

UT PICTURA THEATRUM
- DRAMATIC THEORY AND THE PICTORIAL
PARADIGM IN 17th-CENTURY FRANCE

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In its search for new forms of scenography and poetic expression, the French stage looked to the visual arts as a model of perfection. The deliberate merging of image and text prompted theoreticians to reconsider the nature of theatrical representation (mimesis, illusion, perception) to better understand the nature of a spectator's visual experience of the stage. It was Scaligero's and Pelligrino's own interpretation of Aristotle's theory of imitation which led to the formal identification of painting and drama in France. According to Antoine Coypel: "Tous les arts ont certainement les mêmes principes. Les poètes ne pourront disconvenir du rapport des parties de la tragédie à celles d'un tableau héroïque" (240).¹ Even if at times, theorists and artists alike, fooled themselves with easy comparisons and overlooked what made their art form truly unique, the deliberate merging of image and text was a genuine attempt at redefining artistic perception and gaining new aesthetic insight into a painting/theater analogy or "ut pictura theatrum."

Although the pictorial paradigm had been suggested by Aristotle in his *Poetics* and vastly misinterpreted in Horace's own "Ut Pictura Poesis", French dramatic theorists relied on a more substantial comparison to explain the nature of theatrical representation. Using the visual arts as a reference model was a way of physically reducing the complete theatrical experience to a smaller, more comprehensible scale, a way of deconstructing theater to study its structure and mechanisms. In the Platonic sense a paradigm is the easy model which guides the intellect towards a more difficult and abstract construct. It is also by definition a process which extends beyond the functional "hard copy" model to embrace the concept of the optimal, idealized or "essential" object which remains forever inimitable because always evasive in its perfection. The paradigmatic approach was a creative process in itself and was comparable to the creation of three-dimensional models made to scale in Renaissance Italy. In Leon Battista Alberti's view, an architect's ideas could be successfully translated into realizable projects only through careful analysis of both drawing and models: "I will never tire of recommending the custom, practiced by the best architects of preparing not only drawings and sketches, but also models of wood or any other material. These enable us to examine...the work as a whole" (442). Antoine Le Blond de la Tour recalls that the painter Nicolas Poussin studied light, shadows and

gestures by positioning small wax figurines in small stage-like boxes or "camere obscure."²

The study by "diminutio" was not a simple artistic demonstration, it was a "reflection" in the optical, intellectual and philosophical sense of the term. An accomplished craftsman was not a mere duplicator or "copiste" but the master of an elaborate creative process. Le père Goulu even refers to the art of clothes-making and the use of cut patterns to prove this point: "Notre imitation est parfaite et accomplie lors que par les règles de l'analytique nous développons et découpons la besogne d'un auteur, et que nous considérons et voyons à l'oeil quel artifice, quel moyen, et quelles règles il a suivi pour faire un tel ouvrage" (251).³

The application of the pictorial paradigm to theater was an attempt at keeping track of the deep architectural changes taking place in the dramatic arts at the time. Under the new Italian Order, that is "la scène à l'italienne", the theater was becoming a magnificent optical machine--a "spectacle" in the true optical sense of the term. Through the combination of the "specular" (perspective, vantage point, line of optimum vision and framing) and the "spectacular" (decor, costumes, machinery and stagecraft), the stage became a visual construct, a picture or, at least was meant to be perceived as such. In *La Pratique du théâtre*, l'abbé d'Aubignac states that "the proscenium is nothing more than an image" (83). "Image" is to be interpreted here both in the pictorial and illusory sense of the term.

It was about this time, in the 1630's, that a new type of scenography began to appear on the Parisian stage. It was meant to be pictorially convincing, to be life-like, to be "perspectively correct". Verisimilitude aimed for a more "natural vision" and the stage was to be perceived as a unified surface of a geometrical space reduced to two dimensions. Also contributing to the stage as picture was the overwhelming presence of the wood frame that seemed to transfix the proscenium into a painting. About the frame, Jacques Derrida writes that its acts as a "parergon" -- that is an object that draws attention to itself while pointing towards another. He adds that "le cadre travaille. Comme le bois, il craque, se détraque, se disloque alors qu'il coopère à la production du produit"(87).⁴ It is significant that before it was ever applied to stagecraft, the term "scenography" was used in the art of linear perspective and the science of optics⁵ and in his "Lettre sur les vingt-quatre heures" dated November 1630, Chapelain gives the strange account of a perspective eye capable of perceiving not only scenic space but also dramatic time. His reference is clearly pictorial.

Il en est [des poèmes dramatiques] comme des tableaux réguliers dans lesquels jamais un bon dessinateur n'emploiera qu'une action principale, et s'il en reçoit d'autres dans les enfonçures ou dans les éloignements, il le fera bien pour ce qu'elles auront nécessaire dépendance de la première, mais ce sera plus encore parce qu'elles se passeront au moins dans le même jour, par la seule raison de l'oeil qui ne saurait bien voir qu'une chose d'un regard et duquel l'action est limitée à un certain espace. (117)⁶

The idea of a "tableau régulier" opposing a more baroque artistic rendition, provides evidence that linear perspective became a model of representative construction. In his preface to *La Silvanire ou la morte vive*, Jean de Mairet not only integrates the poetic into the figurative he extends it to the geometrical: "[Dans une pièce régulière] il doit y avoir une maîtresse et principale action à laquelle toutes les autres se rapportent comme les lignes de la circonférence au cercle" (375).⁷ This point of view called for a new "reading" of the dramatic action as rigorous as the perspective in a Renaissance painting. Artificial concentricity was to permit the rational mind to contemplate what d'Aubignac called "the truth of theatrical action" -- that is an attractive arrangement that gives the virtual object the power of reality. In short, the principles of perspective were to pictorial representation, what the rules of unity were to theater: the creation of a spatial and temporal frame within which real and fictive time and space were made to match. Such a match allowed the fictive appearance to be some kind of marker or acceptable indicator of "true" actions.

Perspective and optics ensured a spectator's quality of vision and judgment. Roland de Fréart writes that "[La Perspective], c'est l'art de voir les choses par la Raison, et avec les yeux de l'Entendement"(19).⁸ More specifically, linear perspective corresponded to a well-conducted line of reasoning which in turn, lead to sound judgment. To apply perspective was to operate in two directions: it was just as much to perceive what was present as imagine what was absent. Perspective allowed to imagine what was beyond the frame, in other words, it was the conquest of depth through imagination.

Theoretically, whether it be the stage or the visual arts, a spectator's space has to become the extension of the represented space in the painting or drama if the viewer is to become intimately involved in the illusion of the scene portrayed. The more the dividing line between real and fictive space vanishes, the greater the viewer's role in the creative process. He reconstructs the picture itself by focusing on

reiterated visual imagery, which is fixed into sequences analogous to the process of vision. As alluded to by Chapelain, perspectives of time and space are to be simultaneously created and deconstructed to achieve visual harmony.

Yet, if linear perspective pertains to the visual, the verbal was also to find guidance in its rules and applications. For the 17th-century, poetic composition itself became a kind of perspective device for the poet to manipulate. It confirmed a writer's "author/ity" by placing him in the centric point and allowing him to see and judge a work of art from a single point of view. A playwright was encouraged to visualize his work and even apply a painter's technique to his craft through sketching, tracing, line and color. Le père René Le Bossu notes that "les peintures ont leur jour, leurs distances et leur point de vue hors desquels elles perdent leurs grâces et leur régularité...La Poésie a donc son jour et son point de vue, comme la peinture"(250).⁹

In order to construct lifelike literary characters an author had to distance himself from the universe he projected in front of his objective, organizing eye. Like the supreme architect of a miniature "theatrum mundi", he positioned his characters in a closed world and his external gaze allowed him to encompass different plotlines, examine the problems of each protagonist and combine their individual stories. The spectacle was to be perceived as a unified piece by the spectator only because the author had previously "placed his story before his eyes" as Aristotle recommended in his *Poetics*. Essentially, a successful painting or a play was a simple question of harmony and "bonne distance" -- that is the distance between a painter and his canvas, the distance between a playwright's inner eye and his poetic composition. The anonymous author of "Le Discours à Cliton" literally speaks of "clairvoyance": "Comme il est besoin aux peintres pour faire de belles perspectives de savoir l'optique, il n'est pas moins nécessaire aux poètes pour bien réussir en leurs desseins d'être clairvoyants au théâtre"(247).¹⁰

Of all the French theorists, it is undoubtedly François Hédelin, l'abbé d'Aubignac who makes the most fascinating theater/painting analogy. His *Pratique du théâtre*, abounds with pictorial references.

Je prends ici la comparaison d'un tableau dont j'ai résolu de me servir souvent dans ce traité et je dis qu'on peut le considérer en deux façons. La première comme une peinture, e'est-à-dire, en tant que c'est l'ouvrage de la main du peintre, où il n'y a que des couleurs et non pas des choses; des ombres, et non pas des corps, des jours artificiels, de fausses

élevations, des éloignements en perspective, des raccourcissements illusoire, et de simples apparences de tout ce qui n'est point. La seconde en tant qu'il contient une chose qui est peinte, soit véritable ou supposée telle, dont les lieux sont certains, les qualités naturelles, les actions indubitables, et toutes les circonstances selon l'ordre et la raison. (34)¹¹

Theatrical representation is, thus, clinically divided into two complementary levels: the first which corresponds to the stage and its artifacts including the actors and their voice is compared to the paint on a canvas and the second which pertains to what is actually portrayed in the picture or "la chose représentée dans le tableau" is compared to the abstract reconstruction that occurs in the spectator's mind. Let us note that this signifier/signified distinction between an artistic medium and the represented object is a general criterion for a century fascinated with the idea of the sign and its representation. The phenomenon applies everytime there is "représentation", everytime an object is substituted for another and refers to it. In their joint work *La Logique ou l'art de penser* Arnauld and Nicole explain that "un signe enferme deux idées, l'une de la chose qui représente, l'autre de la chose représentée et sa nature consiste à exciter la seconde par la première" (71).¹² In the same way, the stage and its artifacts allow us to interpret and contemplate what it stands for. D'Aubignac's notion of image is remarkably flexible. The "image" is a mediator between the representation which produces it and the absent reality to which it refers. This concept of theater seems to presuppose a kind of "double vision", a reconstruction in the spectator's mind.

Such an intellectually mediated stage practice gives us an idea of the epistemology of theater in the French classical period. The role of "Representation" is to permit the spectator to contemplate the truth of the action without mistaking the visible action he perceives for truth. As in painting, the coherency of the theatrical experience is built upon a carefully balanced system of correspondences between what is present and what is absent. L'abbé d'Aubignac explains this apparent paradox: "Le théâtre est une espèce d'illusion, ...il faut tromper les spectateurs en telle sorte, qu'ils ne s'imaginent pas l'être, encore qu'ils le sachent; il ne faut pas tandis qu'on les trompe, que leur esprit le connaisse, mais seulement quand il y fait réflexion" (210).¹³

For these scholars, Aristotle's theory of imitation led to the formal identification of painting and dramatic arts and painting functioned as a convincing metaphor for the theater in its stage representation, poetic composition and expression. Obviously a stage performance was never

meant to be perceived as the replica of a painting or an actor an imitation of a painted figure or even that Rotrou or Corneille had to be compared to Pierre Mignard or Claude Lorrain to be understood. The paradigmatic approach was yet another attempt at understanding the relationship between the concept of theater which theory implies and the kinds of dramatic experiences the stage offered its audience. As a result, scholars and teachers may be encouraged to see the subject of a tragedy in terms of action and situational relationships (Aristotle considered the poet essentially "a maker of plot"); to think of characters as "stage-figures" or "acteurs" as Racine and Poussin intended and to study tragedy in the light of aesthetics of visual and spatial construction or what the 17th century called "Ordonnance."

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NOTES

¹ "All art forms are surely based on the same principles. Poets will certainly not disagree on the relationship between tragedy and heroic paintings." (All translations my own).

² Antoine Le Blond de la Tour, "Lettre du Sieur Le Blond de la Tour a un de ses amis contenant quelques instructions touchant la peinture" (N.p., 1669. Rpt. in *Actes du Colloque Nicolas Poussin*, Paris: Chastel, 1960) 56.

³ "Our imitation is perfect and accomplished when by analytical rules we develop and unstich the work of an author and that we consider and see which artifice, which method and which rules he followed to complete his work."

⁴ "The frame warps, cracks, falls apart as it contributes to the making of the product."

⁵ In *L'Encyclopédie ou le dictionnaire raisonné des sciences des arts et des métiers*, Diderot defines "scenography" as "a one plane representation of an object in all its dimensions and set in perspective as it appears to the eye of the beholder." Non paginated.

⁶ "Drama resembles regular paintings in that a good painter will portray only one principle action and if he displays others, he will do so in the background and at a distance, and will show how these depend on the former, but even more because they will have taken place in the same day for the fact that the eye could only see an object well if the action is limited to a particular space."

⁷ "In a regular play there must be a main and principal action to

which all others refer, like the lines of the circumference to the circle."

⁸ "[Perspective] is the art of seeing things through Reason and with the eyes of Understanding." By definition, "Perspicere" is "to see clearly," "to see through" and "to regard mentally." In short it is to see beyond appearances.

⁹ "Paintings have their lighting, their distance and their point of view beyond which they lose their charm and unity... Poetry has also its lighting and point of view just like painting."

¹⁰ Just as painters need to know optics to achieve beautiful perspectives, it is no less necessary for the poets to see clearly, to succeed in their projects at the theater."

¹¹ "I take up here the comparison with a picture, of which I have resolved to make use frequently in this treatise, and I say that one can consider it in two ways. The first as a painting, that is to say, inasmuch as it is produced by the painter's hand, and where there are only colors and not things, shadows and not bodies, artificial light, false elevations and perspective distances, illusory foreshortenings, and simple appearances of what does not exist. The second inasmuch as it contains a thing painted whether real or supposed to be so, whose places are certain, whose qualities are natural, whose actions are unquestionable, and all the circumstances are in accordance with order and reason."

¹² "A sign contains two ideas, one refers to the object that represents, the other to the object represented and its nature is to stimulate the second by the first."

¹³ "Theater is a type of illusion...spectators have to be deceived in such a way that they do not believe they are, although being fully conscious of it; and as for their intellect, it cannot be informed of the deception unless it reflects upon it."

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