

## Laodamia DASCĂL

### I DARE NOT TOUCH THE WORK OF ART (OR DO I?)

**Abstract.** The aim of this paper is to analyze Tiziano Vocellio's early work, dated in 1511, entitled *Noli me tangere*, from multiple methodological points of view. During the investigation of the work of art, the author uses a comparative method as the guide and organizer of ideas. The work of art discussed is used as an example of various approaches, from the visual narrative codes, to the semiotic interpretation of the sign systems, the psychoanalytical perspective, and the empirical-factual observation. The comparative approach described in this analysis proves that in order to be objective, and to provide validity for the information, there has to be a multi-methodological understanding of the painting, one manifested through an exercise of synthetic analysis. The present analysis follows the possibilities of scientific looking at visual facts, using Tizian's work from The National Gallery in London, from a deeply phenomenological stand-point.

**Key words:** Painting interpretation, triangulating methodologies, factual observation, hermeneutic investigation, psychoanalysis, feminism.

Laodamia DASCĂL

*Babeş-Bolyai University, Faculty of Letters, Cluj-Napoca*  
*E-mail: laodamiascal@yahoo.com*

*Introduction.* After freely contemplating the geometric motifs and schemes, and carefully examining the given work, albeit only from a virtual point of view (being aware of its disadvantages), one can observe that in the methodical study of any work of art, pleasure intermingles with knowledge, while subjectivity becomes relevant. Due to the desire of undertaking a rigorous study, we shall start off by underlining three hypotheses: 1) The plastic *organization of composition* is bipolar; the interaction between the centric and eccentric brings forward a dynamic of global and important meanings. 2) Visual *symbols* and the relations between them can generate meaning, while they cannot be set apart from their creator's intentionality. 3) Visual elements are capable of activating certain levels belonging to the viewer's unconscious. 4) A painting echoes *the meanings and values attributed by the viewer*, a fact well known by its maker.

*Methodological approaches.* We aim in analysing the given painting from three

methodological angles, each accompanied by their specific methods. Firstly, we shall use the *method of factual observation* in order to offer a strictly rationalistic line of interpretation, which involves quantifying the compositional elements of shape, colour, size, making use of Descartes' "bon sense" (*Discourse on Method*), of the ability to distinguish between what is true and what is false. During this first phase we shall totally neglect the historical and cultural landmarks which might bring certain justifying clarifications regarding the significance of the work, on the one hand, and the personal opinions concerning the perception of the work, on the other.

We shall complete the empirical observation through a *hermeneutic investigation* which aims to analyze the visual narrative codes from the point of view of the sign systems. The methodologies of semiotics study the acts of culture seen as a signifying system through methods of semiotic and hermeneutic interpretations. When we talk about hermeneutics, we do not only refer to the classical sense of art and of interpreting the sacred texts, but also to the method of interpreting the phenomena of spiritual culture, as a more general approach. We can only speak of *code*, inside the category of signification when "there is the socially conventionalized possibility of generating *sign-functions*, whether the functions of such functions are discrete units called signs or vast portions of discourse, provided that the correlation has been previously posited by a

social convention." (Eco 1982, 101) In a conventional or analogous way, the *sign* indirectly represents an object, a being, a notion, an idea, an attribute, a feeling. The author makes the distinction between the sign and the non-sign based on the relation with the function of meaning. Eco's second work, which we took into consideration, explores, among other fundamental problems of the contemporary semiotics, the principle of *hermetic semiosis* as an "interpretative practice based on the sympathy relations which bind the micro- and macro-cosmos." (Eco 2007, 17) Here the author pleads for the existence of metaphysics of universal sympathy, based on the semiotics of similitude. The first forms of the hermetic semiosis can be traced back to the early Christian centuries, triumphing with the Baroque revival. (Eco 2007, 123) Returning to the first work mentioned above, Eco states that "any aspect of culture can become a semantic entity." (Eco 1982, 45) For the current philosophy, which focuses on communication, there is only the sign, thus, "what is" or what we know (reality) is reduced to what we can communicate or signify.

We shall also follow a *psycho-analytical line of interpretation*, focusing on the interplay of the visual images (namely their dynamics and their possible effects on viewers) located between intentionality and unconscious, between the author and the receiver. We shall consider particularly noteworthy our own generalizations seen as the basis of the perceptions regarding the given

painting, through an introspective method, that is to say *self-analysis*.

*Bibliographic references.* As a fundamental landmark for our research study, one might consider Gillian Rose's *Visual methodologies*, a handbook of strategies regarding the visual perception, in terms of qualitative studies.

The general outcomes, depicted in Rudolf Arnheim's (a renowned art and film theorist and perceptual psychologist) *The power of the Center*, will help us in demonstrating the first hypothesis of our analysis. The main objective of his work is investigating the way in which the perceptible art forms are organised around a given reference point, named *centre*. Our paper aims to analyze the chosen painting, by following practical rules concerning the special proportions and settings, the intuitive judgments on the balance and imbalance of a composition, in slightly different degrees. We have also become familiar with Erwin Panofsky's study entitled *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, in which he theorizes upon *iconology*, describing the method of looking at a painting from the perspective of all three levels. Although we did not consider a line of interpretation based on the Panofskian model, the information uncovered in his research brought certain clarifications regarding the differentiation of interpretative approaches which can be applied to a work of art.

Umberto Eco's *A Theory of Semiotics* and *The Limits of Interpretation* have served as a key element in our semiotic investigations. Without looking at *culture*, as a whole, strictly in terms of *commu-*

*nication and signification* (Eco 1982, 42), his work underlines the fact that culture can be understood, from a semiotic point of view, as a *set of codes* related to the sign-function. In his other work, Eco discusses the interpretative processes, the aesthetic perception, types of intentionality, a suggestive discrimination between *the semantic reader* and *the critical reader*, the difference between the semiotic and semiotic interpretation, the criteria of authenticity, the different aspects of hermetic semiosis, the interpretation of metaphors.

We also investigated Lacan's post-structuralist theories regarding the unconscious, the castration complex, the ego, the identification, the language as subjective perception, discussed in his *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. We shall focus on the concept of falocentrism, also discussed in Laura Mulvey's theory, in order to prove the fact that the chosen image is centred on activating certain levels of the viewer's and its creator's unconscious.

*Interpretation.* After analyzing the plastic construction which takes place around a *visual centre* as discussed by Rudolf Arnheim (*The power of the Centre*) we could say that, here to, the purpose of the composition is that of creating a well organised structure. We sought to investigate the formula according to which plastic items are distributed. In order to locate them, we shall make use of the vertical and horizontal axes, called by Arnheim *Cartesian coordinates*, but we shall also investigate their intersection

point, known as the centre of balance. By tracing the vertical and horizontal axes, we get four sectors. The visual elements in the foreground are a standing man, who, after tracing the vertical axis, belongs to the painting's right side, and a kneeling woman placed in a diagonal position, lower than that of the man. The vertical axis passes through the man's left hand, the one with which he holds the rod, and through the root of the tree, separating the woman's actual face from the head and hair, which remain in the left part of the painting. Thus, only the image of the face and the woman's right arm pass over the central vertical and remain in the right side, along with the man's body. After tracing the horizontal line, which separates the terrestrial and the celestial landscape, it is clear that the woman's body is placed in the lower/inferior part of the painting

The Cartesian axis clearly delineate the natural space from the urban, the man made one. Another visual element is the tree, located behind the two characters, which starts from the lower terrestrial part and goes through the entire composition, managing to achieve a dominant position. Due to the vertical axis, this element will unmistakably remain confined to the right part, the one reserved for nature. A couple of bushes complete the lower part of the natural space.

After formally analyzing Tiziano's painting, we can argue that his work is a bipolar composition, formed around two different centres, kept in balance and



represented by the two human characters. The woman's body generates a dynamic vector oriented towards the man's masculinity centre. The rod belonging to the man sets the boundary between the two figures; it also represents the meeting point if the two axes, namely the centre of balance.

Jesus' body position presents a concavity; his torso is curved. We can interpret the gesture captured by Tiziano as a retreat – he shuns the female creature, or as a protective bend over it. The tension perceived by the bodies of the two characters, their dynamics, give place for contradictory interpretation which actually represent the basis for the next stage of our research.

We should further add that the male character's bodily centres are represented by the head and pelvis, which also act as counterpoints. His head is placed above the horizontal axis, in the solar part of the painting, surrounded by the blue of the

water, while the rest of his body remains in the lower half of the picture where the woman is placed entirely. The woman's interaction with the male character is closed in the lower part of the painting. The delineation of plans is marked by the chromatic difference between the space located above the horizon line and the earthly nature highlighted through shades of brown, black and dark green. This division at the level of the two plans is obvious due to the opposing colours: dark shades (earth) – light shades (sky, sun). The sea is the chromatic element of transition between the two spaces, rendered through a soothing blue which might indicate towards calm feelings, dreaming and meditation. Besides the white robe, the woman wears a red cape which easily captures the attention.

Depleting the inventory of perceptible visual images, we come closer to understanding the creator's intentionality regarding the chosen work. Thus, we shall change the focus from the simple observation to the underlining of conventional themes and motifs. The images become recognizable signs. This line of analysis will prove that the work reveals dense attitudes and beliefs, richer than those seen so far.

Starting from the above mentioned, we shall try to recognize the possibilities of hermeneutics when interpreting the significant units perceived as sign systems identifiable in Tiziano's painting, *Noli me tangere*. We shall try not to overlook the title given to his creation, a metaphor that will guide, without a doubt, the viewer's

eyes. The metaphor-utterance of the title warns with regard to the entire rhetoric of the visual discourse. What would signify the meeting of the two characters in the garden, without the support of the title's biblical context? Would the closeness-distance between the two characters, be more explicit? Would the symbolism of the tree, as an element that vertically unites the two spaces, be the same?

The creator's intentionality is quite clear: *Noli me tangere!* (*Touch me not!*) is the warning given by Jesus to Mary Magdalene after his resurrection. The continuation of this imperative is very well known to any representative of the Christian world: "Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father: but go to my brethren, and say unto them, I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God." (*The Bible, The Gospel of John*, ch. 20/17)

From this point on, we can state without any doubt, that the male character is Jesus, while the feminine one is Mary of Magdala. She is the one we all know from the Gospels, the sinful woman who was saved from the punishment of being killed with stones. She is the example of piety given by Jesus to his disciples who were so intrigued by his attitude, when she washes his feet with her tears and dries them with her own hair. He discovers in her the thrill of meeting God, descended from heaven to earth, that will forever change her path in life.

According to John's Gospel it is this Mary the one who goes to the tomb early in the morning in order to embalm his body as tradition requires it. This while

the apostles, unable to believe Jesus' promise are frightened and keep their doors closed. Other evangelists recount about the presence of various women in the group following to embalm the body. Mark recounts that Mary Magdalene, Mary, Jacob's mother and Salome got frightened when they found the tomb empty and the angel asked them to let the apostles know about it. All, except Mary Magdalene. It is only Luke who doesn't mention the event from the tomb as the first time Jesus appeared; all the others point with more or less details the meeting between a resurrected Jesus and Mary Magdalene. Although John makes it so obviously in his gospel that both Peter and the other "beloved disciple" are anxiously running to the tomb, after having found out from the women that it is empty, it is only Mary Magdalene who asks the gardener in tears for further clarification about where Jesus' dead body might be.

I do not believe it fortunate when Jesus chooses not to show up in front of the two in order to confirm the news, but chooses Mary, the one mourning her teacher, as she shall call him from now on. She is the first one to discover a world – changing news and she thus has to spread the news apart. How wonderful this trust given unto her! Jesus' duty to enhance new connotations to the Old Testament, through the New Law, the one of love, is as well explained here. From a feminist approach one could identify even something more, without becoming too interpretative. This is anyway an area not to be discussed in the present paper.

We could surely identify some significations for the chromatic symbols, without these acquiring any functions. The opposite chromatic technique clearly separates the picture's plans: dark (land) – light (sky, sun). The seaside is the transitory chromatic element between the two spaces. It is rendered by the blue colour, which encourages mediation and induces calm, passivity, sensitivity; at a perceptive level it indicates the beginning of a spiritual contact. The white garment wore by the woman is to be completed by a deep red cloak. Signifying passion, this colour stimulates, is warm and encompasses a profound range of feelings. On the contrary, the masculine character is sketchy clad, the white garment that should have covered his entire body is illogically set only on his back, having thus his whole body naked, except the pelvic area. Given the fact that we do not know the function of these signs, they only open for us that *intentio operis* (Eco 2007, 97), and not the whole hermeneutic energy expected by Titian, the one involving us in the strategy. But if we are to connect this information with the ones to come, obviously right from the title of the work, then our interpretation shall be completed.

Coming back to the visual composition in connection to its narrative references, we stick to noticing a fact. This by using the factual observation method, namely the significance of the two characters' bodily dynamics. If the man's position didn't initially come with any light in our investigation, we can at this level bring about new significations. Is Jesus

answering to Mary's stepping forward through his bodily concavity? Is he retiring or is he bending? Jesus protects himself with his left hand against the woman's arm in the neighbouring of his pelvic area. He is a living apparition: he talks and has a tangible human body. Jesus is still human when meeting Mary Magdalene, thus still under telluric jurisdiction, under these physical forces. For a total transformation, a transcending towards the supreme divinity is needed, a phase superior to the human Jesus. "I have not yet risen to my Father." – is the explanation he offers to Magdalene for his gesture of rejection.

We haven't yet discussed the ambiguity of Jesus' figure after His resurrection, both when he met Mary Magdalene, and in his next apparitions. This because we want to stick to the imposed frame.

From now on we have to perceive the composition as a metaphor transcending from rhetoric to culture. It is the metaphor implicating a creative approach, which according to some recent theories is open to an interdisciplinary dialogue, a reunifying one according to reasoning by analogy (Eco 2007, 275-340). Coming back to the role of these strains of colour, it is remarkable to notice the unity of sense between sign-code, visual-signification. This time by using the biblical lecture the visual image explicitly appeals to, shall we affirm that Mary Magdalene's red bears even more profound significations: she is the passionate woman before meeting Jesus, the warm woman longing for a man, not for the resurrected Jesus.

Here all the information gathered in the first part of our investigation by factual observation comes of great need. More precisely, the vertical axis only allows the feminine face to pass in the same plan with the inferior part of Jesus' body. This thing is subject to a *psychoanalytic interpretation*. We shall not render psychoanalytic intentions upon a 16<sup>th</sup> century author of art. Namely, we are aiming at introspection from the point of view of a contemporary spectator. However we are not to totally deny the subjectivity of the Venetian painter's unconscious about this problem. In supporting this statement we have the set of visual data previously mentioned. Is here to be encountered another subtle message in Tizian's picture? In a conscious and courageous attempt we shall try to show that after all the formal delimitations done at a first level of interpretation, we have discovered some sort of connection among the information the composition may offer.

If it were to present Freud's psychoanalytical theory in a very concise way, we could say that it has to do with the unconsciousness' existence and action within the psychic, hence leading to explaining the human personality. Psychoanalysis is today rendering much more than that, having developed a therapeutic methodology, but its concepts extended unto explaining the socio-cultural phenomena. It thus developed a complex system of theories approaching the effects of unconscious psychic processes upon people's feelings, thoughts and activities. Freud is the one introducing through

his libido theory the term of *stages of development* (after the four erogenous zones dispersed in the four regions of the body: oral, anal, utero-genital area and breast area). The phallic stage is the stage of an infant organizing of the libido, ulterior to the oral and the anal stages and characterised through unifying partial pulses under the genital eminence. Opposed to pubertal genital organization, the child, either a boy or a girl, only knows a genital in this phase, the masculine one, and the opposition between sexes equals the phallic-castrated opposition. Having this as a starting point, but with a major connotative evolution, falocentrism has developed a whole system of thought in which the phallus and its symbolism constitute its essential significant value. The term has been popularized by Jacques Lacan, who used this concept in order to define the social relations of power and the introduction of a sight-based control (with phallic power).

The feminist theory has developed the concept of "*the gaze*", which covers aspects such as the description of the social relations between women and men based on this mechanism of power and by analysing various aspects: how the man looks at the woman, how the woman perceives herself, how the woman perceives another woman, and the effects of such a perception. In his work, Gillian Rose (108) reaches the conclusions of Laura Mulvey from the paper "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" in order to offer a concrete enough definition of the term *falocentrism*. The feminist theory comes

as a reply to the masculine perception expressing a relation of asymmetric, unequal power between the onlooker and the person under observation; the man imposes his look upon the woman, reducing her to an object. The quality of being a man enables you with these rights, whereas a woman looks only by assuming this role of male viewer when she turns the others into an object under analysis, looking at them as a man, hence identifying herself with masculinity. Such an interpretation shall we dare to impose upon the relation established between the masculine and the feminine character in Titian's work. The feminine character in the picture undertakes the negative identity imposed, longing to recover her image in the eyes of the accusers and thus accepting her *punishment*. A punishment consisting in the sufferance caused by the aggressiveness, the indifference and the contempt she was treated with. Jesus, the human, the man, not the resurrected God, is the purifying means. This attitude is *introjected, interiorised*, sent back to its initial point in the inner ego. Mary is the patriarchy woman, accepting to adopt an attitude of inferiority in a misogynist society. She is precisely the dichotomist opposition of the *hore* prototype, the one who offers warmth and pleasure, not out of love, as mothers do it, but out of obligation, out of interest. She is a victim in a falocentric society because their entire existence unmasks and unmistifies the patriarchy and its fundamental myths. The forgiveness Mary still begs for tends to become an ideal of happiness consisting in love and harmony, thus reconciliation.

This line of interpretation leads to a patriarchal governing system in which the feminine characters belong to a strong visual and erotic code of apparition. Mary Magdalene is not a human-woman, but a function-woman, a cultural metaphor, a social syntagm for power reports, a woman still begging for her forgiveness, which is basically her ideal of happiness.

Whether or not it were to undertake Eco's metaphor used to illustrate "intention auctoris" (the author's intentionality) for its own creation to be seen by an entire community, be it bigger or smaller, and not for "a unique addressee", shall we state that Titian as well has created the present work, as other works, being aware of the fact that the interpretation will not always be according to his intentions. It may as well be accordingly to a complicated strategy of the one who reads the image with his/her own competence, bearing in mind the cultural conventions of the time. The object needs the interpreter's feedback.

Self-analysis. Our analysis would not be exhaustive if we haven't set us apart of the rationalism's constrains or of the rigurocity of different methods (this too of course only partially possible) and haven't taken upon us full rights in an introspective analysis that could deny, or, on the contrary, confirm what has been above-mentioned until far.

The subjectivity of visual or emotional perception (as flexible as these might be) is relevant in that it comes out of my condition and my conscience of woman viewer. It shall be difficult for my feminine empathy to remain on a neuter field when watching the scene with the woman crawling towards the naked man sitting in front of her, although knowing that the man is Jesus, the only one not seeing in her any dirt or decay. As I see things, Mary is the woman who objectivises herself not through the masculine look, but through another force belonging to Jesus, a force coming from other spheres. This is the significance I attribute, as a woman viewer, to this analysis.

Conclusions. We consider that a comparative approach set upon this analysis proves to have been objective enough, and the validity of the information conferred has been proved, if not exhaustive. The initially illustrated assumptions have had their verosimilarity proved through an exercise of synthetic analysis.

We do also confess that the present analysis has definitely opened a form of attention, tracing recognisable traces. In a route of turning back in science's duty to look at a visual fact. We would also like to add the fact that this investigation enriched our wish towards admiring Tizian's work in its naturalness at The National Gallery in London.

### References

- Arnheim, Rudolf, *The Power of the Center: A Study of Composition in the Visual Arts*, Bucharest: Meridiane Publishing House, 1995.
- Biblia*, Ed. Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 2007.
- Eco, Umberto, *A Theory of Semiotics*, Ed. Științifică și enciclopedică: Bucharest, 1982.
- Eco, Umberto, *The Limits of Interpretation*, second edition, Polirom: 2007.
- Gillian, Rose, *Visual Methodologies*, London: Sage Publication, 2001.
- <http://www.oedipe.org/fr/documents/porge>
- Panofski, Erwin, *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, Meridiane Publishing House: Bucharest, 1980.
- Jacques Lacan's Return to Freud: The Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary*, by Philippe Julien, Devra Beck Simiu.