

# The eye tells the story

Artist's Writing final paper

Academic year and semester: 2018/2019, semester 2

Course: Artist's Writing

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## **Table of contents**

Table of contents	2
Introduction	3
Mind-made metapictures	3
The eye as the window to the beholder's perception.	5
Conclusion	7
Images	8
Source list of images	10
Bibliography	11

## Introduction

The way pictures are contemplated, enjoyed, or simply glanced upon will most likely leave a mark in one's mind based upon what they depict, rather than what they are. As a result, the picture's feature as a picture is possibly taken for given which may give the impression that the picture, like a conjunction of words, tells the beholder what to see.

In this paper, the aim is to examine the concept, qualities as well as mechanics of metapictorial thinking that clarifies why this above mentioned situation may be incorrect. The examination is prompted by the French philosopher of Arts Bruno Trentini's article "The meta as an aesthetic category". Trentini's research is demonstrated through an analysis on artworks considered as metapictures and it is inspected to what extent metapictorial characteristic can be applied to a broader art historical segment. It is argued that the principals of the metapicture can be compared to the renaissance painter Leonardo Da Vinci's writings which, in essence, can be reasoned by the fact that Leonardo regards the eye of the beholder of great significance.

## Mind-made metapictures

The word meta refers to a thing about the same thing. A picture about a picture is thus regarded as a metapicture since it contains more than one level of representation that may or may not be nested within each other. However, since pictures do not speak for themselves, the use of meta as a prefix to picture can be considered misleading due to the fact that it is not the pictures themselves in which the meta-quality is generated but rather the mind of the beholder. Trentini argues that a metapicture, being a picture nested in another picture, more than any other picture, makes possible for the beholder to comprehend the depicted as a picture rather than what it represents.<sup>1</sup> Although this act of recognizing this pictorial quality is indeed possible with other forms of pictures, Trentini underlines the singularity of the metapicture since it is not defined by its material qualities and can therefore be examined as a picture alone.<sup>2</sup> A crucial part of the comprehension of the metapictorial qualities is what Trentini refers to as the metacognitive act, being the contemplation of one's own perception of the picture.<sup>3</sup> This contemplation involves the cognitive process of failing to clearly identify the object perceived, which creates a second cognitive level that intermingles with the first and thus evolves into a cognitive loop. Perceiving the picture suddenly mainly evolves around the beholder

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<sup>1</sup> Trentini 2014. pp. 1-8

<sup>2</sup> Idem., p. 8

<sup>3</sup> Idem., P. 7

perceiving the picture. Thus, the quality of the picture is not in the picture but in the activation of the cognitive loop. This loop, Trentini states, is in fact what is at stake in any aesthetic experience but becomes conscious to the beholder in the experience of a metapicture.

To understand the concept of the metapicture more accurately, it is appropriate to address the metapicture from the perspective of paintings given the painting's pictorial distinction. In order to perceive an object as a painting, the objective implementation, such as hanging the painting on a wall, is not sufficient. The perception of the beholder needs to be activated in order to successfully perceive the object as a painting. The perception is in this sense understood as the process taking place when the embodied sensations that the beholder associates with the painting is experienced which is in fact regarded as the aesthetic experience. Therefore, the aesthetic experience of a painting does not happen because of the object's quality itself but rather because of the beholders own, subjective perception of the object which depends entirely on this individual's assumption of the world.<sup>4</sup> This process in the mind of the beholder is most likely unconscious. However, if a painting qualifies as a metapicture, the beholder might become aware of this aesthetic experience, simply due to the fact that the cognitive perception fails to identify whether the object is content or container. Consequently, the perception becomes the object itself, leading to a metacognitive experience of the painting.

Now, one might assume that a rather limited amount of paintings is considered metapictures since the moments when paintings can be seen as pictures before anything else is rare. In the painting *Attempting the Impossible* (1928) (fig. 1) by Rene Magritte, the metapicture quality becomes clear due to choice of representing the picture and the nested picture in the same painterly style. As a result, the intend to create a hierarchy of the images represented becomes obstructed. A similar attitude is arguably present in the painting *Flag* (1954-55) (fig. 2) by Jasper Johns. Here, the motif is rather clear for the beholder being a seemingly exact representation of the American flag. The painting, however, is considered to be within the quasi-abstract painterly field due to the atypical use of materials which consist of newsprints applied with techniques such as the ancient encaustic technique that seem unusual in the case of this particular painting's style and motif.<sup>5</sup> The distinct material features of *Flag* is undeniable which makes it complex to contemplate it as a picture alone. The painting does furthermore not contain any explicit metapictorial characteristic but a similar metacognitive experience is perhaps recognizable when considering the image of the flag as well as the strips of newspaper in the painting as objects of information that are indeed

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Hunter 1997, p. 224

nested in each other. As a consequence, the question whether the representation of the flag is content or container becomes unclear and therefore the metacognitive process will possibly happen.

## **The eye as the window to the beholder's perception.**

In the process of defining a metapicture the sense of seeing is an undeniably crucial, if not necessary act. To examine the eye's part in a debate on the metapicture is arguably redundant due to its self-evident involvement in looking at a picture. It is nonetheless not without cause that the sense of the eye is of great importance to Leonardo Da Vinci in his *Paragone* on painting as the superior art form. In his notes, which combined form the *Paragone*, the eye is continuously elaborated upon as a result of its above mentioned inevitable part in looking at pictures and therefore also paintings. To Leonardo, the eye is the intermediary between objects and the *impressiva* which is somewhat equal to what is regarded as one's perception.<sup>6</sup> This *impressiva*, he argues, receives what is represented in a painting the same way it receives natural objects.<sup>7</sup> This notion somewhat resembles Trentini's argument that identifying a represented reality is no different from identifying reality itself since identifying a picture means to identify what it shows.<sup>8</sup> The praise for the sense of sight comes to a climax in a note in which Leonardo claims the eye to be most excellent above all things whose true operation cannot fully be expressed by anyone.<sup>9</sup> The attitude towards the eye, hieratically placed above all other senses, is reflected in Leonardos view on painting as the art form superior to poetry, music, and sculpture. In a phrase, where Leonardo aims to convince the reader that painting is superior to poetry, he brings up an account from his own professional life. The chapter addresses a costumer who once bought a painting by Leonardo that depicts a made up divine figure which, to the costumer, is very desirable. This strong desire for the painted figure eventually becomes delusional for the costumer who, as a consequence of this, feels the necessity to get rid of the painting.<sup>10</sup>

Although Leonardo is more concerned with convincing the reader of the above mentioned statement about painting this account is nonetheless attractive to put in context with concept of metapictures. The costumer, being the beholder of the painting, fails to distinct the painting from the

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<sup>6</sup> Farago 1992, p. 221

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Trentini, p. 7

<sup>9</sup> Farago, p. 239

<sup>10</sup> Idem., p. 231

real thing. As a consequence of this, the consciousness of the beholder overrules his sight and his lust for the painting which forces him to remove it from his house.<sup>11</sup> If one considers this triggering of his consciousness as the moment the beholder realizes his own thinking, what happens is indeed the activation of the beholder's metacognition. What confirms this assertion may be that the state of metacognition is reached through the inner sense and sensation which shares the same qualities as Leonardo's *senso comune* which communicates with the *impressiva*. While one cannot know whether the painting itself may or may not contain any metapictorial quality it is thus argued that the costumer is, to some extent, experiencing the painting similarly to the way one experiences a metapicture.

Returning to *Paragone* as an entity it should be taken into account that the text is concerned with the excavation and process of painting, perhaps more than the beholder's reaction to a finished painting. The importance of the eye is thus regarded as eminent, not only to the beholder but also to the artist who, in the case of the metapicture, might be less crucial to examine. The text does, furthermore, not contain any explicit examples of metapictures though it is highly plausible that metapictures were painted in Leonardo's time. Though this assertion is made, the metacognitive experience is arguably not exclusively present in the experiences of metapictures. This is demonstrated with *Flag* as well as Leonardo's painting that deludes the costumer. The beholder's reaction to *Flag* can, with regards to this argument, be compared to the costumer of Leonardo's reaction to the painting of a divine being since the beholder, in both cases, become aware of the fact that their experiences of the paintings are reflexive. As Trentini states, this awareness of the reflexivity in the painting is what makes the experience an aesthetic experience.<sup>12</sup> Even if Leonardo is not demonstrating this argument in those exact words, it is possibly demonstrated through his uncompromising arguments on the sight's impact as the final effect that communicates between the painting and the beholder.<sup>13</sup> According to Leonardo, painting renders things outside the eye which makes the eye receive the representation *as if* they were natural and by this, he demonstrates that he is aware of the painting being a picture.<sup>14</sup> This notion, however, is not answered in any picture itself since, as both Trentini and Leonardo agrees upon, pictures do not speak for themselves.<sup>15 16</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Trentini, p. 8

<sup>13</sup> Farago, p. 187

<sup>14</sup> Idem., p.179

<sup>15</sup> Trentini, p. 3

<sup>16</sup> Farago, p. 287

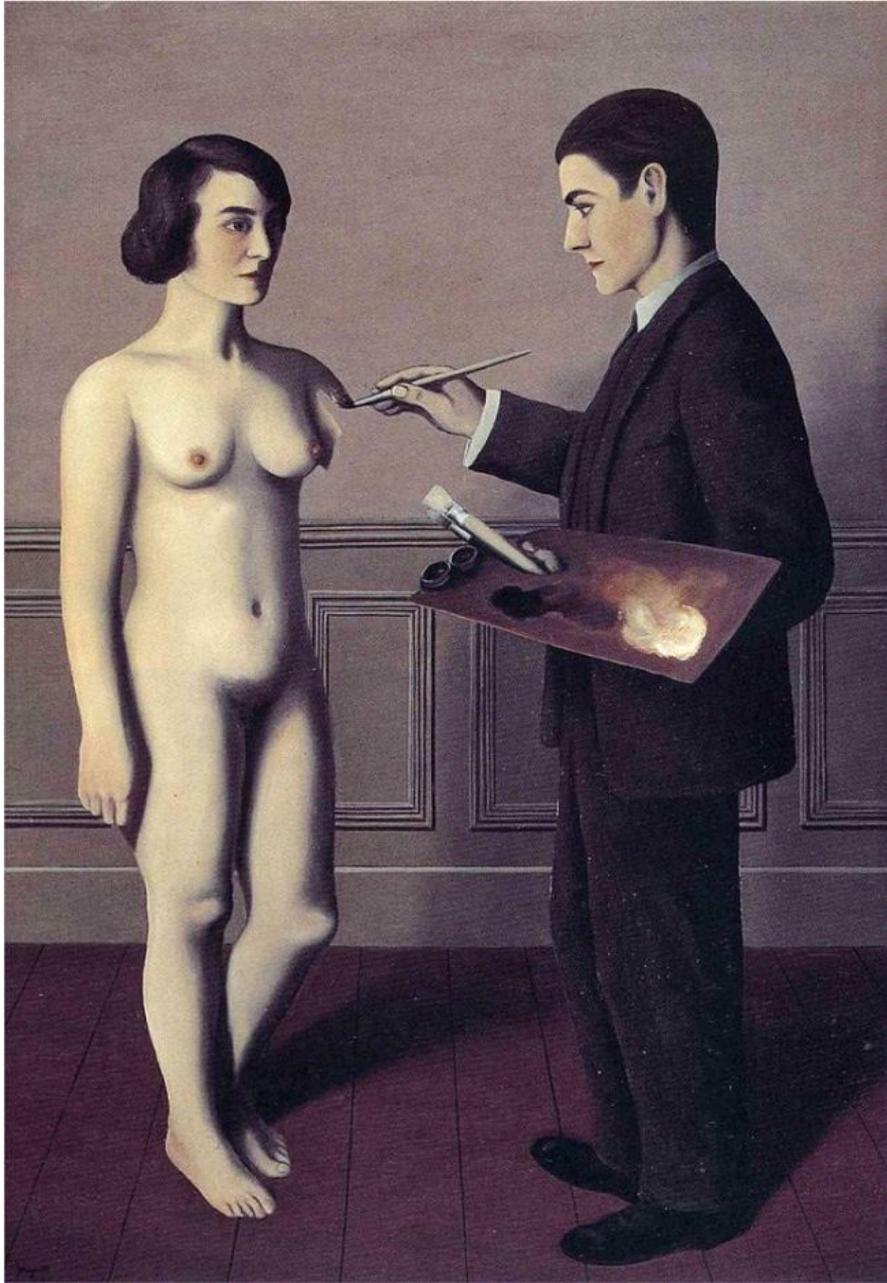
## Conclusion

Just like the organ of sight is needed to discover a painting's divinity, the human mind is needed to discover the meta-quality in a picture. Therefore, aesthetic experiences of pictures are not present in the pictures alone but can only be realised once the awareness of experiencing a picture as a picture is made. Trentini and Leonardo write from rather different backgrounds and their subjects as well as aims take different outputs which can most likely be explained by the extensive time gap that exists between the writing of the texts. The organ of sight which, to Leonardo, is a critical subject in the aesthetic experience, appears superfluous to the argument of Trentini but it is nonetheless needed in the act of comprehending a visual object. Conversely, it is demonstrated that Leonardo probably takes the contemplating mind of the beholder into account when demonstrating the superiority in painting but the necessity to elaborate on this is not relevant since *Paragone* is indeed concerned with the painting's abilities rather than the beholder's. Trentini affirms that metapictures are unique since only metapictures can make the the beholder see the picture as a picture but with examples such as *Flag* and Leonardo's divine figure painting it has been asserted that the metacognitive process that happens when contemplating a metapicture can be applied to any picture which the beholder fails to identify.

## Images



**Figure 1:** Jasper Johns. *Flag*. 1954-55. Encaustic, oil, and collage on fabric mounted on plywood. 107.3 x 153.8 cm. Museum of Modern Art, New York



**Figure 2:** René Magritte. *Attempting The Impossible*. 1928. Oil on Canvas. 81 x 105.6 cm. Private collection

## Source list of images

Figure 1: Image derived from The Museum of Modern Art homepage

<https://www.moma.org/collection/works/78805> (retrieved 12/07/2019)

Figure 2: Image derived from Rene Magritte Biography, Paintings, and Quotes

<https://www.renemagritte.org/attempting-the-impossible.jsp#prettyPhoto> (retrieved 12/07/2019)

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