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Linguistic diversity, disciplinary specificity. Some reflections from an art historical point of view

The topic of this lecture concerns some of the aspects involved in the practice of speaking and writing about cultural heritage. As an art historian, my whole work lies often at the crossroad between visual and linguistic realities. My point of view is thus partial, the point of view of someone who constantly works with a tool but that only sometimes stops to reflect on *how* that tool is made, *how* it works, and what are the implications of combining such different things. This is also a partial justification for the fact that this evening I will not offer you an all-encompassing reflection on these problems. Instead, my aim is to put to the foreground some reflections on the possible intersections between different disciplinary fields[1].

To confront these topics and their complex – and sometimes controversial – implications, entails some preliminary considerations. I intend the words 'speaking' and 'writing' in a broad sense, not only in the specific sense that has to do with, for example, the practice of art historians. I would try to clarify some points about these practices, in order to gain a better understanding of the problems, but also of the opportunities, of this field of research.

I will not enter here the intricate field of the origins of language – a field of research with a significant tradition, with divergent positions about the origin and development of language during the human evolution: it would take us to a completely different path[2]. The interest in understanding how language works and what is its peculiarity, has led to very significant turns in linguistics and philosophy. In the past century, since at least the publication of Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* in 1921, first published in German and then in English, with a foreword by Bertrand Russell, the study of language has increased significantly, becoming the object of meticulous scrutiny[3]. Even if I will not retrace the phases through which modern linguistics has emerged, it is important to remember that the philosophical thinking about the structure, the function and the specificity of language crossed their paths with neuroscience and the study of human brain.

A particular aspect that I would like to focus on now is one strictly related with the practice of studying and writing about works of art or, more broadly, cultural heritage, that even if it has a special relation to the work of art historians, has nonetheless, I hope, an extensive usefulness. Even if I will refer mainly to concepts related to works of art such as painting, sculpture and architecture, this practice could be of course expanded to include other manifestations of 'cultural heritage' as I will try to show.

Now, confronting with the manifestations of the art works of the past entailed also a study of *what has been written* (more rarely on what has or is being said) about those works of art. In the Western-world, at least from Antiquity, writers, scholars, and amateurs left written texts that described works of art. The practice of the ekphrasis, that is to describe through words an object that is characterized by special esthetic values and to recreate in this way its visual property on the page, has a very long tradition, from ancient Greece to, at least, the twentieth century[4]. This process of 'translation' from the visual to the linguistics is crucial, for example, to have an idea – even if a vague one – of the paintings of Antiquity, otherwise completely lost. In this *longue durée* and thanks to the continuity of the practice of 'translating' what is visual into something

1. These reflections lie on my research on linguistic diversity in the field of Art history carried at the Kunsthistorisches Institut – Max-Planck-Institut in Florence. I would like to thank the organizers of the conference for inviting me to deliver this lecture, and especially Jennifer Celani, Giacomo Pailli and Lucrezia Palandri for their help and assistance in the previous months during the preparation of the conference. Throughout the footnotes references will be maintained at the essential bibliography for the topics addressed.
2. In this field scholars and scientists have sometimes very different positions. For an overview on the topic see, for example, Fischer S.R., *A history of Language*, London: Reaktion Books, 1999 and, more recently, Arbib M.A. ed., *How the Brain got Language. Towards a New Road Map*, Amsterdam-Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2020.
3. Wittgenstein L., *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1922. The consequences of the so-called "linguistic turn" in various disciplines was bold. See, among others, Clark E.A., *History, Theory, Texts: Historians and the Linguistic Turn*, Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard University Press, 2004.
4. The literature is extremely vast. See especially Settis S., *La trattatistica delle arti figurative*, in Cambiano G., Canfora L., Lanza D. eds., *Lo spazio letterario della Grecia Antica*, vol. 1, *La produzione e la circolazione del testo*, t. II, *L'Ellenismo*, Roma: Salerno, 1993, pp. 469-498; Alpers S., *Ekphrasis and aesthetics attitudes in Vasari's* Lives, Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes 23, 1960, pp. 190-215.

different, into a linguistic experience, a broad spectrum of concepts, ideas, and interpretative tools were developed[5].
Michael Baxandall is one of the scholars who had contributed most to our understanding of these historical processes. For example, in his first book, published in 1971, *Giotto and the Orators. Humanist observers of painting in Italy and the discovery of pictorial composition 1350-1450*, Baxandall examined the way works of art, especially paintings, were described in the texts written by scholars and intellectuals[6]. What emerged from Baxandall's analyses is that those descriptions had at least two components, one tied with what was derived from the classical literature and another specifically adapted for the contemporary works of art. One of the most important arguments advanced by Baxandall is that with the humanistic rebirth of Latin, those same humanists changed their way of looking at contemporary works of art. To use humanistic Latin implied, as Baxandall shows, a series of categories and concepts that were not proper of Italian or Medieval Latin. Just one example: in describing a human figure, and speaking about his or her beauty, one could not avoid to locate that beauty in the face when speaking of 'forma' or in the whole body when speaking instead of 'pulchritudo'. In so doing, words acquired a historical depth that is passed down in a new context and tradition.
Looking at another historical moment, it is possible to observe what happened when some words and concepts entered a new linguistic and cultural context. When Karel van Mander wrote his treatise, the *Schilder-Boeck*, published in Haarlem in 1604, he apologizes to the reader for his dependance on foreign words and concepts «I couldn't totally avoid foreign words», wrote van Mander, «because that is the way we define things in our profession and it would be difficult to define them otherwise»[7]. He used words that were spread especially by artists, and especially from Italy, all around Europe in the previous centuries. It was a technical language, above all used by artists and architects that little by little was also fixed in treatises, poems, and literary works. The first example of this being of course Giorgio Vasari's *Lives of the most famous painters, sculptors and architects*, first published in Florence in 1550. A painter himself, van Mander knew extremely well those 'technical' languages and relied extensively on Vasari's text, translating the lives of the Italian artists in his own *Schilder-Boeck*. In so doing, van Mander transferred Italian words in the Dutch context, but contributed also to establish a language that was specific to his artistic context, the context of the Seven United Provinces at the beginnings of the seventeenth century. Next to the words translated directly from other languages, especially Italian (words like 'schets' for sketch, or 'profijl' for profile), van Mander uses words that are proper to the Dutch tradition, like 'schilderachtig', which means 'something that is worth reproducing in paint', or used words borrowed from Italian that acquired a polysemic quality, that expanded their semantic in the new linguistic context (such as, for example, 'manier' or 'landtschap')[8]. Through the centuries, writers and artists used and adapted those words, changing their conceptual field or refreshing it for a new epoch.
Even from a necessarily brief survey such as this, some elements emerge that are worth noting. In the process of transmission and adjustment from one linguistic context to another arises not only problems concerning, for example, the conceptual translation or the modification of meaning; the new linguistic context into which a word is used offers also the possibilities to adapt the historical depth of that specific word. This is particularly evident when confronting the Western tradition of treatises on art, where it is possible to find words that are still used today in different linguistic contexts.
Many scholars had taken up the challenge to clarify this complex relationship of the visual and the linguistic dimensions that coalesce, for example, in the work of art.

5. On Pliny and his practice of describing antiques works of art, otherwise completely lost for us, and his influence on different epochs (especially Italian Renaissance) see Blake McHam S., *Pliny and the Artistic culture of the Italian Renaissance. The legacy of the* Natural History, New Haven-London: Yale University Press, 2013; Anguissola A., *Pliny the Elder and the Matter of Memory. An Encyclopaedic Workshop*, Abingdon-New York: Routledge, 2022.
6. Baxandall M., *Giotto and the Orators. Humanist observers of painting in Italy and the discovery of pictorial composition 1350-1450*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971. On this book, see also Langdale A., *Linguistic theories and intellectual history in Michael Baxandall's* Giotto and the orators, Journal of Art Historiography 1, 2009 (available at arthistoriography.files.wordpress.com/2011/02/media_139142_en.pdf, last accessed 20 Sept. 2023). Baxandall devoted specific attention to the problem art history's linguistic specificity and the challenges of writing about something that is visual in 1979: Baxandall M., *The Language of Art History*, New Literary History 10, 3, 1979, pp. 453-465.
7. Van Mander K., *Den Grondt der Edel vry Schilde-const*, in *Het Schilder-Boeck […]*, Haarlem 1604, f. 5r. On van Mander's treatise, in the vast literature, see especially Waterschoot W., *Karel van Mander's Schilder-Boeck (1604): a description of the book and its setting*, Quærendo 13, 4, 1983, pp. 260-185; Melion W., *Shaping the Netherlandish Canon. Karel van Mander's Schilder-Boeck*, Chicago-London: University of Chicago Press, 1991; Terrenato F., *In the Manner of Vasari: Italian Loanwords and Calques in Karel van Mander's* Schilder-Boeck *(1603-4)*, in Brennan R., O'Donnell C.O., Mascolo M.M., Nova A. eds., *Art History Before English. Negotiating a European Lingua Franca from Vasari to the Present*, proceedings of the International Conference (Florence, Kunsthistorisches Institut – Max-Planck-Institut, March, 8-10, 2018), Rome: Officina Libraria, 2021, pp. 123-140.
8. On the concept of *schilderachtig* see Bakker B., Schilderachtig*: Discussions of a Seventeenth-Century Term and Concept*, Simiolus 23, 2-3, 1995, pp. 174-162. Other concepts too play crucial role in defining the way of looking at pictures. See especially the concept of *houding*: Taylor P., *The Concept of* Houding *in Dutch Art Theory*, Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes 55, 1992, pp. 210-232.

Especially in the Anglo-American world, these issues had received a great deal of attention. When Nelson Goodman, for example, published in 1968 *Languages of art: an approach to a theory of symbols* he explains how his theory of symbolic form works[9]. One of the key concepts of Goodman's book is 'reference', that is to say, the relationship between one object to another. At the very end of the first part of his book, «Reality remade»[10], Goodman concentrates upon the relationship between «Depiction and description»:

> «Reference to an object is a necessary condition for depiction or description of it, but no degree of resemblance is a necessary or sufficient condition for either. Both depiction and description participate in the formation and characterization of the world; and they interact with each other and with perception and knowledge»[11].

In his complex analysis of the peculiarity of a notational system, Goodman offers also some elements to distinguish between the representational system and language. Although in passing, it is interesting to note that one of the pupils of Goodman at Penn State University was Noam Chomsky, who developed a strong interest in philosophy thanks to Goodman's tutelage, and who later became one of the world's most famous linguists.

It is possible to consider Goodman's book as the culmination and synthesis of a field of study that had passed – at least – through the experiences and reflections of scholars such as Aby Warburg or Ernst Gombrich. Following a flow of studies that flourished during the twentieth century, Goodman offered a first systematic approach to the issue of the relationship of language and works of art.

Considering briefly how these problems have been addressed, a central place is occupied by Warburg. One of his mottos was 'Das Wort zum Bild', which can be translated as 'From the word to the picture'. What Warburg intended was the necessity to tie together what is said and written about works of art and the work itself. But whose word? This could seem a meaningless question, but it is instead extremely important. The 'Wort' about which Warburg was speaking was the historical word, the word that surrounds the work of art in its history. Warburg was extremely conscious – and he wrote it several times – of the fact that to better understand a picture we must investigate also its contexts. And it is, of course, also a *linguistic* context[12].

This way of understanding the relationship between words and pictures was also at the core of the work of another giant of the history of art, sir Ernst Gombrich, who had been research assistant at the Warburg Institute in London since 1936, after fleeing from Austria. When he delivered the inaugural lecture for his Slade Professorship in Oxford, in 1950, Gombrich focused exactly on the topic that was so special for Warburg: *Pictures and Words* – that is the title of his lecture. Gombrich interpreted the issue as central in Warburg's thoughts, considering it the only 'methodological point of view' that the Warburg Institute had inherited from its founder. Even if Warburg's research can barely be limited to that, it is nonetheless true that in his career he was rather keen to recuperate written sources that could help to better understand the works of art he was studying. For Gombrich, too, the relationship between words and pictures was also a crucial issue: he stated in the 1950 lecture that, in the end, all that is written on art consists of words and pictures, and all the methodological conundrums of the discipline could have been labeled under that issue. How to express the differences in colors and nuances in a painting, for example? How to describe the subtle compositional differences that characterized a painting by Raphael? Gombrich was convinced that the problem lied in the language, that we must make an effort to find the more appropriate words for a given painting. Even so, as he put it, the link between the picture and the word is *never* symmetrical, it is always an unbalanced correspondence[13]. Even in his most famous book, *Art and Illusion. A study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, published in 1960 but conceived at least five years before, Gombrich stated a series of principles that could be resumed under the formula «Making precedes Matching»: artists created pictures by manipulating a series of 'schemata', inherited from the tradition; then, at some point, someone decided to compare the scheme to what was seen in reality, in what was directly observable in the world, and from this comparison arose the decision to modify the scheme. The series of changes, modifications and adjustments gave art a history. On the other hand, beholders interpreted what they saw represented thanks to what they remembered of the world and from other pictures they have seen. What is striking is that this process described by Gombrich presents keen similarities to the processes involved in the use of language[14].

9. Goodman N., *Languages of art: an approach to a theory of symbols*, Indianapolis-New York-Kansas City: Bobbs-Merrill 1968.
10. *Ivi*, pp. 40-43.
11. *Ivi*, p. 40.
12. On Warburg see especially Gombrich E.H., *Aby Warburg. An Intellectual Biography*, London: The Warburg Institute, 1970; Id., *Aby Warburg, his aims and methods*, Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes 62, 1999, pp. 268-282.
13. The text of the lecture was reprinted in 2001: Gombrich E.H., *Pictures and words*, in Golden L. ed., *Raising the Eyebrow. John Onians and World Art Studies. An* Album Amicorum *in his Honour*, Oxford: Bar Publishing, 2001, pp. 91-105.
14. Gombrich E.H., *Art and Illusion. A study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1960. See also Wood C.S., Gombrich E.H., *Art and Illusion. A study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation, 1960*, in Shone R. ed., *The Books*

It is worth noting here that also in Italy many scholars confronted these issues, even if from a slightly different point of view. The work of Roberto Longhi stands out as one of the most important elaborations on the relationship between art and language. Longhi was keenly aware of the differences between the two fields, and throughout his long career he forced himself to try to find the most exact words to describe the works of art[15]. One of his most important results was to recognize the necessity to study and understand deeply what was written about works of art of the past. Studying Caravaggio, for example, he investigated the treatises and lives of the painter written immediately after his death. In so doing, he picked up those words and expressions that were remarkably fitting to describe the paintings, thanks to their conceptual accuracy (for example, to remain in the context of his studies of the Italian seventeenth-century paintings, words like 'scorto', 'macchia', 'legamento'). Those words then, were used by Longhi in his writings, giving them not only a great degree of precision, but also a historical intensity that reverberate with the echoes of the historical literature on art. It was a different way to find the more appropriate words to correlate to a work of art that also Warburg was looking for.

It is possible to trace and identify a similar process of 'translation' and 'transmission' also in the field of law: I am quite sure that similar problems arose also in the context of the different national laws and their definitions. The dimension of historicity of law is, again, a *process* that is inseparable from language. In the case of the laws on cultural heritage, for example, efforts have been made to achieve the more inclusive definition as possible, increasing what should fall under the protection of those laws.

It is particularly challenging to reflect upon how two complex and (apparently) separated fields such as 'cultural heritage' and 'law' overlap. Each one has its own specificity and its own code. In many cases of cultural heritage, it is a visual code, different from the verbal-linguistic one.

The path that from Warburg and Gombrich brings to Baxandall and Goodman and to the philosophical reflections concerning visual elements and language had significant parallels also in the philosophical and linguistic elaboration of laws on cultural heritage.

It is interesting to note that when Goodman's book was published attention was given increasingly to the problems of preserving what we now call 'cultural heritage'. Just to consider briefly one example: in November 1972 the General Conference of the United Nation adopted the World Heritage Convention. That was a crucial step for preserving the *natural* and *cultural* heritage recognized as having 'universal outstanding value'. Even if there were debates and disagreement around the concept of 'universal outstanding value', something quite abstract, it is nonetheless important to consider that this document combines together *natural* and *cultural* heritage. In doing so, the 1972 treatise expanded enormously the field of what should be protected as 'heritage'. Moreover, it is possible to distinguish a progressive shift from 'immovable, tangible heritage' to 'immovable, intangible heritage'[16].

Result of the complex historical and political processes of the twentieth century, this definition reflects also the changes in terms of membership of the United Nation and the UNESCO. The progressive weight in numerical terms of African and Asian States, for example, caused a progressive shift from the concept of cultural 'property' to cultural 'heritage': if in Western countries domestic laws define cultural expressions in terms of and through property laws, non-Western countries adopt definitions that underline more the aspect of safeguarding through a common effort, thus leaving property in the background[17].

Now, one thing that is very interesting is that also language itself became part of this system of safeguard and protection. As stated in the second article of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, language is considered «a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage», through which that same heritage manifests itself. Language is thus recognized as a consubstantial, quintessential element of cultures. But in considering this normative frame, it is also necessary to confront it with the broader frame on language laws, that specific field of legal rules that, for example, fixes the use of language in public communication or education. In these cases, language is regarded for its special communicative and functional characteristics, not as a 'heritage'. Moreover, language is also a key element not only from a practical, functional point of view, but also, more generally, as an element that contributes to build and define the cultural identity of the community that uses a particular language[18].

Considering language as a tool, as a powerful instrument for communication, it is significant that the legal regulations

that Shaped Art History. From Gombrich and Greenberg to Alpers and Krauss, London: Thames & Hudson, 2013, pp. 116-126

15. In the vast literature about Longhi's language see especially Mengaldo P.V., *Note sul linguaggio critico di Roberto Longhi* [1975], in Id., *La tradizione del Novecento. Prima serie*, Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 1996, pp. 274-316; Montagnani M., *Glossario longhiano. Saggio sulla lingua e lo stile di Roberto Longhi*, Pisa: Pacini Editore, 1989; Mascolo M.M., *Roberto Longhi e la sua ricezione, tra* ekphrasis *e* connoisseurship, in Brennan R., O'Donnell C.O., Mascolo M.M., Nova A. eds., *Art History Before English*, cit., pp. 227-245.

16. For the broader frame into which this Convention was signed see especially Vrdoljak A.F., Meskell L., *Intellectual Cooperation Organization, Unesco, and the Culture Conventions*, in Francioni F., Vrdoljak A.F. eds., *The Oxford Handbook of International Cultural Heritage Law*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020, pp. 13-39.

17. See Blake J., *Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage*, ivi, pp. 347-370.

18. For a useful overview see especially De Witte B., *Language as Cultural Heritage*, ivi, pp. 371-378.

are embodied *in the* language, are *inseparable* from their linguistic dimension. Every State who has adopted the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage has its own national legal order, and in many cases considers law language differently from its neighbor. Just think for a moment how the domestic laws in Spain or France can differ in their respective languages. As a matter of fact, this kind of specificity is the result of the different historical processes at the origins of these modern States. Some of the problems associated with these kinds of regulations are exactly the frictions between domestic and international regulations, and the effort to balance the two systems, the national and the international, concerns many political activities.

Of course, it is possible to retrace the same path toward a progressive shift and expansion of the concept of 'heritage', as in the case of language, for other manifestation of the cultural heritage.

If language is considered one of the elements that shapes the identity of a community, the different works of art, practices, and traditions that are part of the 'cultural heritage', tangible or intangible, are of course invested with the same role in defining the identity of a given community. But – and this is a key aspect – as in the case of language, the shift from 'cultural property' to 'cultural *heritage*' implied a larger, shared 'possession' of that heritage. This shift implies the question to whom belongs the many works of art in museums all around the world. In times when it is difficult to talk about identity, given the use and misuse that has been – and is being – made of this concept, that of the link between cultural heritage and identity remains a complex issue that needs to be dealt with carefully.

One thing that is worth noting is that in the field of international law, as in many other fields – science, for example, but also art history – English has progressively become the most used *lingua franca*. Many explanations for this could be put forward[19]. One could be the necessity to bypass the barrier of different languages. But different languages mean also different legal systems and, more importantly, different law languages and different points of view in the field of the Philosophy of Law. The biggest barrier, therefore, lies only partly in linguistic diversity. As in many other cases, language is a tool, something that could be used exploiting fully its plasticity, its powerful flexibility or, on the contrary, deciding to use it to create gaps to avoid dialogue. Language alone is not sufficient to make the law. As language alone is not sufficient to define what is 'cultural heritage'. Interactions and overlaps of these different fields are one possible way to preserve what could be considered an ecosystem of great richness and diversity. Trying to surpass barriers, whatever their nature, is also something that could be positively dealt with and through language. In one of his notes written in 1937, Wittgenstein stated, «the light shed by work is a beautiful light, which, however, only shines with real beauty if it is illuminated by yet another light»: the mutual, sometimes convoluted, sometimes difficult exchange between different fields is the only way to try to be more conscious of the specific differences of those fields, and to try to build bridges to connect them[20].

19. Even if focused mostly on the scientific field, see the brilliant account offered in Gordin M., *Scientific Babel: How Science was done before and after Global English*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015. Some considerations from an art historical point of view are in Brennan R., O'Donnell C.O., Mascolo M.M., *Introduction*, in Brennan R., O'Donnell C.O., Mascolo M.M., Nova A. eds., *Art History Before English*, cit., pp. 9-29.
20. The quote from Wittgenstein is from Wittgenstein L., *Culture and Value*, ed. by G.H. von Wright, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980, p. 26, under 1937.