

E.R. Curtius and the rhetoric of visual art

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In common usage, the word «rhetoric» often indicates superficial, exaggerated or inauthentic speech. Ernst Robert Curtius' major work, *Europäische Literatur und lateinische Mittelalter*, provided for a re-evaluation of the term. In his book (referred to in the following as *Europäische Literatur*), Curtius recognised the classical tradition of rhetoric and its enormous impact on European literature from the Middle Ages to romanticism. *Europäische Literatur* is aiming to show to what extent the teaching of Latin and the reading of a canonical corpus of texts by *auctores* have dominated and formed the horizon of expectation of what we could call the European mind. Thus Curtius has made an important contribution not only to literary studies, but to intellectual history in general, and the book has, after its publication in 1948, become a classic of literary history and the history of ideas.

Curtius' subject in *Europäische Literatur* is «the survival into and beyond the Middle Ages of the rhetorical topos»¹. He describes how classical patterns of literary form and content have been conveyed and transformed from one generation to the next through the Latin curriculum texts in the medieval schools. What is essential about Curtius' description is not so much his specific arguments for the unbroken rhetorical

¹ Peter Goodman: «Epilogue. The Ideas of Ernst Robert Curtius and the genesis of ELLMA», in E.R. Curtius: *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, Princeton/Bollingen 1990, p. 632.

tradition as the methodological intention underlying it. His goal is not only that of reassessing a forgotten corpus of Latin texts in the study of literature. He also wants to provide his discipline with an ample method. Since classical rhetoric was a method for the writing and composing of texts, Curtius aims to use it as a method for the «reading» of texts. In his view, the rhetorical tradition can successfully be used as an analytical tool; or even, be considered as the very key to the understanding of canonical European literature. This view is an alluring one, because Curtius has the empirical evidence on his side. The existence of rhetorical patterns and employment of fixed *topoi* and metaphors in medieval and Renaissance texts can be easily proved. As Peter Goodman points out in his epilogue to the English edition of *Europäische Literatur* from 1990:

About the importance of his theory Curtius was, from the outset, in no doubt. Unlike the groundless abstractions of *Geistesgeschichte*, here was a comprehensive cultural explanation founded on fact.¹

To fully understand the methodological implications of *Europäische Literatur* one would need to take into consideration the fact that Curtius writes his book partly as a polemic against the dominating literary theories of his time. This polemic, however, is not the focus of my essay. As an art historian my concern is whether it, being the book which taught literary history to classify verbal images, can be of interest in the study of visual images. For art historians concerned with *iconography*, that is the study of fixed motives and their interpretation in historical art,² *Europäische Literatur* may be

¹ Goodman, *ibid.*

² Art historical terminology distinguish between iconography (fixed pictorial motives) and iconology (the interpretation of such motives in a broader historical, cultural and intellectual context). The distinction was made by Erwin Panofsky (1892-1968) in his famous and widely read

read as a bright and entertaining introduction to the literary tradition from which so many works of art from the Middle Ages and the Renaissance pick their themes. The work has been characterised as «ein groß angelegter Topos-Katalog»,¹ and as such it is a storehouse of useful references for the study of iconography. But it is also profitable reading to art historians from another perspective: the methodological one. In my opinion, Curtius' study of verbal images intersect with the study of iconography on a fundamental level. I will try to elaborate this in the following.

Curtius himself would probably not appreciate my claim that the rhetorical tradition may be a valuable methodological tool for art historians. On the contrary, in his introduction to the work, Curtius explicitly warns against interdisciplinary loans of methods in general. In his view, such loans reveal a superficial attitude towards one's own discipline and «eine dilettantische Vernebelung von Sachverhalten» (p. 21).² Curtius criticizes literary scholars who reject the established philological and historical methods in favour of methods and models borrowed from other disciplines, such as philosophy, sociology, psychoanalysis – and, «vor allem»: art history (ibid.). At the time, Heinrich Wölfflin's «formalist» art theory had a great impact on the study of literature, and Wölfflin's style-describing concepts were often applied to the description of

book *Studies in iconology* (1939). The notion iconology has however proved to be a problematic one, and has caused a complex theoretical discussion (See e.g. Brendan Cassidy (ed.): *Iconography at the Crossroads*, Princeton 1993, and Micheal Ann Holly: *Panofsky and the foundations of art history*, London 1994). In the following I will apply the term «iconography» for the study of motives and themes in visual art, and reserve the term «iconology» for the works by Panofsky and his predecessor Aby Warburg.

¹ Peter Jehn: «Ernst Robert Curtius: Toposforschung als Restauration», in: Peter Jehn (ed.): *Toposforschung. Eine Dokumentation*, Frankfurt 1972, p. VII

² All references to *Europäische Literatur* refer to the German edition of 1961 (Francke Verlag Berlin und München).

literary texts. According to Curtius, the application of imported art historical terms becomes a handmaid of the pseudo-philosophical, schematic and anti-empirical abstractions of *Geistesgeschichte*, and gives birth to such airy beings as the «Gothic man» and the «Baroque man». Curtius' polemic is to be understood as a crusade in favour of the empiric foundations of literary scholarship.

Therefore, Curtius seems almost hostile to any exchange between the disciplines literature and art history. In his opinion the disciplines have nothing to teach each other, because the discrepancies between the experience of visual art and that of literature are too fundamental to be overcome:

Einen Tizian «habe» ich nicht weder in der Photographie noch in der vollendesten Kopie ... Mit der Litteratur aller Zeiten un Völker kann ich eine unmittelbare, intime, ausfüllende Lebensbeziehung haben, mit der Kunst nicht. Kunstwerke muß ich in Museen aufsuchen. Das Buch ist um vieles realer als das Bild. Hier liegt ein Seinsverhältnis vor und die reale Teilhabe an einem geistigen Sinn. (p. 24)

A literary work is spread «in unzähligen Exemplaren», whereas a work of art is unique and must be experienced *in situ*. Accordingly literature is more accessible than visual art – and, according to Curtius, appears to be of greater substance. This view is a peculiar one for a philologist and historian. Curtius seems to ignore the fact that access to texts and images is historically determined. Only if you live in a time and at a place where books are mass produced and you yourself master the art of reading and have access to libraries and bookshops, «die Litteratur aller Zeiten un Völker» will be accessible. Artefacts of the kind we today label «visual art» have not always had their places in museums. Curtius' statement quoted above inevitably creates an image of the great philologist in his modern studio, sitting in his armchair with every great literary work at hand,

too comfortable to take the inconvenience of getting up and visiting museums to study art.

Curtius' dislike for a juxtaposition of literature and art is clearly expressed in his introductory chapter. Here Curtius seems to vindicate the word's primacy over the picture – and thus the greater dignity of the student of literature to that of the art historian. It takes hard work and knowledge in depth to master literature, Curtius claims. No intuition or theoretical contemplation on the «Wesen» of literature can replace philological knowledge. Art history, however, does not demand anything of that sort from its students. «Sie arbeitet mit Bildern – und Lichtbildern. Da gibt es nichts Unverständliches», Curtius asserts (p. 24). Art historians would of course protest immediately against this quite provocative assertion. A profound understanding of the complex universe of images in historical art does not cost less intellectual effort and less historical and linguistic insight than the struggle with Greek or Latin syntactical problems, they would respond. But Curtius ascertains:

Pindars Gedichte zu verstehen, kostet Kopfzerbrechen; der Parthenonfries nicht. Die Bilderwissenschaft ist mühelos, verglichen mit der Bücherwissenschaft. (p. 24)

Therefore, it seems likely that Curtius himself would disagree with my claim that his «rediscovery» of the rhetorical tradition is relevant to art history and the study of iconography. However, his dedication on the book's frontispiece indicates something else. One of the two dedicatee of the book is actually an art historian, namely the Jewish German scholar Aby Warburg (1866-1929), whom Curtius also quotes several times in his work.¹ According to Peter Goodman, «the significance of this dedication was not purely personal; it also implied an

¹ The other dedicatee is the philologist Gustav Gröber (1844-1911), Curtius' Strasbourg professor.

adherence to a particular view of scholarly method».¹ At the beginning of the 20th century, Warburg had investigated the classical heritage in Italian Renaissance art and discussed problems in the field of art history similar to those Curtius was to take up in the field of literature one generation later. Like Curtius, Warburg scrutinized the conventions of form and content that the Middle Ages inherited from Classical and Christian Antiquity, transmitted through texts and images and applied to new works of art, both literary and visual. Art historians recognize Aby Warburg as one of the «fathers» of the discipline. He is known as the founder of the iconological method, first introduced in a paper given in Rome in 1912 on the wall paintings in Palazzo Schifanoia at Ferrara.² Together with his follower Erwin Panofsky (1892-1968), Warburg established iconology as a new approach in art history. Whereas art historians of the 19th century had focused mainly on stylistic problems and on the personal expression of the different artists in the great periods of European art, the methodical iconology of Warburg and Panofsky became a means to investigate the content and the ideas underlying their paintings and sculptures. As such it meant an impetus to study the relations between texts and images. What is significant in this context, is the fact that Panofsky's almost revolutionary iconological studies are concurrent with Curtius' philological investigation of rhetoric, topics and metaphors. As the Danish scholar Jens Hougaard has recently pointed out, Curtius and Panofsky, belonging to the same generation, have similar declared intentions: They both aim «to investigate how stable 'formulations' are generated and then separated from the tradition».³ Curtius aims to find images in the texts, whereas

¹ Goodman op.cit., p. 640.

² Aby Warburg: «Italienische Kunst und internationale Astrologie im Palazzo Schifanoja zu Ferrara», *Gesammelte Schriften*, Leipzig - Berlin 1932, Bd. II, pp. 459-479.

³ «At undersøge, hvorledes en række stabile 'formuleringer' opstår og udskilles af traditionen», Jens Hougaard: «Romantisk kærlighed og

Panofsky aims to find texts in the images. The concurrence of Panofsky's iconology with what we could call Curtius' rhetorical-hermeneutical theory of literature goes back to a common source of inspiration: Aby Warburg.

The most explicit trace of Aby Warburg in Curtius' *opus magnum*, is the author's eagerness to prove the influence of classical rhetoric on visual art. In his pioneering writings on Italian renaissance art, Warburg showed that the interest of Florentine humanism in classical rhetoric and poetry had a certain influence on contemporary painting. Warburg's analysis of works such as Botticelli's *Primavera* shows that the iconographical programme is founded on rhetorical and literary knowledge (p. 87). Curtius also draws attention to the architect and rhetorically and literarily learned art theorist Leon Battista Alberti, who recommended painters to study the *auctores* carefully in order to invent new subjects for their paintings and to learn to give them a proper form (p. 87). At the same time, however, Curtius claims that while literature is the medium of ideas – «Träger von Gedanken» – visual art is not and can never be. Seen in the light of his respect for and deliberate use of Warburg's writings, Curtius here seems to be self-contradictory in his view on visual art. How is this then to be understood?

I would claim that Curtius' apparent self-contradiction in reality represents a consistent view that he also shares with the art historians of his generation. Curtius seems to suggest that if a work of art actually does express thoughts and ideas, there has to be a written text behind it. The paintings and sculptures of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance are *illustrations*. Thus,

dansk romantikk», unpublished project abstract, Aarhus University, available at www.hum.au.dk/dk/ckultur/cfk.docs/cfk.researchprojects/foel.modern.htm.

In the field of literature and philology Curtius is not the only one with such an interest. His book *Europäische Literatur* came out two years after Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis: Dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der abendländischen Literatur*.

the visual image itself is not a «Träger von Gedanken», but a pointer to a text. Thoughts and ideas are expressed in the language, not in images. In other words, Curtius seems to presuppose the existence of a textual source for the *Primavera* as created by Botticelli. The painting itself is secondary to its text.

Curtius shares this view on images with his contemporaries within the field of art history: Aby Warburg, Erwin Panofsky, and the school of iconology. Critics of the Warburg school have attacked the iconological method on exactly this point: The search for textual sources to explain the «literary» meaning of paintings, sculpture and even architecture inevitably reduces the *visuality* of visual art. However, these critics have often fallen into the opposite extreme. Their responses to the text-ridden iconology have often been a sort of «anti-iconographical» stripping of meaning in the visual arts. They tend to suggest that the paintings of the Italian Renaissance have no literary meaning at all; mythological or biblical motives being used only as a pretext for an interest in formal and aesthetic qualities. Thus, art history has become a unnecessarily disintegrated discipline, divided into two distinct fields of interest: formal, stylistic or aesthetic matters on the one side, iconography and interpretation of meaning on the other.

A reason for this polarisation in art history might be precisely the hypothesis that thoughts and ideas – i.e. meaning – only can be expressed in language, not in visual images. This hypothesis is at the core of Curtius' argumentation in *Europäische Literatur*, as it indeed is in many of the writings of Warburg, Panofsky and also – indirectly – in the critics of iconology. They all presuppose that the intellectual tradition of Antiquity and the Middle Ages is handed down to modern Europe primarily by means of verbal language. Yet, a survey of the medieval theories of language, images, meaning and learning teaches us that this hypothesis is an insufficient one.

Curtius certainly is right when he convincingly argues that for the authors of the Middle Ages, rhetoric is a tool for generation of ideas and structuring of thoughts. However, rhetoric was not the only «argumentative tool» at their disposal. The theorist of the liberal arts, Hugh of St. Victor (1097-1141), ascribes this function to another of the *artes*, namely *geometry*. In his significant introductory work on the study of the arts, *Didascalicon*, Hugh calls geometry «fons sensuum et origo dictionum», that is the «fount of perceptions and the source of utterances».¹

Hugh's definition reveals what we could call a geometric way of thinking, characteristic of the High Middle Ages. Geometry is applied as a productive expressive form, in literature and the visual arts alike. The manuscripts of many of the works that Curtius analyses in *Europäische Literatur* consist of two components: written text and geometrical diagrams. The diagrams – either simple figures or carefully composed iconography – are almost as a rule «censored» in printed versions of the works.² The diagrams are a kind of «applied geometry» and a visual language with an expressive potential different from that of verbal language. The properties of geometry can express relations between a totality and its parts, between high and low, large and small, significant and insignificant, and do so in a more elegant and «economical» manner than words can do. If a circle or wheel – *rota* – is divided into concentric spheres, it visualises a hierarchical relation between centre and periphery. If it is divided into sectors, it depicts a continuous, cyclical movement. Argumentative, geometrical schemes were widely spread already in the Early Middle Ages, above all in the influential works of Isidore of Seville (d. 636). Isidor employed different

¹ Hugo de S.Victore: «Eruditionis didascalie libri septem», II.15, in: J.-P. Migne. *Patrologia Latina*, p. 176, col.757D.

² About the «geometrical» way of thinking in the Middle Ages, see Micheal Evans. «The geometry of the mind», i: *Architectural Association Quarterly*, 12 (1980), pp. 32-55.

circular diagrams to such a degree that his work *Etymologiae* simply went under the name *Liber rotarum*. The qualities of geometrical figures make them speak – and transform them into rhetorical figures. The visual language of medieval art employ these figures deliberately. Thus, the development of Christian iconography provides telling examples. From its very beginning Christian art has established a language which is able to visualise complex theological ideas very concisely. If we take Hugh of St. Victor's statement seriously – that geometry is the «fount of perceptions and the source of utterances» – it would be wrong to perceive images as secondary illustrations to thoughts already formulated verbally. On the contrary, images reproduce the very structure of thought. If it is right to interpret Hugh in this way, Curtius' claim that visual art never can be «Träger von Gedanken» is in conflict with the very literary tradition that is the subject of his book.

However, my intention is not to make geometry play the role in visual arts that Curtius makes rhetoric play in literature. In that case I would have to postulate two parallel means of thought-production and thought-mediation; one for visual expression and another one for verbal expression. My intention here is the opposite. I want to point out that the medieval view on geometry as medium for thoughts, formulated by Hugh of St. Victor, tears down the traditional divide between visual and verbal expression, and with that the assumption of Curtius and the «iconologists» that images are derived from words. Hugh borrows his description of geometry from the field of rhetoric: The expression «fons sensuum et origo dictionum» is also the conventional definition of topics (*topica*), as found in Cassiodorus or Isidor of Seville.¹ We are therefore to interpret geometry in light of the rhetorical *topos*, to which Curtius devotes so much attention in his work: Geometry is a commonplace, a *locus communis*, a site where

¹ Jerome Taylor. *The Didascalicon of Hugh of St. Victor. A Medieval Guide to the Arts*, New York and London 1961, p. 203, note 55.

patterns of argumentation are available. The mental, creative process behind any discursive work – i.e. *inventio* in the terminology of classical rhetoric – employs both verbal (rhetorical) and visual (geometrical) *topoi*. Accordingly, the product of *inventio* can be both verbal and visual.

The inciting force behind *inventio* is the human ability to memorise sensual perceptions as images of the mind. This ability is, according to Hugh of St. Victor in the first book of *Didascalicon*, unique to the human rational mind. It is the foundation of all arts and it enables man to store and put together notions, *imaginationes*, of all things in his mind. It is a power of the soul that allows man to «exercise things present, understand things absent or investigate things unknown¹ Aristotle named this image-producing ability *energeia*, that is mental creative force or activity. The medieval scholars translated the Aristotelian notion into terms such as *expressive force* or *imagination*. Within the medieval «psycho-rhetorical» theory of intellectual creativity, text and image are equivalent manifestations of *energeia*.²

I believe medieval rhetoric can offer important methodological insights to art history on this point and probably also to the study of Medieval literature. A monumental decoration of a medieval town hall and a didactic poem written by a clerk at the cathedral school next to it are both to be understood as manifestations of *energeia* and products of *inventio*. Both works are argumentative, «poetic» and intellectual structures built on material from the same source. The conceptual

¹ «Sed vis animae (...) tota in ratione constituta, eaque vel in rerum praesentium firmissima conclusione, vel in absentium intelligentia, vel in ignotarum inquisitione versatur», Hugo de St. Victore, op.cit., p. 176, col. 744A.

² For a discussion on this subject, see Stephen G. Nichols. «Picture, Image and Subjectivity in Medieval Culture», *MLN*, 108, 4 (1993), pp. 617-637. «The whole point of *energeia* is that it allows for the same mental activity to generate two distinct kinds of material images, verbal and visual», Nichols claims in his article (p. 627).

distinction between textuality and visuality seems not to be an essential one in the medieval rhetorical tradition. Therefore, despite Curtius' insistence on the visual arts' inferiority to literature, his *Europäische Literatur und lateinisches Mittelalter* is disseminated by a method relevant not only to the study of literature, but to an almost equal degree to the study of visual art.

Illustrations

Fig. 1:



Fig. 2:



