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# CHAPTER EIGHT

# A Guide to Interpretation: Art Historical Hermeneutics

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## Clarifications

*Art historical hermeneutics concerns itself with the well-founded interpretation of visual artworks.*

Thus I have defined three aspects: (1) Art historical hermeneutics deals with the same object as art history, while it also contributes to changes in the definition of its object. (2) Interpretation is based on the application of a well-founded method that substantiates conclusions through critical argument. (3) Art historical hermeneutics, as an object-specific theory and method of interpretation, differs from general or philosophical hermeneutics: while the latter studies understanding and interpretation historically and systematically, art historical hermeneutics is geared toward understanding and interpreting specific objects. As such, it is related to philosophical hermeneutics in a critical way, its close relatives being other object-specific disciplines that are aimed at interpretation, such as literary hermeneutics or literary theory.[1]

*Art historical hermeneutics comprises the theory of interpreting visual artworks, the development of methods of interpretation and their validity, and the praxis of interpretation.*

A scholarly discipline that seeks to move beyond merely addressing studio practices and unexplained theories of copying and imitation cannot do without well-founded, verifiable procedures, which always remain open to scrutiny. Methodological reflection alone is not sufficient,

because methods are based on assumptions, object definitions, and scholarly objectives, which likewise require ongoing scrutiny. This is the focus of the theory of interpretation. Theories and methods cannot be developed, however, without taking into account the praxis of interpretation. This praxis does not simply supply the specific materials of reflection, nor does it merely entail the application of methods on the basis of theory. Rather, it involves the ongoing scrutiny of both theory and method. This concise "guide to interpretation" cannot address all the relevant issues. Based on a discussion of a specific example, its primary aim is to establish a critical link between method and praxis.

*In the act of interpretation, we consider works of art as themselves.*

The foregoing sentence is the most intricate one of this contribution. To consider a work as itself does not mean that we look at it in isolation, as in the earlier tradition of "work-immanent" interpretation. What I mean instead is that by interpreting a work of art, we do not view it as evidence of something else. It is important in this respect to distinguish between various scholarly concerns. It is possible, for instance, to consider a work of art primarily as a document of the artist's biography, intellectual history, or particular social conditions. In these cases we rely on the artwork—as well as on other documents—to address concerns associated with its more immediate or broader context. When Erwin Panofsky, in his iconology, considers artworks as symptoms of the general principles on which they are based and which can be deduced from the *habitus* (or the major political, religious, or philosophical tenets), he supplies a historical explanation, which in turn is construed on the basis of abduction and deduction.

An artwork's historical explanation is as important for the logical basis of interpretation as for the reconstruction of the work's historical and social context. However, interpretation is geared toward *not* enclosing the artwork in what we can explain. This is why interpretation focuses on what renders a work visible in terms of its materials, color, depiction, composition, content, or, put differently, in terms of the multiple relationships between the various aspects of form and content. Interpretation starts from the hypothesis of the open and revealing (productive) work of art and should provide a basis for this hypothesis by exploring the essential difference between, on the one hand, thought, *habitus*, and social conditions and, on the other hand, the work made of

stone, wood, or colors. Therefore, when I suggest that in the act of interpretation one considers the work as itself, I do not mean to propose the exclusion of contextual or historical explanation. The two concerns must be linked up with each other in the act of interpretation, and this precisely requires that they are identified as such, as separate concerns, rather than that they dissolve into each other. Even though concerns associated with an artwork's context or historical explanation provide answers to other questions than those associated with a work's interpretation, a work's interpretation requires such answers for generating interpretive ideas and establishing their logical basis. This need also underscores the fact that we do not consider a work as itself when we naively resort to our immediate experience of the work. Evidently, the ignorant gaze is as blind as the innocent eye.

*Art historical interpretations are articulated in language; an interpretation is the linguistic product of the interpreting subject.*

Interpretations are articulated in spoken or written language, but visual artworks are drawn, chiseled, cast, painted, built, or construed. Even though certain works may figure signatures and inscriptions, the alphabet does not count as a basic means of expression in visual art. We are nevertheless inclined to obscure the various means of expression used in visual art with a range of language-related metaphors: we speak of "reading" the image as if it were a text; we encounter expressions such as *architecture parlante* and *peinture parlante;* we refer to the "message" (Aussage) of an image as if it were the linguistic articulation of a specific situation; and we claim that an image does not "speak" to us when we feel unaffected by it, when it leaves us indifferent. Moreover, in a religious context, "speaking" images figured prominently, as in the case of the pax that said "Pacem meam do vobis" to believers, or the image of the Salvator Mundi that communicated the words "antonellus messaneus me pinxit" to the collector.

In relying on the metaphor of images that "speak" to us, a metaphor that in fact dates back to antiquity, we express our wish to decipher and hear the work's *kerygma,* the message it holds for us; or put more straightforwardly, we express our wish to experience its "call." This kind of metaphoric language, however, may confuse our speaking and writing about visual art. An artwork's interpretation is a scholarly product that is expressed in another medium than the work itself, is generated by

subjects other than the original maker of the work (except in cases of artistic self-interpretation), and assumes a certain historical distance from the original maker and the person who commissioned it, as well as from the function of the work (except in interpretations of contemporary art). A work of art is accessible to our gaze and experience through its physical presence.

## Approaches

*The understanding of an artwork is conditional on the interruption of the work's casual perception and everyday usage and begins in the acknowledgment of the work's incomprehensibility.*

Our casual or perfunctory perception is limited to the acknowledgment that something is there, or that it exists as an unchanging object. This is how we generally perceive a monument or building. If, for instance, we are in Rome on the Corso Vittorio Emanuele and ask a passerby the way to a particular pizzeria, this person may well mention the Marco Minghetti monument or the Palazzo della Cancelleria as points of orientation, and most likely, we consider them accordingly, especially if we are hungry. In everyday life, art historians tend to relate to artworks in the same way as everyone else.[2] We interrupt our perfunctory gaze when we pause in front of a painting or building, and we ask ourselves who made it, or who commissioned it, what subject it expresses, what use was made of the building, and so forth. Perhaps we gather snippets of information from a museum guide or an art handbook, after which we absentmindedly go on looking for some new object to please our eyes.

It also happens, though, that we are looking at a work and that we experience its "call," or that we are struck by its mystery or incomprehensibility. It may be either such a call or our incomprehension—our *Unverständnis*—that prompts us to engage in the act of interpretation. We can describe the interpretation of a visual artwork in general terms as the act by which we seek to do away with our incomprehension. We should make a distinction between a work's call, which is geared toward understanding (Verstehen), and other calls for our attention that seek to influence our conduct, as, for example, a poster that tries to lure us into buying a certain brand of beer. I also believe we have to make a distinction between the understanding of works of visual art and under-

standing derived from reading a text. Klaus Weimar has suggested that understanding on the basis of reading, which involves a continuous dynamic of anticipating new sentences and returning to previous sentences, depends on a "mental reflex": the understanding that follows from reading cannot be willingly suppressed, or otherwise one simply stops reading.[3] In contrast, one can look at a visual artwork without engaging in the act of understanding.

*Understanding and interpretation only become possible and necessary after the work has lost its original function.*

As long as a work has a strictly defined practical, political, cultic, or representative function that determines its use, we do not refer to our dealings with it as "understanding" or "interpretation." In such a case, any form of incomprehension can simply be removed by demonstrating or learning the work's use. But understanding and interpretation can only be realized in situations where a distance between work and function has been established. In thirteenth- and fourteenth-century liturgy, for instance, a pax was used in the ritual of the kiss of peace. Its proper application by believers triggered emotions such as adoration or admiration, but not activities such as understanding or interpretation. These activities only become possible and necessary after the pax's cultic function has been superseded by its artistic value.

The same holds true for other functions of buildings or objects of crafts and design. A chair by Mario Botta in the Museum of Modern Art, for example, is cut off from its normal use by the exhibit platform and by the sign that prohibits one to sit on it. When for various historical or institutional reasons an object has lost its original function, several questions come to the fore: How was it made? Which ideas, rules, or models did the artist or maker rely on? What was the relationship between the form and the earlier function?[4] In other words, we are confronted with the interesting problem of the interrelationship of interpretation and artistic production. The two are not necessarily subjected to the various functions mentioned earlier. Artistic production requires knowledge of the rules associated with the making of an object that has a specific function, but the rules of its making do not correspond to the rules of its function or use. In our interpretive effort, then, we are as much in need of knowledge of the particular rules and models associated with a work's production as we are of knowledge of its functions.

*Interpretation begins in articulating our incomprehension (Unverständnis) as a series of questions.*

We may begin to articulate our incomprehension by looking at a particular artwork, by describing it, or by reading about it. Generally, it is worthwhile to spend quite some time looking at a work of art and comparing it to others before turning to the relevant literature. This is not to suggest the importance of feigning ignorance, but the importance of training oneself to look carefully—of educating oneself in visual experience. Moreover, by looking at an image, we may discover a better angle for formulating the proper questions than by reading the relevant literature. The answers encountered in the literature are frequently so sophisticated that they altogether keep us from articulating our incomprehension in "silly" questions. If, however, for some reason it does not suit us well to start off with questions, we should begin with a description. Simply naming the persons or the facts that can be identified in the image, or taking in its colors and lines, may already encourage us to watch more carefully. This results in a basic grasp of the image—one that may be used for developing a concrete set of questions. By interrogating our initial understanding of the artwork, we objectify it, whereas the ensuing detachment generates opportunities for correcting our initial responses to the work. This is also a useful practice for developing the detachment we need from the understanding of others as found in the literature. Rather than drawing our description into the text of our interpretation, though, we should throw it away. After all, nothing is duller or more inappropriate than merely linking up description and interpretation. Interpretation should proceed not on the basis of a fixed model but according to the questions that were generated on the basis of the work to be interpreted. It is perfectly fine to develop an argument with the help of brief descriptive statements, for this implies that one adds a language of one's own to the work. We may avoid merely presenting a schematic description by writing down our questions. The articulation of one's incomprehension is not just an exercise for beginners. To paraphrase a sentence from Klaus Weimar: the talent and competence of art historians will grow in accordance with their ability to interrogate their own or some given basic understanding of a work of art in an objectified manner.

I would like to discuss and demonstrate this process on the basis of one specific painting. I believe it is more productive to discuss a single case in detail than to provide general advice. Although I selected a classic case, I do not want to leave the impression that this "guide to interpretation" is only useful for paintings from between 1500 and 1800. Sustained reflection on the interpretive process should enable one to develop the problems addressed in more detail or to apply the same principles to visual artworks from other times. Making minor methodical adjustments should be fairly easy in most cases, yet the application of this guide to other artistic genres (architecture, sculpture, arts and crafts, design) will require more substantial adjustments.

The information I supply about the image corresponds to what one commonly finds in a catalog entry: Nicolas Poussin, *Landscape with Pyramus and Thisbe,* 1651, oil on canvas, 192.5 x 273.5 cm, Frankfurt am Main, Städelsches Kunstinstitut (Figure 8.1).[5] The questions that enter our minds when we are looking at this painting may include the following: What are the depicted figures doing? Which landscape is depicted? What do the figures in the foreground have to do with the thunderstorm? Why does the painter show a struggle with a lion in the middle of the painting? Why are there two lightning flashes in the sky? What is the name of the city to the right of the painting's middle? How is the thunderstorm depicted? Why is the sky in the background to the left brightening? Why does the water in the middle of the image show a surface that is smooth as glass while everywhere else the effect of the strong wind is clearly visible? Why was the painter not consistent in this respect? With this list of questions, we have already generated more incomprehension about this painting than anyone has ever managed to produce before us.

*The process of interpretation can be visualized as an indefinite surface.*

In what follows, I illuminate the various stages of the interpretation process, but I do not provide a map that prescribes each of the individual steps and their consequences. The complex process involved I divide into analysis, creative abduction, and validation. Although I discuss the various relevant problems in a specific order, this is not to suggest that they can or should be addressed and solved in this order only. To underscore the complexity of the interpretation process, I include a

Figure 8.1. Nicolas Poussin, *Landscape with Pyramus and Thisbe,* 1651. Oil on canvas, 192.5 x 273.5 cm. Städelsches Kunstinstitut, Frankfurt am Main.

representation of an indefinite surface (Figure 8.2). This particular visualization suggests that the process of interpretation may start with any activity, go on in various directions, while its earlier stages may be reconsidered at any point. It is even crucial, I would submit, to return to the completed stages of the interpretation process repeatedly, or, in other words, to proceed in a recursive manner.

## Analysis

*The materials for the preliminary answers to our questions and for the development of further questions are generated through analysis, that is, by close examination and classification of works and elements thereof.*

Proper analysis cannot be executed without studying the scholarly literature. Of course, we gather relevant information from bibliographies and journals, but we begin with reading the most recent literature on our topic. In this way, we do not first have to grapple with outdated views, which in most cases only have significance from a historical angle. For methodical reasons, since one cannot process everything at the same time, we focus our research on individual elements. Drawing up

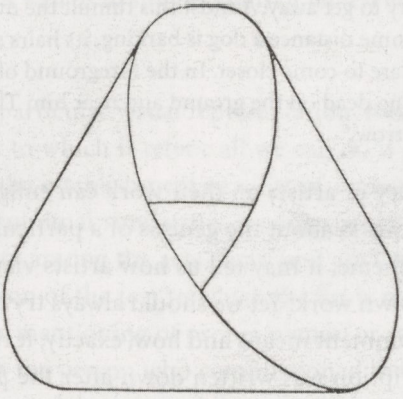

Figure 8.2. The indefinite surface as a representation of the interpretation process.

lists with information on the iconographic type, the genre, or the style of the work reflects the view that one can determine a work's characteristic features only on the basis of distinctive comparison. Analysis functions primarily as a preparatory effort for creative abduction, which is why our analytic effort should aim for the articulation of further questions. I have selected a case that allows us to demonstrate as many steps of the interpretation process as possible. It has to be taken for granted that in each individual case the challenges and opportunities of analysis depend on the materials that can be located.

*The commentary of artists about their work, if available, is taken into consideration.*

With respect to *Landscape with Pyramus and Thisbe,* there is a detailed description by Poussin in a letter of 1651 to his colleague Jacques Stella in Paris:

> I have tried to represent a thunderstorm on earth. To the best of my knowledge and abilities I imitated the effects of an impetuous wind and an atmosphere that is permeated by darkness, rain, sheet lightning, and flashes of lightning that come down in various locations and cause chaos all around. All depicted figures have a role to play in accordance with the weather: some escape through clouds of dust toward the direction of the wind, which pushes them further still, but others stride against the wind, barely advancing, and cover their eyes with their hands. On one side a shepherd, hurrying away and leaving his flock behind, catches sight of a lion that has just knocked down a few ox-drivers and is busy attacking others. While several drivers are defending themselves, others stir up

> their oxen and try to get away. Amidst this tumult the dust is rising in great swirls. At some distance a dog is barking, its hairs standing on end, but it does not dare to come closer. In the foreground of the image one sees Pyramus lying dead on the ground and near him Thisbe, who is devastated by sorrow.[6]

The commentary of artists on their work can enlighten us about the nature of artistic work, about the genesis of a particular work, or about its intentions or theme; it may tell us how artists viewed, evaluated, or interpreted their own work. Yet we should always try to ascertain what a specific artistic comment means and how, exactly, it relates to the work.

Poussin's description was written down after the painting was completed. His words address the artistic problem of faithful imitation, the true-to-nature rendering of a thunderstorm in particular. Furthermore, the description contains the names of the victims of misfortune in the foreground; it provides us with both the artistic and thematic intention. The detailed listing of the various effects of the thunderstorm invites us to look at the image once again: perhaps we can now discover among the thunderstorm's manifold effects the dust swirl at the nearby lakeshore in the painting's middle and between the houses along the lakeshore to the right. By mentioning the barking dog, Poussin identifies an element that we did not yet see or, for that matter, hear. Nothing is said in the description about the combination of the thunderstorm and love's misfortune. The remarks about the artistic problem and how it can be overcome reinforce the mystery of the quiet lake. We must ask why Poussin does not say anything about the combination of the thunderstorm and love's misfortune, and why he does not justify the fact that the lake is unaffected by the strong wind. It is not difficult to come up with swift answers and say that Poussin's letter underscores the intention of all-out imitation and therefore the rendering of the lake must reflect the observation of a fact of nature, while he added the lovers as a fitting motif for the thunderstorm landscape. Such answers, however, fall short, not so much because they are easy but because they shut off further analysis and reflection. We should keep in mind, of course, that there is a difference between painting and writing, image and text, artistic work and artistic self-interpretation.[7]

*First, iconographic analysis elucidates whether an image refers to a specific text, and if so, which text; and second, it determines the relationship of the*

*image to the text as well as to similar kinds of representations of the same subject.*

On the basis of a particular visual representation, it is impossible to reconstruct the text to which it refers: all we can do is *assign* a text to it. This requires (1) the establishment of a list of representations that are characterized by minimal similarities among the depicted figures and sufficient similarity among the acts, facts, and attributes depicted; and (2) the identification of the text to which the list is related by means of an inscription, the mentioning of proper names, or specific documents from the artist (or the person who commissioned the work). This kind of iconographic research has meanwhile covered most canonical artworks and resulted in extensive knowledge, which can be found in handbooks, lexicons, monographs, and case studies.

If the iconographic problem of the work at hand has not yet been solved, though, we are faced with a challenging task. How can we know whether the work refers to a particular text? How can we assign a text to this work? If we are lucky, we may trace an image that mentions a text, or at least the names of the figures in the painting, by putting together an iconographic list. This allows us to link up this *list* with a text. It remains an unsolved question, however, whether or not the work at hand refers to this particular text. Therefore we have to study both text and image for their unambiguously corresponding features or rely on some document from the artist that verifies his thematic intention.

In the case of *Landscape with Pyramus and Thisbe,* Poussin's letter provides an answer to our first question. The determination of the text is made easier by literary or iconographic lexicons, which direct us to the *Metamorphoses,* written by the Roman poet Ovid. In book 4, verses 43–166, we find the story of Pyramus and Thisbe of Babylon. The story tells us not only about the misfortune of the two lovers, who on the night of their escape meet with death after a series of chance accidents and wrong decisions, but also about the transformation of the mulberry fruit, the color of which changes from white to black by the blood of Pyramus. The *Metamorphoses* first introduced this Babylonian love tragedy in Europe.

Did Poussin base his work on Ovid, or did he merely follow a visual model? To answer this question, we have to take into consideration our iconographic list and explore the text and the image for their corre-

sponding features. The outcome is that in illustrations, drawings, and paintings of this particular subject that were made before Poussin, each time the final moment of the tragedy is represented, the one in which Thisbe stabs herself with a sword in the presence of Pyramus's dead body. Moreover, we discover, many representations mock the couple's fate as a case of love's folly, while there is only one nightly landscape with this motif, by Niklaus Manuel Deutsch from 1513 or 1514 (Figure 8.3), and but a single illustration of Thisbe's escape from the lioness. The tragic moment selected by Poussin, the one in which Thisbe recognizes her dying lover, is not found in other visual representations, but it is found in Ovid, who describes the tragic turn of events in great detail (verses 128–49). The poet, however, does not say anything about a thunderstorm, nor does he evoke the scene of the struggle with the lioness or that of fleeing shepherds and their flocks. On his part, the painter ignores the mulberry motif and the description of the location.

Poussin's departure from the pictorial tradition and the choice of another scene we interpret as indications of his having read Ovid. But we do not know why the painter with respect to location and time deviated from the text, nor why he introduced scenes in his composition that are absent in the text. An iconographic analysis may solve these problems, which we may articulate as new questions: (1) Are there any explanations for Poussin's departure from both the pictorial tradition and Ovid's text? (2) Are there any texts by other authors on this same subject? (3) Are there any other connections between image and text involved that we did not notice because our attention was solely geared toward the identification of the depicted scenes and objects? (4) Is it possible to explain Poussin's deviations by considering either the person who commissioned the work or the specific location for which the painting was made?

*An analysis of the work's genre, in connection with an examination of its style and mode (its stylistic level), determines the image's general historical level; a distinctive comparison with other works from the same artist determines the particular place of the image in the artist's oeuvre.*

Previously, one sought to compensate for the one-sidedness of iconographic analysis by combining it with stylistic analysis. I believe, however, that a combined analysis of a work's style, mode, and genre is preferable. If iconographic analysis of motifs provides too small a basis for

Figure 8.3. Niklaus Manuel Deutsch, *Pyramus and Thisbe,* 1513–1514. Distemper on canvas, 151.5 x 161 cm. Öffentliche Kunstsammlung, Basel.

interpretation, a classification of relevant pictorial genres already widens it. A systematic inventory of the depicted scenes or objects found in individual artworks allows us to identify genres such as history, allegory, portrait, landscape, still life, and so on. Style refers both to the sum total of the general formal characteristics of a representation and to the individual patterns of its representational form. Similarly, the mode or style level (for instance, the general tone) refers to the general rules of expression and to the individual repertoire of expression. The rules of genre, of the various aspects associated with form and content, are determined historically and geographically. By investigating these various rules, we study the historical level of the pictorial representation within a limited scope. Evidently, in our analysis of a specific work, we also draw on contemporary theories of genre, style, and mode.

This kind of analysis requires great effort. We may rely on the countless diachronic and synchronic studies of genre and style and on the few

studies about the general tone. For those who consider this investment too high for a single image, I should point out that strictly speaking, it is impossible to interpret a single work. Without a reconstruction of the historical levels of representation, we cannot establish the place of a particular image in the history of art, nor can we say anything about the relationship between invention and imitation or formal pattern and originality, or about the particular nature of meaning and representation. This is why we cannot yet engage in a reconstruction of the historical level. Instead we should try to determine the relationship between the general rules and the individual artistic patterns of representation.

In the case of Poussin's image, we will first consider the tradition of Roman landscape painting. By studying its patterns of composition and mimetic representation, we may discover that we have to do with an *ideal* (that is, a composed) landscape, rather than a topographic depiction. Furthermore, we find out that this particular type of composed landscape, comprising historical or mythological scenes and ancient buildings, was called a *heroic* landscape. Poussin's image also belongs to the specific genre of so-called thunderstorm landscapes, which gives us reason to extend our distinctive comparison to include thunderstorm images from painters that go back as far as Giorgione and also from painters outside the Roman circle such as, for instance, Rubens. Thus we are able to establish that Poussin in *Landscape with Pyramus and Thisbe*—in contrast to other thunderstorm representations, including his first thunderstorm image, the *Storm* of 1651—"disrupts" the symmetrical composition by the diagonal movement of the thunderstorm, the direction of both light and wind, and the sprinkled color splotches. The gloominess of the colors, the *contre jour,* and the paleness of the large lightning flash create an atmosphere of disaster that accompanies the ominous disruption of the ideal order.

By studying the relevant genre theory, we discover that Leonardo da Vinci left instructions on how to represent a thunderstorm. Poussin's illustration of the copy of Leonardo's treatise was commissioned by Cassiano dal Pozzo, the same person who ordered the painting of Pyramus and Thisbe. The first edition of Leonardo's *Trattato della pittura* came out in 1651. Poussin used one of the images in his illustrations for the book also in his Thisbe painting.[8] When we look at the first edition, we notice that Leonardo's instructions are found under the heading "Come si deve figurar' una 'fortuna'" [How one should represent a thunder-

storm]. "Fortuna," however, does not only mean storm and thunder but also means luck, chance, destiny, and misfortune. This particular knowledge may give rise to the idea that thunderstorm and love's misfortune come together in "fortuna" in a double sense. Poussin, then, may have interpreted Leonardo's theoretical suggestion in practical terms, extending it to achieve this ambiguity. If we consider this to be the case, we will be even more bothered by the striking gap in Poussin's true-to-nature rendering in the Thisbe painting, namely, the lake with the glasslike surface in the middle of turmoil, as this precisely contradicts the first sentence of Leonardo's instruction. Significantly, the *Storm,* Poussin's other thunderstorm landscape from 1651, does not contain such mimetic disparity, while at the same time it refrains from developing a double meaning and agrees very well with an instruction from Leonardo found in another copy.

*When we consider a genre that is directly linked up with particular texts, our analysis should include—in addition to genre theory and the relevant pictorial tradition—the history of the work's cultural reception.*

In our iconographic analysis, we were content with studying the artwork's motif and tracing the text to which its image refers. This, however, is not enough in this particular case. After all, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* has had a broad influence, not only in the visual culture of the West but also in its literary and musical culture.

If we extend our investigations to the genre of the mythological image, we will come across Guercino's *Venus and Adonis* from 1647 (Figure 8.4). The similarity between Poussin's representation of Pyramus and Thisbe and Guercino's representation of Venus, who finds her dead lover Adonis, gives one the impression that Poussin developed his new representation of the couple on the basis of Guercino's image. The question is, what do we do with this possibility? A comparison of iconographic forms or developments is interesting here, since it broadens our view of artistic invention beyond the boundaries of our specific research project. Poussin's choice to depict love's misfortune in a lofty manner makes it impossible for us to consider the fate of Pyramus and Thisbe as a case of love's folly. This in turn suggests to us the view that what is at stake here is a fate to which even the love of the gods was subordinate.

This matter will keep floating in the air, however, if not argued better, and to do so, we should consider the relevance of the history of literary

Figure 8.4. Guercino, *Venus and Adonis,* 1647. Destroyed; formerly Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Dresden.

influence, if only by consulting literary lexicons or surveys of individual motifs.[9] This will supply us with information about the spread of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and about the ways in which the subject of Pyramus and Thisbe was used in tragic, comic, and moralist reworkings. Around 1595, Shakespeare, for one, wrote a tragedy on the basis of a variation *(Romeo and Juliet),* as well as a jocular play *(A Midsummer Night's Dream).* During the same period, in Spain, Cervantes and Góngora parodied this subject matter, while in France, between 1625 and 1671, a tragedy on this subject by Théophile de Viau was a great success. Moreover, various authors of contemporary moralist commentaries on Ovid tried to establish the mistakes and guilt of the two lovers and their parents.

One needs a detective's instinct, the ability to piece together information, and help from others to know where information derived from the literature should be replaced by one's own careful reading of the relevant materials. For example, it is more likely that Poussin knew the French

tragedy than the Spanish reworkings or the performances of English theater companies. Moreover, our genre analysis and the preference of the gods on whom to bestow their love do not point in the direction of a parodic view, and our iconographic analysis resulted in the rejection of the model of love's folly. It appears more productive, then, to start with a reading of Théophile de Viau's tragedy than with the comedies. Rather than by relying on help and instructions, our chances are best guarded by doing a careful reading of the actual materials. Only then will we discover that de Viau's tragedy also contains the sequence of thunderstorm and love's misfortune. Of course, we will familiarize ourselves with the wider context of de Viau's tragedy so as to confirm that this particular combination is found only in his play, which establishes the likelihood that Poussin, who exposes Pyramus and Thisbe to a thunderstorm, based himself on this particular tragedy. It speaks for itself that we should explore other motifs as well. For example, there is another uncommon motif in de Viau's tragedy whereby a scheme involving a prince explains the cause of love's misfortune, thus linking up the lovers' unfavorable *fortuna* with contemporary political actualities.[10]

*The visual and literary references of an image follow from iconographic analysis, genre analyses, and study of the scholarly literature.*

The study of the scholarly literature is mentioned once again for obvious reasons: it may contain findings we would not have thought of on our own. Anthony Blunt, for instance, identified the striking building to the left in the back, behind the lake, as a Bacchus temple after a design by Andrea Palladio (Figure 8.5).[11] It is the only identified building in the painting. As always, we will have to ask ourselves whether this reference should be understood in terms of its formal (stylistic) value or also in terms of its meaning.

The notion of visual and literary references replaces the commonly used notion of "sources," and this requires a brief explanation. The traditional notion of sources suggests that a new work is based on given models, much the same way a brook is fed by its sources. Accordingly, the relationship between a new work of art and earlier works is called "influence." This way of conceptualizing the relationship between a new work and earlier works, based as it is on a single image or concept, prevents us from investigating their proper interaction. Generally, such interaction can only be studied when the genesis of the visual image is

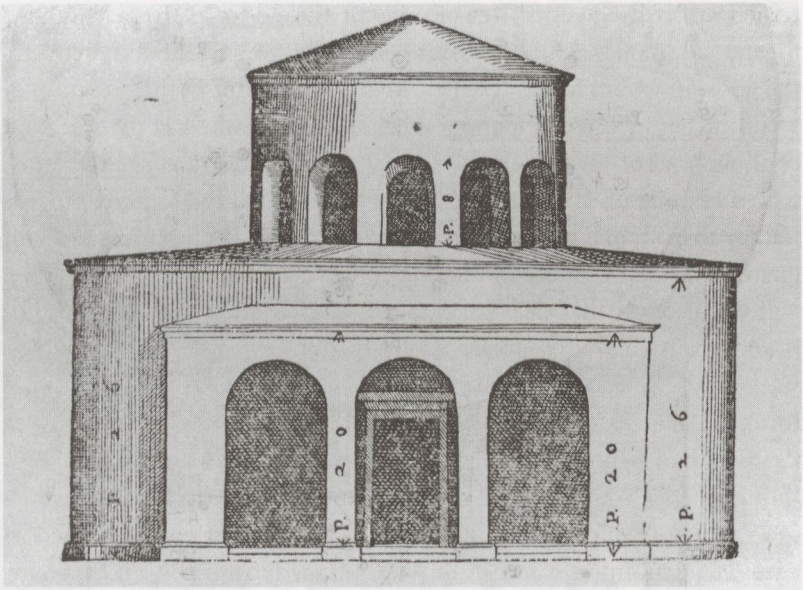

Figure 8.5. Andrea Palladio, Bacchus temple. Woodcut. In *Quattro libri dell'architettura* (Venice, 1570), 86.

sufficiently documented by sketches, designs, and preliminary studies. Where these materials are available, one can frequently observe that artists select and insert existing motifs only during a later stage of their work on a particular painting. Thus the new work does not so much emerge as the outcome of a passive "confluence" but functions as an active center in which particular visual or literary motifs are evoked in a constructive manner. Regarding works that came into being after artistic invention became viewed as a positive value, this seems a more appropriate way of conceptualizing this issue, except in cases where motifs are simply repeated.

How does one move from a work's various analyses to identifying its visual or literary references? There are two ways: by exploring similarities and correspondences, and by exploring the possibility whether the artist in the case could have been familiar with other particular works. Despite some similarities between Poussin's painting and a painting such as *Pyramus and Thisbe* by Niklaus Manuel Deutsch from 1513 or 1514 (Figure 8.3), it is out of the question that Poussin used it as a reference. We know that Deutsch's painting has been in Basel since at least 1586;

we know that Poussin never traveled to that city; and we know that there were no engravings of this painting. Although the illustrations in editions of Ovid and the engravings and etchings by Lucas van Leyden and Antonio Tempesta are possibly relevant here, they can be ruled out as visual references because we are unable to establish any formal correspondences. How, then, should we analyze the references in Poussin's painting? We may consider them as elements that determine the invention, but also as elements that establish particular connections between form and content and as such potentially acquire the function of semantic units in the image.

*To provide a historical explanation of the visual and literary references, as well as an explanation of the function of the image, the person who commissioned the work is taken into consideration.*

An explanation is an answer to the question: why is this the case? It consists of a logical derivation of the *explanandum* (that which is to be explained) from the *explanans* (that which explains something). In historical explanations, the rules of a historical connection and the motives for a specific connection together make up the *explanans.* Whether it is possible to provide an explanation that is associated with the commission of the work or the motives of the person who commissioned it depends on the available information about such motives and about the relationship between the artist and the person who commissioned the work, as well as on the function of the work. In our case, the most important Roman friend and collector of Poussin, Cassiano dal Pozzo, is the person who commissioned the work. Information is available about his early life, his collection of drawings of antiquities, and his interest in Leonardo and mythology, but little precise information is known about his many and frequent contacts with scientists. So far, we do not know of a document in which Poussin is given the assignment to make a painting called *Landscape with Pyramus and Thisbe.* It is imaginable that the commission involved the painting of a second thunderstorm landscape, one in competition with Leonardo's instructions but without the everyday scene of the fallen oxen. Because of the exceptional size of the image and because of the connection with Leonardo, we have to consider the idea of Cassiano dal Pozzo merely being the buyer of a finished painting an unlikely one. We have reason to assume, then, that the work was

specifically made for the collector. This is, of course, a conjecture, but it is one that we may turn into a fact if we can lay our hands on the relevant documents.

*Artistic invention can be described by analyzing the relevant artistic statements, the visual and literary references, the patterns and rules of the genre, the genesis of the work, and, if applicable, its function.*

The description of a painting's invention may be a product of the analytic method as presented in this section of the "guide," but like iconographic analysis or genre analysis, it may also be a separate objective of scholarly work. Determining an artwork's invention is a major step in the interpretation process, because it allows us to recognize what artists reveal in their work in a new way and what procedures they rely on. Invention involves the choice of certain references, the rejection or adoption of genre rules and patterns, the combination of motifs or composition schemes, the spatial arrangement of figures and objects (buildings, objects of nature), and the arrangement of colors and shapes. The analysis of an artwork's genesis allows us to identify the stages in which the work came into being. Obviously, invention and its significance as part of the artistic effort change over time. Art theory includes various models about the significance and dimension of the invention process. What we borrow from art theory is the general framework for the articulation of individual artistic invention efforts.

## Creative Abduction: Conjectures of Meaning

*Conjectures (well-founded speculations) about the possible meaning of the image are articulated by means of creative abduction, that is, by establishing relationships between the image's various objects and elements.*

It proved impossible to put the foregoing sentence in more simple terms. This may arise from the fact that the discipline of art history—despite its constant deployment of assumptions and abductions—basically lacks an analytic framework for its conjectural procedures. It is this absence that might give one the impression of being seduced to enter a domain that lies outside of art history. We are familiar with abductions, and with at least one type very familiar, because the practice of art history largely consists of formulating hypotheses about a specific fact that

is considered to be the outcome of other facts. Classic examples are hypotheses about common models (which today are no longer known), individualization on the basis of stylistic analysis (Morelli's procedure), Panofsky's iconology, and the historiography of art. To be sure, there is no science—and this includes the scholarship produced in the humanities—that operates without abduction.

The most common type of abduction should be employed in a conscious way, but the possibilities of another type ought to be explored as well. This second type of creative abduction starts from a number of facts and is aimed at the formulation of a hypothesis about their interrelationship (a coherent rule, a coherent meaning). An example of this second type of creative abduction is the heliocentric theory of Copernicus.[12] Conjectures about the meaning of a work also belong to this second category. Once we notice art history's conjectural approach, we should no longer have any reason to be afraid of developing ideas into conjectures about a work's meaning. It is not possible to accuse anyone of subjectivity or overinterpretation because it is essential to formulate and subsequently verify one or more hypotheses about a work's meaning (just as Copernicus's theory had to be tested). What matters, therefore, is not the fear of too much subjectivity but the insight that without subjects there is no science and that hence subjectivity should be qualified rather than denied. After all, what is left for us to do when we, overly anxious about possible objections, no longer dare to rely on our intellect, intuition, and imagination when it comes to substantiating our hypotheses?

*The hypothesis of coherency among facts is a text, that is, a linguistic interconnection.*

Hereafter I discuss a simple example of such a linguistic interconnection for three reasons: to show that creative abduction may involve a simple process; to demonstrate that our hypothesis may well contradict the words of the painter without also contradicting the image; and to suggest that we may gather new ideas by reading critically. I quote from a text that the scholar Giovan Pietro Bellori, an acquaintance of Poussin and his first biographer, published in 1672:

> With open arms Thisbe throws herself upon the body of her beloved Pyramus and in utter despair she also descends into death, while the

> earth and the sky and everything else spew up fear and disaster. A storm wind is building, shaking and snapping the trees. From the clouds one hears the roar of thunder, and the flash of lightning cuts off the largest branch of a trunk. Amidst the dark cloud cover a terrible lightning flash illuminates a castle, and across a mountain pass a few houses light up. Not far off the wind brings in impetuous rain, shepherds and their flocks flee and look for shelter, while one on his horse does his utmost to drive his cattle toward the castle in an attempt to escape from the thunderstorm and find a dry place. In a horrific scene a lion, which emerged from the woods, tears apart a horse that with its rider fell to the ground, while the rider's companion hits the wild animal with a cudgel; it is this lion that has caused the deaths of the misfortunate lovers.[13]

Bellori's text is a conjecture about the meaning of the work for two reasons: he establishes a narrative coherence between the lion as cause and love's misfortune as effect, and he describes the horrible phenomena of nature as expressions of that tragic event. Poussin's text, however, as the *sequence* of the sentences suggests, appears to establish another coherency: the case of love's misfortune that is mentioned at the end seems to complete the effects of the thunderstorm. If we disregard our set of questions for a moment and carefully look at the painting once again, we may determine whether the image offers clues for either one of the two proposed coherencies. We may notice, for instance, that the shape and direction of the large flash of lightning correspond quite well with the lowered silhouette and direction of the body of Thisbe. This observation, however, can be accounted for by the coherencies that are assumed in both hypotheses. Since the other problems we analyzed remain unaddressed, we might decide to develop one of the hypotheses, if not both, into a direction suggested by these problems. For now, I let this matter rest and turn to another conjecture.

*A further conjecture may follow from the establishment of a link between the artistic invention process and the unsolved problems.*

Without ignoring the fact that it is we who construe this particular link between invention and unsolved problems, it depends on the quality of our examination whether we find reason to accept or reject it. There is no other way to arrive at ideas about a specific coherency than through analytical effort, the development of questions, and the recurrent going back to the image. Nor is it possible to predict if or when the spark is produced.

One idea worth exploring might be the following: there is perhaps a connection between our *nightmare,* the smooth surface of the lake, and the single identifiable building on its shore, the Bacchus temple. How can we develop this idea into a hypothesis? We should investigate mythology and painting for connections between Bacchus and glasslike lakes. This means that once again we undertake a search for literature and images. In the literature on mythology, we will discover the existence of the Bacchus or Dionysus mirror, which the Neoplatonists of antiquity thought displayed the entire world in all its multiple dimensions and everything that has ever occurred; as such, they believed, it explained why souls got lost in the turmoil and the tempting chaos of matter.[14] It is obvious that we can only use this for developing our conjecture because the painting represents a mirrorlike lake and *also* a Bacchus temple: it does so in such a way that the mirror effect in the middle of the turmoil of the elements *cannot* be understood as a natural phenomenon (as, for instance, in the landscape image *The Rest*).

Several ways of further pursuing this issue present themselves. For example, the two lightning flashes could be seen as another reference to Bacchus and his father, Jupiter: the mother of Bacchus died in the castle of Thebes when Jupiter had to be with her as if she were his wife, namely, during the thunderstorm, even though Jupiter did not take the large flash but the smaller, second flash. When we consider a contemporary illustration that shows the death of Semele and the birth of Bacchus (Figure 8.6), we may draw the castle—hit by the smaller lightning flash in Poussin's image—into our hypothesis. Only now do we identify in another of Poussin's paintings a Bacchus mirror as well, and only now, after rereading Ovid, do we realize that the first time we altogether failed to see any connection between Bacchus and the story of love's misfortune, largely because we were preoccupied with taking stock of the various elements in the image. We may conclude that the story of Pyramus and Thisbe interlocks with the story of Bacchus, specifically his birth, his behavior, and his powerful influence (books 3 and 4).

Is there a way to link this information with love's misfortune? Not without a further hypothesis. Contrary to tradition, the painting depicts the tragic turn from fortune to misfortune in which Thisbe recognizes her dying lover. Bacchus is the master of both tragedy and satire, of both orgiastic pleasure and the fall from fortune into misfortune. We should add that the lightning sky reflects not only the fall from clarity


Figure 8.6. *The Death of Semele and the Birth of Bacchus.* Etching. In Blaise de Vigenère, ed., *Les images de philostrate* (Paris, 1629), 108.

to darkness (a metamorphosis that is similar to that of the fruits of the mulberry) but also the reverse change.

In this way we have ended up with a conjectural meaning of the painting—one that is based on many facts, but not all facts, and for this reason alone, we must suspect that other abductions are equally possible. The pleasure about the text we have generated on our own is substantial for the following reason in particular: it is impossible to imagine how someone else could come up with another text. We perhaps gladly ignore that some elements, such as the lion's attack or the *fortuna* in both senses (as thunderstorm and fortune/misfortune), have not yet been included into our interpretation. Furthermore, although we discovered that Théophile de Viau's tragedy provides the important motif of the connection of thunderstorm and love's misfortune, the question about the political cause of misfortune, posed by the tragedy, is not yet answered. Much to our advantage, though, another scholar proposed to view some of these elements as effects of *fortuna,* specifically in the thunderstorm, the animal attacks, and the adverse wind Thisbe has to face. A statement by the painter from 1648, saying that he wanted to represent the effects of the blind and mad *fortuna,* provides support for this view.[15] The confrontation of our conjecture with this scholar's conjecture helps us to make a first step in the objectification process in which we have to ask ourselves whether the two conjectures exclude or complement each other—whether we must reject our conjecture, adopt the other one, or develop a third one.

*Each conjecture implies hypotheses about the method of representation and is completed by reflection on these hypotheses.*

This statement means that a conjecture should be developed in such a way that it may be checked in part by looking at the work. Poussin's conjecture suggests the complete visibility of thunderstorm, effects, and misfortune; Bellori hears things that are invisible in what is visible, namely, the roar of the thunder. Poussin mentions the barking dog. The two conjectures about *fortuna* and the Jupiter-Bacchus relationship suggest that the visible order, via specific signs, leads to the (paradoxical) presence of the invisible and that the two lists of the visible and invisible are connected on the basis of their interaction. It is our hypothesis, then, that Poussin's image links up the visible and the invisible, as may be schematically represented as follows:

| I | II | III | IV |
|---|---|---|---|
| nature | interaction | myth | moral standards |
| thunderstorm | cause | Jupiter | fortuna |
| chaos | peripeteia | Bacchus | |
| misfortune | effect | Pyramus and Thisbe | |

I shall add no further comments. One can see immediately that this diagram comprises all conjectures, with the exception of the one by Bellori, and that it applies to the nature of representation.

## Validation: Sealing the Argument

*Validation, that is, the sealing of the meaning through argument, completes the interpretation so that it may be considered as correct.*

An interpretation is complete and correct when in methodical terms it is properly developed and sealed by argument. There may be several correct interpretations of a work, none of which is a refutation of another. The incorrectness of an interpretation can only be demonstrated by the identification of methodical error. When the argumentative sealing of the work's meaning is absent, that is, when the interpretation process is not properly completed, the conjecture does not go beyond being merely an opinion. Validation is not geared toward articulating the work's meaning as "objective" meaning, nor does it seek to trace an authority that can confirm the conclusion.

*Where possible, the established meaning is examined in terms of whether the artist could support it.*

If the artist is still alive, we confront him with our interpretation and ask him whether he feels some element in it to be misguided. We should not ask the artist whether the meaning corresponds to his intention, so as to avoid the risk that he knows more about the relationship between intention and artistic work, or that he read Wittgenstein more closely than we did and that he replies, saying: How should I know, for I too have but the image at my disposal?[16] If the artist is no longer alive and we established the meaning through analysis and creative abduction, it is hard to carry out this examination because we have already taken

into account the artist's statements and biography and there is no other way of reconstructing the artist's point of view. This examination can only consist of explicitly comparing meaning and biography, or artistic statements and the artist's oeuvre, so as to trace discrepancies rather than confirmations.

*A comparative consideration of relevant works should prove whether the established method of representation is historically and individually possible at all, meaning that it agrees with specific rules.*

The materials for this examination have already been developed to some extent as part of the genre analysis, where a preliminary explanation for the particular rules of artistic creation was provided as well. At this point we attempt to determine not the historical rules of genre or the individual artist's rules of artistic work but the historical and individual rules of representation: what can images from seventeenth-century Rome reveal about Poussin, and how do we furnish them as evidence? This task is anything but easy: the determination of the rules of representation would require a systematic and historical analysis of the specific visual tradition involved. In our case, we should restrict our effort to establishing whether we can find with the same painter (or among his contemporaries or those he used as an example) similar connections between the visible and the invisible, a similar reaching out to what cannot be represented, such as sounds and noises, and an analogous game of showing and hiding. By carefully analyzing Poussin's second self-portrait of 1650, we have made a good start in sealing the argument about the meaning we established for *Landscape with Pyramus and Thisbe.*

*A work's function and meaning are examined for their compatibility or incompatibility.*

The function of a work can be determined by considering its commission, its first location, and its use. The relationship between form, function, and content is subject to examination.[17] In the case of Poussin's image, the aesthetic function (art as function of the work) is sufficiently warranted by the general historical rule, by the inclusion of the painting in the collection of a scholar, and by the fact that it was most likely commissioned. What, however, is the proper function of art? In his description, Bellori mentioned the emotional effect; Poussin described his

art of complete imitation; and our interpretation established a link between imitation, the sign of the hidden gods, and the visualization of how *fortuna* operates. The question whether this is compatible with the historical function of art we solve with reference to the biography of the artist, his statements, the biography of the person who commissioned the work, the exploration of art theory (notably theories of reception and their spread), and the exploration of the actual usage of art. I give only two clues: the literature on art has frequently expressed the view that art aims to *delectare, docere,* and *movere* (to give pleasure, instruct, and move). It might be worthwhile to examine whether the artist of the work and the person who commissioned it shared this view.

The second clue I derive from a remark by Poussin. In 1648 he wrote that his planned images about the mad power of *fortuna* were meant to remind people of wisdom and virtue and to encourage them to be steadfast.[18] This is a reference to the cognitive, emotional, and moralist function: the realization, shattering, and stoic hardening of character. We have reason to suspect, then, that in our case, function and meaning are joined together. A contradiction between function and meaning would disqualify the function as argument, but if we can provide support for the established meaning through other arguments, it is not contradicted by the function. With respect to function, we should ask if we can account for the fact that, at that particular time in history, the painter enriched the function with the images he created or with those that the person who commissioned the work wanted him to create. To deliver a historical explanation is to derive a single case from general rules of conduct and from individual motives. Therefore we have to look for reasons in the historical and social environment of which the artist was part, in the historical context, and in the artist's response to his world. An explanation might be the following: the political unrest caused by the opposition in France and the people's uprisings in Europe after 1648 were extremely worrisome to Poussin. In response to the chaotic world of his day and age, he took recourse in a stoic attitude. This is a possible explanation of the function of the image, not an explanation of its meaning.

*By providing support for my approach and by the argumentative sealing of the meaning, I establish the preconditions for others to add further support for my interpretation or to reject it on the basis of well-founded reasons.*

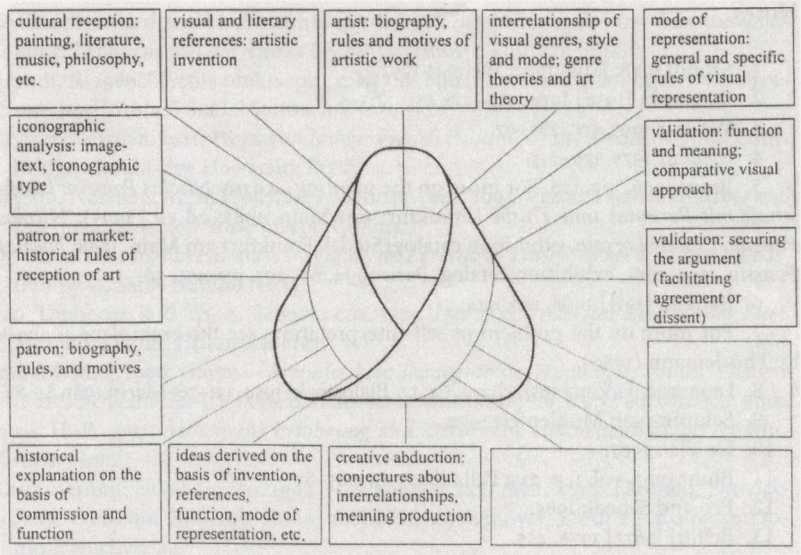


Figure 8.7. Visual representation of the act of interpretation and its various steps.

By offering our founded method and sealing our conclusion in argument, we become members of a discursive community. I would like to consider this a basic requirement of scholarly academic work. We have to present our methods and results in such a way that our readers do not become objects of persuasion but participants in a shared intellectual discursive endeavor. What matters is that we continue it, either by approval or rebuttal. When we find approval and thus see our interpretation endorsed through intersubjective agreement, we do not see this as proof of a definitive explication. Nor do we forget the historicity of our interests and discourses.

*The figurative representation of interpretation, the indefinite surface, can be used to check the completeness of our interpretation.*

I conclude with this small mnemonic device (Figure 8.7). In contrast to the first representation of this figure (Figure 8.2), the fields have been inscribed. Some are left empty, though, and this suggests that in our interpretive effort, we are never operating in a closed system, but rather in one whose coherency is always open to further development. If and how we will change this figure depends on whether we reject it or can agree with it. In both cases, we need good reasons.

## Notes

1. Szondi 1988; Jauss 1997; Weimar 1993.
2. Benjamin [1936] 1974, 361–508, esp. 503–5.
3. Weimar 1993, sec. 285–97.
4. Ricoeur 1975, 179–215.
5. Blunt 1966, 177, 126. For more on the painting, see my *Nicolas Poussin: Landschaft mit Pyramus und Thisbe* (Frankfurt am Main, 1987; 2d ed., 1995); *Nicolas Poussin, Claude Lorrain,* exhibition catalog, Städel, Frankfurt am Main, 1988; *Nicolas Poussin, 1594–1665,* exhibition catalog, Paris 1994, no. 203, pp. 453–56.
6. Poussin [1911] 1968, 188, 424.
7. For more on the problem of self-interpretation, see the exemplary analysis by Thürlemann (1986).
8. Leonardo da Vinci 1651, chaps. 64, 14; Bialostocki 1954, 131–36; Marin 1981, 61–84.
9. Schmitt–von Mühlenfels 1972.
10. De Viau 1967.
11. Blunt 1967, vol. 1, p. 235; Palladio 1570, 4:85–87.
12. Eco and Sebeok 1985.
13. Bellori [1672] 1976, 455.
14. Vinge 1967, 123–95. In the seventeenth century, knowledge was based on Plotin and Macrobius; for more on the spread of their views, see Panofsky 1960.
15. Verdi 1982, 680–85; cf. Brandt 1989, 234–58; McTighe 1989, 333–61.
16. Wittgenstein 1969, 447.
17. Belting 2000; Kemp 1992.
18. Poussin [1911] 1968, 384.

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