

# *Phantasmata poetica* or Images as Objects of Knowledge in Early Theories of Aesthetics

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The tendency to make the sign independent of the object...is the grounding principle of the whole of modern art." Roman Jakobson, *Questions de poétique*, (1973)

## Abstract

In the context of eighteenth century sign-theory Gottfried Ephraim Lessing outlines a theory of the arbitrariness of the sign reflected in the general concern about the ambiguity of the sign in Enlightenment culture. As David Welberry points out in *Lessing's Laokoön: Semiotics and Aesthetics in the Age of Reason*, the sign proves to be at once that which allows man to elevate himself beyond immediate experience, at the same time it points to the essential limitation of his finiteness and propensity for delusion and error. Rather than deny the arbitrariness of the sign Lessing makes a distinction between the arbitrary signs of language and the natural signs or emblems of painting. Signs as images in the twenty-first century acquire additional resonance as the role of cognitive perception as an active agent in the subjective status of representations in relation to the objects of nondiscursive nature. This re-reading of the *Laokoön* offers a methodological analysis of the way an aesthetic philosophy could work as a science of signs in a contemporary context at the intersection of technology, art and language.

## 0.1 Introduction: Beauty, Taste, and Representation

Beginning with Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten (1714-1762) and the *Aesthetica*, aesthetics is considered as the science of sensual cognition that links the theory of art as an epistemological discourse to cognitive judgements of beauty. Questions arising from concerns with our capacity to discern beauty bridge metaphysical concerns about the kind of knowledge an understanding of beauty produces and ontological questions about the status of the images and signs through which we perceive beauty either in nature or in artistic production. The question is more simply, how it is that we perceive art (or anything else) and where does the relation between matter, sign, and meaning register in our models of consciousness? Baumgarten proposed that individuals realize a certain "fullness of being" under the influence of artistic beauty. This "subjective completeness" (*Vollkommenheit*) was an extension of Leibniz and Wolff's metaphysical speculations about the universe of monads differentiated by degrees of consciousness. Leibniz logico-ontological equivalence as it is sometimes called, whereby reality and cognition mirror one another, is not a simple one-to-one relationship; instead there are a hierarchy of cognitive levels or states of consciousness.

All signs, including the ones that point to the idea of beauty, are therefore not fixed, but their ambiguity depends on where we interpret them in our conscious mind. The point here is that once the door to the *psychological state* of the maker and the observer opened the idea of a psychological dimension to reception emerged as a key component of how it is that we "think" art.<sup>1</sup>

Gottfried Ephram Lessing, a great friend and collaborator of the philosopher Moses Mendelssohn, sometime literary critic and dramatist developed his own solution to the problem. Using Leibniz, Mendelssohn, and Baumgarten's psychological philosophies to attenuate the membrane separating the objective cognition of representation in art Lessing addressed how signs as representations operate in painting and poetry respectively. The *Laokoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry* (1766) is Lessing's polemic against the tendency in eighteenth art criticism to apply Horace's *ut pictura poesis* (so as painting, poetry) to all forms of literary production. He argues that painting and poetry have unique symbolic characteristics that evolve from differences in the way they use signs to signify meaning. Following Plato in the *Cratylus* the distinction was articulated before Lessing in the work of the Abbé Dubos in his *Refléxions critiques sur la poésie et sur la peinture* (1719). Dubos formulated that the signs of painting are "natural" meaning there is a direct correspondence between the sign and the thing signified (smoke is a natural sign of fire) whereas the signs of poetry are arbitrary such that their signification is established by convention, like language (the word "smoke" is an artificial sign for actual smoke). In this context, Lessing's conceit about the arbitrariness of the sign points follows the general concerns about the ambiguity of the sign in Enlightenment culture. As David Welberry points out in *Lessing's Laokoön: Semiotics and Aesthetics in the Age of Reason*, the sign "proves to be at once that which allows man to elevate himself beyond immediate experience," at the same time it points to the "essential limitation" of his finiteness and propensity for delusion and error."<sup>2</sup>

Rather than deny the arbitrariness of the sign Lessing (using Mendelssohn) makes a specific *psychological* distinction between the arbitrary signs of language and the natural signs or emblems of painting. Painting (generally) uses natural signs which limit it's capacity to an extensive illusion or what Baumgarten terms "extensive clarity."<sup>3</sup> That is, engagement with the imagination through

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<sup>1</sup>In art history the problem of perception is embedded in any discourse that asks what relation the experience of beauty in art is to beauty or being in nature. It is interesting to note that the consideration of aesthetic experiences as a particular mode of knowledge comes to the fore in the eighteenth century soon after the late seventeenth century philosophical interest in subjectivity, the unconscious (before Freud), and mind/body interaction starting with Descartes in France, Locke in England, and Leibniz in Germany.

<sup>2</sup>Welberry's excellent study offers many insights into Lessing's anxiety about the representational capacity of signs. I would differ with his conclusion that Lessing's real motivation for writing the *Laokoön* was to assuage this same anxiety and that the outcome fails to distinguish painting from poetry, but in fact brings them into the "closest possible proximity." (Welberry, 198). Rather than deny their close proximity, Lessing's point seems to be that their difference is one of degree, not kind. D. E. Welberry, *Lessing's Laokoön: Semiotics and Aesthetics in the Age of Reason*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1984, 5.

<sup>3</sup>Lessing's contemporary the French dramatist and encyclopedist Denis Diderot in his *Lettre sur les Sourds et Muets, 1751* develops a similar theory in which language is understood as a system of signs that evolved from the concrete and sensual to the abstract and arbitrary. More similar to Lessing however, is Diderot's concept of the dramatic *tableau* (*Entretiens sur le Fils naturel, 1757* based on the Greek rhetorical category of hypotyposis. Hypotyposis is the description in words of a situation that is so vivid and visual that it calls to mind for the hearer a representation of the scene.

mimesis in painting is *limited* by the literalness of the natural sign. The painter uses "emblems" to point to an idea: for example, the ideas of Temperance and Constancy are indicated by female figures with a bridle in hand or leaning against a pillar respectively. But where a painter uses allegorical figures, the poet Lessing argues can use personified abstractions that that unfold over time in relation to the way they are perceived: "In poetry a garment is no garment; it conceals nothing. Our imagination see everything beneath it."<sup>4</sup> These *phantasmata poetica* or sensual images ("sinnliches bild") originally coined by Aristotle derive from sense perception and are a kind of visual memory linking what was previously seen to what the artist makes present before the eye: they are not strictly mimetic images, but derived from perception.<sup>5</sup> To understand how this works for Lessing in the eighteenth century and why this may be of interest to us in the twenty-first, the first problem is to characterize the reception of signs in relation to the medium of the art through which they are given, and second, clarify a sign's status in relation to Lessing's characterization of a qualified mimesis specific to painting and poetry respectively.<sup>6</sup>

## 0.2 Lessing's Laokoön

In the Laokoön Lessing responds to several broad currents of late eighteenth century aesthetic philosophy.<sup>7</sup> The original dispute evolved out of the excavation in Rome in 1506 of a marble sculpture depicting the death of the Trojan priest Laokoön and his sons attributed by Pliny the Elder to Polydorus. Laokoön was a tragic figure in Greek mythology; a priest of the cult of Neptune in Troy whose punishment for defying the gods was to be dragged into the sea and devored by a sea serpent. The sculpture was a focal point for discussion amongst Lessing's contemporaries, including Johann Joachim Winckelmann and the Comte de Caylus, as to the correct interpretation of Laokoön's facial expression in the marble. Winckelmann and de Caylus argue—and Lessing agrees in principle—that Laokoön is not bellowing as Virgil suggests in late classical *Aenied*, but rather his expression should be interpreted in the context of classical Greek thought where the essential quality of Greek sculpture was a composed "noble simplicity and quiet grandeur."<sup>8</sup> Lessing however, uses the the case to argue a particular point in philosophical aesthetics about the difference between visual arts and poetry or literature. Lessing rejects Winckelmann's explanation on the grounds that it does not address an essential difference between specific nature of literature and sculpture.

The love of all things classical triggered by Johann Joachim Winkelmann's archeological and

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<sup>4</sup>Laokoön, V.

<sup>5</sup>The dominance of the Platonic model for the role of representation in art dominates art history up until the seventeenth century. It is only with Baumgartens' *Aesthetics* that the Aristotelian formulation of sensual images working through anamnesis or an awakened memory return as viable models of representation.

<sup>6</sup>One possible alternative reading of the binary opposition between painting and poetry is the anthropological discussion of conflictive mimesis in M. Schneider, "Problematic Differences: Conflictive Mimesis in Lessings Laokoön," in *Poetics Today*, 20(2):273-289, 1999.

<sup>7</sup>J. Frank, Spatial Form in Modern Literature: An Essay in Three Parts, in *The Sewanee Review*, 53(4):643-653, Autumn 1945, 644.

<sup>8</sup>See Johann Winckelmann, *Thoughts on the Imitation of Greek Works of Painting and Sculpture*, 1755

art historical research popularized Greek art produced a culture of literal or crass imitation of classical motifs and themes watered down by rules generated from a purely external analysis of forms.<sup>9</sup> Form, including form in poetry and painting, had been deduced from the ideals of the classical by theorists who passed on a set of 'rules' or foundations on which artists were to build their copies.<sup>10</sup> Lessing turns back to the Greek poets to find in the original classical texts counter arguments to what he perceives as the distortions promoted by this purely formal aesthetics. Lessing argues that form in the plastic arts is spatial because the visible "bodies" are best shown juxtaposed in an instant of time. The visual artist bears the burden then of determining the most pregnant "instant of the action" (*Augenblick der Handlung*) while poetry which makes use of language given in a succession of words relies on narrative form as a sequence which unfolds over time and must be constructed such that its events or actions *Handlungen* are meaningfully linked by the perceiver.

I argue that another less recognized current underlying the *Laokoön* is the *philosophical psychology* Lessing inherits from Locke and Leibniz. Lessing begins the *Laokoön* with a psychological explanation for the reception of art where the empathic effect of a work and its ability to produce pleasure are the key conceptual structures:

The first person who compared painting and poetry with one another was a man of refined feeling, who became aware of a similar effect produced upon himself by both arts. He felt that both represent what is absent as if it were present, and appearance as if it were reality; that both deceive, and that the reception of both is pleasing.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Locke's empirical speculation about the relation between the simple sensations and their aggregation to form complex ideas leads to new considerations of the internal reception of the beautiful

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<sup>9</sup>in Germany this was accomplished through two important texts, the *Gedanken über die Nachahmung der Griechischen Werke in der Malerey und Bildbauer-Kunst* (1755) and the *Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums* (1764).

<sup>10</sup>For instance, the idea of the Aristotelean unities which did not exist in Aristotle. For Lessing the enemies of a true understanding of the intentions of Greek art in regards to form included the French theorists Charles Alphonse du Fresnoy (1611-1668), Roger de Pile (*Idea of a Perfect Painter* (1699)), the Comte de Caylus (1692-1765), and the Italian humanist Paolo Alessandro Maffei (1653-1716). Additionally the English painter Jonathan Richardson's (1665-1745) *An Essay on the Theory of Painting* published in the French as *Traité de la Peinture et la Sculpture* (1722) and the text by the German lyric poet Friedrich von Hagedorn (1708-1754), *Betrachtungen Über die Malerei Kritische (Meditations on Painting)* argue that poets imitate the images made by painters.

<sup>11</sup>G.E.Lessing,*Laokoön*, Preface

<sup>12</sup>His second observation echoes the classical argument for the essential symmetry of poetry and painting as *ut pictura poesis* at the same time he begins in contradiction to distinguish not only these two arts from each other but to whom the difference would matter. For the first, it is the amateur as receiving subject, second it is the philosopher reflecting upon the idea of sensible Beauty, and finally the critic noting the difference between painting and poetry, but failing to draw general conclusions apart from particular instances. He then continues to explain that although modern critics imagine that they are far advanced from the ancients "because we have changed their narrow lanes into highways," in fact the ancients did not apply Simonides dictum homogeneously to poetry and the visual arts but that "notwithstanding the complete similarity of this effect" they noted that "the two were different, both in the objects which they imitated and their mode of imitation (*Nachahmung*)." This false criticism has as Lessing opines, "produced the love of description in poetry, and of allegory in painting, while the critics strove to reduce poetry to a speaking painting, without properly knowing what it could and ought to paint, and painting to a dumb poem, without having considered in what degree it could express general ideas, without alienating itself from its destiny and degenerating into an arbitrary method of writing." (Ibid., Preface) On the one hand the *Laokoön* is a critique of criticism as a call to inductive reasoning in

(as with the sublime in Burke and Kant) through human perception. From the new German aestheticians the external formalities of beauty are less important than how an art object is received or perceived by the observer.<sup>13</sup> Along with the Lockean tradition inherited by Hogarth, Burke and Hutcheson,<sup>14</sup> Several essays written during or soon after the *Laokoön* testify to Lessing's interest in Leibniz. At the center of this intellectual exploration is Moses Mendelssohn who along with Christian Wolff introduce the faculty of taste and the theory of the faculties in general to a larger German speaking audience.<sup>15</sup> Lessing's friendship with the philosopher Moses Mendelssohn is well documented—it is Mendelssohn to whom he sends early drafts of the *Laokoön*—as it is to this intellectual discussion that Lessing contributes his essay.

Lessing's application of the rationalist psychology of Leibniz is key to understanding Lessing's argument that poetry creates *sinnliches Bilden* or sensate (sensual) pictures. The idea of "clear and distinct perceptions" inherited from Leibniz by Baumgarten and Mendelssohn as explanandum for the way visual signs incite the imagination of the viewer. All of this is to suggest that reading the *Laokoön* as a *psychological* text or a text that deals with the epistemology of mind and the sensual reception of art in relation to perception is to also to see what is in the background of his criticism. Lessing is not only arguing for new forms of poetry or painting, but for a distinct understanding of an aesthetic perception which complicates their "symbols" by augmenting them with a robust illusion such that 'to imitate' is not only to copy but to re-create an experience that the observer confronts with an unrestrained freedom.<sup>16</sup> An appearance (either in poetry or painting) as a collection of signs is not "out there" in the world or even a naturalized ideal as Winkelmann argues for Greek art, but an internal action such that "the longer we gaze, the more must our imagination (Einbildungskraft) add; and the more our imagination adds, the more we must believe we see."<sup>17</sup>

### 0.3 Arbitrary and Natural Signs

Lessing's central argument in the *Laokoön* is based upon several ostensibly simple observations about the different representational strategies used by poetry and the plastic arts. The difference in mediums indicates for him a difference in the laws by which they are created in relation to how they are perceived. All art as he argues "must imitate as an illusion—it cannot show or do the actual act or it would overwhelm our senses—art must engage the imagination,"<sup>18</sup> but how the sensual image

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contrast to the primarily deductive arguments his contemporaries Winkelmann and de Caylus, on the other hand his thesis clarifies the modes of reception and creation of the visual and textual intending to rescue both poetry and painting from being 'arbitrary' methods of representing.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 646.

<sup>14</sup>All are mentioned in Lessing's text and equally all are early contributors to the idea of a sensate perception as the distinguishing characteristic of aesthetic pleasure and knowledge. See William Hogarth *Analysis of Beauty* (1753), Edmund Burke *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), and Francis Hutcheson *Inquiry concerning Beauty, Order, Harmony and Design* (1725).

<sup>15</sup>Wolff is the primary architect of German intellectualism in the eighteenth century.

<sup>16</sup>Lessing always uses *Nachahmung* which literally means to copy in the German.

<sup>17</sup>Dasjenige aber nur allein ist fruchtbar, was der Einbildungskraft freies Speil läßt. Je mehr wir sehen, desto mehr müssen wir hinzu denken können. Je mehr wir darzu denken, desto mehr müssen wir zu sehen glauben. *Laokoön*, III.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., II.

(*sinnliches Bild*) creates a different kind of knowledge still needs to be determined. The general acknowledgement after Locke that all knowledge is empirically determined precipitates the need to differentiate the epistemologies of all representations either as representation in art or primary representations of ideas. Lessing following Baumgarten and Mendelssohn asks the question assuming there is some aspect of knowledge that can only be gotten to with *aesthetic* knowledge given that the question of man's moral condition and the nature of freedom are linked to the judgment of taste or beauty as much as rational thought. The role of sensation and specifically visual sensation underlines Lessing's rationale for the way imagination is engaged. At the beginning of the Chapter XVI at the heart of the *Laokoön* Lessing reasons that:

If it is true that painting and poetry in their imitations (*Nachahmungen*) make use of entirely different means or symbols—the first, namely, of form and color in space, the second of articulated sounds in time—if these symbols indisputably require a suitable relation to the thing symbolized, then it is clear that symbols arranged in juxtaposition can only express subjects of which the wholes or parts exist in juxtaposition; while consecutive symbols can only express subjects of which the wholes or parts are themselves consecutive.<sup>19</sup>

This idea of the juxtaposition of wholes and parts applies equally to painting and poetry. He goes on to characterize the subjects whose wholes or parts are in juxtaposition as *bodies* which are visible (in space) and those whose wholes or parts are consecutive as *actions* (*Handlungen*) whereby actions are the rightful subject of poetry. What is curious is that he immediately qualifies this by acknowledging that bodies too occur in time:<sup>20</sup>

Still, all bodies do not exist in space only, but also in time. They endure, and in each moment of their duration may assume a different appearance, (*erscheinen*) or stand in a different combination. Each of these momentary appearances and combinations (*Verbindung*) is the effect of a preceding one, may be the cause of a subsequent one, and is therefore, as it were, the center of an action (*das Zentrum einer Handlung*). Consequently, painting too can imitate actions (*Handlungen*, but only indicatively (*andeutungsweise*), by means of bodies.

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<sup>19</sup>Ibid., XVI.

<sup>20</sup>From an earlier draft c.1763 the text reads in German as follows:

Nach dem, was wir in unsern mündlichen Unterredungen ausgemacht haben, verbeßere ich meine Enttheilung der Gegenstände der poetischen und der eigentlichen Mahlerey folgendergestalt.  
Die *Mahlerey* schildert Körper, und andeutungsweise durch Körper, Bewegungen.  
Die *Poesie* schildert Bewegungen, und andeutungsweise durch Bewegungen, Körper.  
Eine Reihe von bewegungen, die auf einen Endzweck abzielen, heißet eine *Handlung*.

Lessing determines that successive actions (*Bewegungen*) and co-existent actions (*Handlungen*) should both be termed *Handlungen*.

On the other hand, actions *Handlungen* cannot exist by themselves they must depend on certain beings. So far, therefore, as these beings are bodies, or are regarded as such, poetry paints bodies, but only indicatively (andeutungsweise), by means of actions.<sup>21</sup>

Lessing seems to be saying that bodies in both painting and poetry indicate action through spatial as well as temporal signs: the difference is a difference of degree not kind; especially when we realize Lessing is only ever determining action in either poetry or painting limited to the sphere of *visual* phenomena. A careful read of what Lessing means by action reveals a teleological program more robust than the idea of temporal succession alone. Action also includes simultaneous action or action consisting of coexisting parts.<sup>22</sup>

After reviewing an early draft of the *Laokoön*, Mendelssohn's notes to Lessing question his inconsistent application of the idea of 'action.' Mendelssohn suggests *Bewegungen* for progressive actions involving a single person and *Handlungen* for simultaneous actions. Instead Lessing reformulates his definition of *Handlungen* to include both successive and coexistent action which, as Victor Rudowski argues, loses "much of its (action's) former relevance with respect to the aesthetic problems arising from the fact that language is a temporal medium of communication."<sup>23</sup> In effect this reduces the difference between painting as a set of "form and color symbols in space" that exist instantaneously and poetry as a set of "articulated sounds in time" that occur successively to a common denominator: the semantics of the imaginal. One can only conclude that the simple differential that painting indicates action through bodies in space and poetry indicates action through bodies in time does not explain the problematic of Lessing's formula. How the the 'sign' is received is not just a function of time but of the way signs in general are received and what constitutes an effective illusion in either painting or poetry.

For Lessing the symbols of poetry are both arbitrary and progressive or temporal. But it is their arbitrariness (*willkürlich*) that makes them "capable of representing bodies as they exist in space." His goes on to concede that poetry could be guilty of using language in the same way that ordinary speech does—as a set of symbols that "stand side by side in nature" which render the "clear and

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Doch alle Körper existieren nicht allein in dem Raume, sondern auch in der Zeit. Sie dauern fort, und können in jedem Augenblick ihrer Dauer anders erschienen und in anderer Verbindung stehen. Jede dieser augenblicklichen Erscheinungen und Verbindungen ist die Wirkung einer vorhergehenden, und kann die Ursache einer folgenden, und sonach gleichsam das Zentrum einer Handlung sein. Folglich kann die Malerei auch Handlungen nachahmen, aber nur andeutungsweise durch Körper.

Auf der andern Seite können Handlungen nicht für sich selbst bestehen, sondern müssen gewissen Wesen anhängen. Insofern nun diese Wesen Körper sind, oder als Körper betrachtet werden, schildert die Poesie auch Körper, aber nur andeutungsweise durch Handlungen. Ibid., XVI

<sup>22</sup>See, V. A. Rudowski. "Lessing contra Winckelmann," in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 235-243, 1986.

<sup>23</sup>V. A. Rudowski, "Action as the Essence of Poetry: A Reevaluation of Lessing's Argument," in *Modern Language Association*, 82(5):333-341, 1967, 335

distinct” descriptions of prose. Here Lessing addresses a general problematic of language as sign: that it can only be an arbitrary invention or a mechanical fact standing in relation to the *cogito* and not the imagination. The poet, Lessing argues in contrast to the prose writer (or philosopher for that matter), ”must awaken in us ideas so lively, that, from the rapidity with which they arise, the same impression should be made upon our senses which the sight of the material objects that these ideas represent would produce.”<sup>24</sup> It is in this moment of ”illusion” (*Täuschung*) that ”we should cease to be conscious of his instruments—his words—by which this effect is obtained.” Lessing refers for most of his examples to Homer who makes not a ”picture which could be an object of imitation to an artist; but by innumerable devices he contrives to set before our eyes a single object, as it would appear (*erscheint*) at distinct and successive instants.”<sup>25</sup> This is what enables a poet to always ”produce a sensible (sensing) picture”(*sinnliches Bild*).<sup>26</sup>

At the heart of the *Laokoön* over the course of three chapters beginning with Chapter XVI Lessing outlines a program of how a poet is to produce a ”*sinnliches Bild*.” In Chapter XVII after much discussion of the problems of reception in painting and poetry including visible and invisible objects, differences between the natural signs (*natürliche Zeichen*) of painting and the artificial symbols of poetry and the definition of action as discussed above he concludes that symbols in poetry are progressive and arbitrary.<sup>27</sup> As arbitrary symbols they are capable of representing bodies in space, but the poet unlike the prose writer must produce a word–picture through illusion (*Täuschung*) where we cease to be *conscious* of the meaning of the words. This is the same as Baumgarten’s idea of ”extensive clarity” where ”confused representations” (Leibniz ”clear and confused” ideas) mean more when represented as sensate than those that are less clear or sensate only.<sup>28</sup> Prose writers in contrast render ”clear and distinct” descriptions (directly from Leibniz) which are Baumgarten’s ”distinct representations.” Sensate representations are also like ”actions” for Lessing—representations of ”change with respect to place and time” which arouses an ”affect” in the viewer (this is what it means to be *poetische*)<sup>29</sup>. This is especially true Lessing argues for images (*phantasmata poetica*) which are ”sensate representations” (*repraesentationes sensitiuae*) and thus by definition poetical.<sup>30</sup> Remember, that both Lessing and Baumgarten are using an understanding of perception from Leibniz which is not static—every perception includes the potential

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<sup>24</sup>Original German: Der Poet will nicht bloß verständlich werden, seine Vorstellungen sollen nicht bloß klar und deutlich sinn; hiermit begnügt sich der Prosaist. Sondern er will die Ideen, die er in uns erwedet, so lebhaft machen, daß wir in der Geschwindigkeit die wahren sinnlichen Eindrücke, ihrer Gegenstände zu empfinden glauben, und in diesem Augenblicke der Täuschung, uns der Mittel, die er dazu auswendet, seiner Worte bewußt zu dehn aufhören. Ibid., XVII

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., XVI.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., XVII.

<sup>27</sup>”But, it will be answered, symbols of poetry are not merely progressive, but are also arbitrary; and as arbitrary symbols are certainly capable of representing bodies as they exist in space.” *Laokoön*, XVII:97.

<sup>28</sup>A. Baumgarten, *Meditationes*, 17-19.

<sup>29</sup>In an interesting footnote to Chapter XV Lessing recounts that poetical pictures called *phantasiae* by the ancients and what was called illusion, ”or that part of those pictures which produces deception, was by them named *enargia*. For this reason it was said by some one. . . that poetical *phantasiae* were, on account of their *enargia*, dreams of a waking person.” He argues that the terminology confuses the problem. Poetical *phantasiae* would not have been ”so easily confined within limits of material painting.” *Laokoön*, XV.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., II.

future events that are going to exist as well as all the past events that have occurred.<sup>31</sup>

First, Lessing says, we look at the parts singly then at the combination and lastly at the whole, but this is done so quickly by our senses (visual senses) that we do not realize how it occurs. Lessing's "unity of descriptive epithets" is the idea of a thematic organization of parts which he deems necessary in order for us to form an idea of the whole, similar to Baumgarten's "interconnection," but this also related to the Lockean notion of the association of ideas. For Baumgarten and Lessing only "complex" ideas are poetical and it is only in their capacity to form a unified mental construct through a theme (Baumgarten) that we understand the "picture" of the poem, whereas for Leibniz it is the imagination which makes possible the unity of the sensible with the imaginable. Lessing addresses this specifically in relation to the signs of art and poetry. We see a painting "at a glance," but a poem takes place over time and it is difficult for us to remember the parts so that we can form an idea of the whole.<sup>32</sup> Lessing's solution is to unite the imagination with illusion (*Täuschung*)—that is a conscious, psychologically full *apperception* as the union of the sensible and intelligible is the basis for an aesthetic perception.

If the artist, or of ever-varying nature, can only make use of a single moment, and the painter especially can only use this moment from one point of view, whilst their works are intended to stand the test not only of a passing glance, but of long and repeated contemplation, it is clear that this moment, and the point from which this moment is viewed, cannot be chosen with too great a regard to results. Now that only is a happy choice which allows the imagination free scope. The longer we gaze, the more must our imagination add; and the more our imagination adds, the more we must believe we see. In the whole course of an emotion there is no moment which possesses this advantage so little as its highest stage. There is nothing beyond this; and the presentation of extremes to the eye clips the wings of fancy, prevents here from soaring beyond the impression of the senses, and compels her to occupy herself with weaker images; further than these she ventures not, but shrinks from the visible fullness of expression as her limit.<sup>33</sup>

Mimesis (*Nachahmung*) without illusion (*Täuschung*) is merely description. Lessing gives an example where the poet (Lessing cites 'Alpen,' by Albrecht Von Haller) "describes with great art, and faithfulness to nature;" where he, "paints; but paints *without illusion*" (italics mine). Mimesis through a specifically sensual and psychological illusion is the "principle end" of poetry because it rescues language-signs from their role of description and empowers them as hyper-arbitrary signs capable of being objects of knowledge in their own right, "Everywhere, therefore, where illusion is *not* (italics mine) the question, where the writer appeals only to the understanding of his readers, and merely aims at conveying distinct and, as far as it is possible, complete ideas, these descriptions of bodies, so justly excluded from poetry, are quite in place; and not only the prose writer

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<sup>31</sup>See my Appendix A.

<sup>32</sup>The full quote is as follows: "What the eye takes in at a glance he (the poet) enumerates slowly and by degrees." Laokoön, XVIII.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., II.

but the didactic poet (for where he is didactic he ceases to be a poet), may make use of them with great advantage.”<sup>34</sup> Lessing, quoting Pope, goes so far as to say that anyone who would be a poet should renounce description early because “a purely descriptive poem is like a banquet consisting of nothing but sauces.”

Still the question remains for Lessing; “How can poetry, in the same way painting does, convey the image of totality to the receiver by words whose features represent “the various parts and properties in space,” as they, “follow one another with such speed and condensed brevity that we fancy we hear (them) all at once?” Lessing’s argument is twofold: first, he addresses the signification of words in relation to grammar, that is a lexical argument, in which we link ideas through the structure of a language and second, he decomposes the ontology of the sign.

Both arguments follow on one another midway through Chap. XVIII. In the first case Lessing cites syntax, specifically the German syntax contra the Greek. Greek can join the subject to the predicate “at once” such that Homer can say, “round wheels, brazen eight-spoked.”<sup>35</sup> The advantage is the immediacy of understanding that gives the subject first, and what is accidental to it, second. Lessing equates this with a natural order of thought and criticizes this fault in other languages including the German where if epithets are placed after the substantive they act as adverbs even if they are also adjectives (*runde Räder, ehern und achtspeichigt*). It is the ambiguity of meaning that lessens the effect a poet may achieve. The second point is more complex. It is this to which Lessing devotes the remainder of the chapter.

Lessing’s well-known discussion of Homers description of Agamemnon’s scepter illustrates his second argument in which a sign (*Zeichen*), in this case the scepter, is dispersed “over a kind of history of it.” Homer does not describe the scepter as finished (that would be to rely on the semantic meaning) but as it is “formed by Vulcan; next, it glitters in the hands of Jupiter; now it betokens the dignity of Mercury; now it is the martial hands of the warlike Pelops” and so forth.<sup>36</sup> Lessing turns what is a coexistent representation into one that unfolds over time “converting a tedious painting of a body into a vivid picture of an action.” He makes a similar case for Achilles shield, “Homer does not describe the shield as finished and complete, but as it is being wrought.”<sup>37</sup> Instead of the illustration (*Abbildung*) he gives us the history of the shield.

Catherine Brodsky argues that Lessing’s proposition recalls *avant la lettre* Walter Benjamin’s treatment of the ends of history as the artifactual givens of each successive “allegorical perspective,” which are “images that become objects of knowledge once their original (we might say “natural”) temporal context has been eradicated.”<sup>38</sup> For Benjamin these images become “fixing signs” that are “objects of knowledge in their own right” as “emblems” which are natural signs “insofar as they signify not a natural history, but the fact that nature is historical, calling attention...to the arbitrari-

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<sup>34</sup>Ibid., XVII.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., XVIII.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., XVI.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., XVIII.

<sup>38</sup>W. Benjamin, “The Origin of German Tragic Drama,” Verso, London, 2003, 159-163.

ness of semiotic relations at any given moment of time.”<sup>39</sup> At one level by invoking history through the sign Lessing is using the very arbitrariness (*Willkürlichkeit*) of the sign to bring to consciousness the sensible pictures invoked by the poet temporally that constitute the productive illusion of art. At another level the poet uses language to unite both the sensible and imaginable through time—not literally but insofar as the history of the sensible sign (*sinnliches Bild*) can cohere as a continuous psychological narrative—it must link the sensible and the imaginable by engaging the imagination. At another level, as in Leibniz where perception is a “substance” that moves from one state to another through change (action), this psychologically perceived but arbitrary sign passes to greater (or lesser) degrees of perfection as it becomes present to our conscious mind. The *sinnliches Bild* in the *Laokoön* is Leibniz *apperception* of the sensible perceptions as they are united by the imagination. Poetry exceeds painting in this because it can present Leibniz “clear and confused” (Baumgarten’s “extensively clear”) pictures. The literalness of painting’s (naturalized) space–signs is the problem, that is to say; the signs in painting are not “confused” enough.

Lessing uses two specific illustrations of the limitations of the natural sign in painting. First, signs (emblems) in painting cannot be both visible and invisible because painters can only refer to the idea of invisibility by using emblems. One example is the “clouds” that are used by painters to signify “invisibility.”<sup>40</sup> Painters following Homer use a thing cloud or mist to represent to us that their subject is invisible. Homer invokes similar imagery when in the thick of battle a hero is enveloped in the protective power of divinity. In painting the clouds become a “real hieroglyphic, a mere symbolical token, which does not make the rescued here invisible, but says to the beholders, You must represent him to yourself as invisible.”<sup>41</sup> This double–bind of semiotic meaning reveals where painting has stepped beyond its limits: when the representational signs (in this case visual signs) undermine the imagination’s capacity to invoke a “clear but confused” *apperception* of the mimetic illusion. The illusion of “disappearing” that the poet conceals in a mist does not literally occur but only renders “more palpable to our senses that extreme swiftness of disappearance which we call vanishing.”<sup>42</sup> Poetry can suggest invisibility through *language* because rather than confuse arbitrary and natural symbols (the cloud used to represent invisibility in painting is an arbitrary sign) the language as sign is already arbitrary. The signs of language can be either mechanically fixed by being “clear and distinct” or can be imaginatively “extensive” when used by the poet to “render more palpable to our senses” an intellectual construct like ‘invisibility.’

Similarly and second, signs in poetry can be contradictory without failing to be intelligible. These “mixed sensations” such as ugly/good are impossible in painting while language, as the medium of poetry, can refer to an intelligible idea like ‘Beauty’ without having to show a picture. Lessing references Homer’s descriptions of Helen in the *Iliad*. While Helen is arguably the foundation of the *Iliad*, rather than describing her directly, Homer narrates her *effect* on those who saw her; the affect of “pleasure, dedication, love and rapture, which beauty causes.” Homer transforms

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., 159-163. See also, C. Brodsky Lacour, “Is that Helen?” *Contemporary Pictorialism, Lessing, and Kant*, *Comparative Literature*, 45(3):230-257, Summer 1993, 246.

<sup>40</sup>Laokoön, XVIII.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., XX.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., XX.

beauty itself into a dynamic effect of "charm" defined by Lessing as "beauty in motion." (IX:30) Helen's "sensible image" is dispersed over time linking the series of events, often discontinuous and ambiguous, that constitute the Trojan War. When de Caylus painted the same theme his attempt to make a natural sign (the body of Helen) an arbitrary sign by withdrawing the body or hiding Helen behind a veil failed because painting cannot be arbitrary in the same way. Lessing remarks that de Caylus "concealed" the figure of Helen behind a veil leaving the spectator to ask (as Brodsky notes in one of the best and briefest lines in the *Laokoön*): "Is that Helen?"<sup>43</sup> Poetry is not the perceptually more complex art because it represents actions through time (synchronically or diachronically) but because it effectively makes 'natural' signs *arbitrary* by engaging our imagination through illusion. The apperceptions of poetry are stronger because we must use the mind's eye to see: "In poetry a garment is no garment; it conceals nothing. Our imagination sees everything beneath it."<sup>44</sup> As the emblems in poetry, signs are also bearers of a natural history (the actions of nature through time): language is pure perception where words carry their past and present in their substance as signs. Language–pictures are clear–but–confused ideas that enable us to exercise our free will through our imagination (*Einbildung*). The *sinnliches Bild* of poetry are more complex because they engage at a deeper (higher or more perfect) level of conscious perception:

A poetical picture is not necessarily convertible into a material picture; but every feature, every combination of several features, by which the poet makes his object so palpable to us, that we become *more conscious* (italics mine) of this object than his words, is picturesque, is a picture, because it brings us nearer to that degree of illusion of which the material picture is especially capable, and which is most quickly and easily called forth by the contemplation of the material picture.<sup>45</sup>

The illusion, of which art as material picture is capable, supersedes what is given directly as appearance (*Erscheinen*) in nature when it engages the imagination, "For that which is beautiful in a work of art is beautiful not to our eyes but to our imagination, affected by their means."<sup>46</sup>

#### 0.4 Action as Sign, Images as Objects of Knowledge

What is to be gained by reading Lessing through the lens of psychology? In addition to being a cogent analysis of the subtle difference between the reception of two aesthetic arts, poetry and painting, the *Laokoön* is a nuanced argument for the role of cognitive perception as an active agent in the subjective status of representations in relation to the objects of non–discursive nature. The imaginative faculty associated with "taste" is here placed on a continuum somewhere between "clear and distinct" and "clear-but-confused,"—not that one would deny that this is an intellectual apperception of the aesthetic.

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<sup>43</sup>"Das ist Helena?" *Laokoön*, XXII. See also C. Brodsky Lacour, "Is that Helen?" *Contemporary Pictorialism, Lessing, and Kant*, *Comparative Literature*, 45(3):230-257, Summer 1993.

<sup>44</sup>*Laokoön*, V.

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*, XIV.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*, XIV.

Late nineteenth century philosopher Benedetto Croce contended that aesthetic philosophy is an analog to rational philosophy. But where Croce posits this as a *lesser* analog, for Baumgarten and Lessing philosophical poetics is an equal partner to rational cognition. It is "the science guiding sensate discourse to perfection" where the perfection of sensate discourse is the presentation of the things perceived through "vivid" and "extensive" representations. If aesthetic philosophy is not a lesser metaphysics but a complimentary faculty whose perfection is the clear apprehension of Beauty, Lessing's text is a methodological analysis of the way an aesthetic philosophy would work as a science of signs as they are received or perceived. It is as if we suddenly insert a new filter between the projected image or mimesis and the screen. The reception of any representation requires some kind of lens, but in the case of representations of art the signs are clearly not a direct imitation or even an enhanced representation of reality, but rather something more complex. If Mendelssohn opened the door for the signs of art to be detached from the objects they represent, Lessing walks us past the threshold and into a new room. It is worth remembering that Lessing confers this new status to signs in poetry, not painting. Poetic imagery is the more complex of the two for him, but I would argue that in the twentieth century Lessing's argument is equally important for non-figurative visual art. Even as Lessing insists that art is imitative (*Nachahmung*) the character of the illusion is a *psychological* construct where the aesthetic *ratio* in this case through poetry invokes a material substance of the sensible in the mind's eye that *supersedes* natural signs or what is before the eye in nature:

Indisputably! For that which is beautiful in a work of art is beautiful not to our eyes but to our imagination, affected by their means. Thus, as the same image may be raised afresh in our imagination by means either of arbitrary or natural symbols, so the same pleasure, though not the same degree of it, must on each occasion be again excited.<sup>47</sup>

In Lessing's final calculus poetry is located above painting precisely because poetic language reveals the fact or action of the material history of substance, that is—as substance becomes more present to the conscious mind it reveals the potential of beauty as a perfection: "The poet is far above the painter as life is above the painting."<sup>48</sup>

Once the sign is severed from the object the question is, to paraphrase Kenneth Burke, "What is the representation of what?"<sup>49</sup> Burke's 'Dramatism' proposed to treat language as a kind of action that mediates between the social realm and the realm of non-verbal nature. As an elaboration on Spinoza's insistence that things must be understood in their overall context instead of treating words as ontologically real entities as the signs of things, Burke offers a linguistic model where things are the signs of words. Thus he gives an example sentence, "The man walks down the street." What man? is he tall, short, fat, blond? Is this a walking-situation, a street-situation, a man-situation? The sentence as stated cannot be illustrated. In a similar way, Lessing inverts the problem and suggests that there are times when the artist should imitate nature through the poet,

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<sup>47</sup>Ibid., VI.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., XIII.

<sup>49</sup>See Kenneth Burke, "What are the Signs of What?," in *Anthropological Linguistics*, vol. 4, no. 6, Jun., 1962:1-23.

that is—through a mimesis of the poets words. In a much misunderstood passage in Chap. XI he elaborates:

There are even cases where it is a greater merit for the artists to have imitated nature through the medium of the imitation of the poet, than without it. The painter who executes a beautiful landscape after the description of a Thomson has done more than he who takes it directly from nature. This latter sees his original (non-verbal nature–SIC) before him, while the former must exert his imagination until he believes he has it before him. The latter produces something beautiful from a lively and sensible impression; the former from the indefinite and weak representation of arbitrary signs.<sup>50</sup>

Lessing's argument is that poetry through the use of arbitrary signs can when used not as Burke's example of a descriptive sentence, but when employing language as an 'act' with all its particular impressions, codes, and histories—this is the "indefiniteness" of the sign—become a kind of super-natural nature or hyper-arbitrary system of representation. To realize that this is more a "title" of a situation than a description of an act Burke's famous paper of 1956 posits that it is not words that are signs for things, but things are the signs of words. Similar to Lessing's example of 'Helen' who represents both Beauty and War in the Iliad 'Helen' operates as a sign that is an abbreviated title for a situation—the history of the start of the war, the geographic displacement of power, the putative emblem of tragic loss. Helen the sign has social, historical, and ideal content. The sign's fullness or what Baumgarten calls "extensive clarity" could also be understood as entitling a situation rather than describing one—that according to Lessing that is the role of prose. For Lessing it is not the singular sign only (the word) but the collection of words or signs that constitute the poem as such. The poet mediates between the second order representation of perceived objects and the realm of non-verbal "natural" objects.

The analogy with Burke is not isomorphic. Burke the Modern does not discriminate between first or second order representations or words that represent natural objects (those of physics subject to action and motion) and representations made by the artist (Plato's appearances) but Lessing and his eighteenth century cohorts do. However, rather than a Neo-Platonic idealist Lessing is essentially more of a Leibnizian; that is a Neo-Aristotelian for whom substance is made comprehensible through form as a process of clarification. But instead of the rationalist reduction of objects in nature to knowledge that is "clear and distinct" Lessing like Baumgarten, proposes an idea of aesthetics as an analog to ratiocination that proceeds to clarification through inclusion, not exclusion of the particular or sensate knowledge. Lessing arguably goes one step further than Baumgarten (and especially Mendelssohn) and in this he prefigures Kant without the transcendental proof: he suggests that the arbitrary language of poetry is a kind of symbolic action as an unfolding of the universe as monad where the representations and their relations change over time and acquire new meanings as they transform the nature of that which they represent. This is to say that these *phantasmata poetica* or sensual images are forming the universe through their own unfolding over time: images in art are more than mimetic representations of an external sensual world, they are objects of knowledge about the world in a state of becoming.

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<sup>50</sup>Laokoön, XI.

Kant's notion of the *intuition* will perform a similar function but without the imagination. It is the sum of the *a priori* principles of space and time that gives form to the sensations before they enter the mind because sensations insofar as they are crude matter are outside the mind. The mind only observes things like color, hardness, coldness, once a form is already given to it. Aesthetics will slip into a lesser philosophy. But in this brief moment before Kant the possibility of the aesthetic as a cognitive faculty is still underdetermined. Kant's intellectualist system of has not yet barred the imagination (Leibniz clear-but-confused cognition) from the psychological content of the sign. Aesthetics is still laid bare to the panpsychical model of consciousness, but without a developed empirical psychology to explain *how* it is that we perceive sensible knowledge. For that art will need the nineteenth century empirical and experimental psychology of Müller, Helmholtz, Wundt and most importantly for aesthetics, Fechner and Lipps. Sometimes to go forward, we must go back.