

## **The problem of titles in painting**

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Traditionally the medium of literature is considered to be the word while those of visual art are colour, form, line — i.e. media perceived through the eyes. The following is concerned with the word in a picture, foremost in a painting, thus, with an assumed secondary element in visual art.

In the early 20th century borderlines between the different forms of art seemed to be quite clear. The objects of pictorial art had spatial dimensions expanding in two or three dimensions, these could be hung on walls or displayed in exhibitions halls; while objects of the art of words were linear, proceeding in only one, the temporal dimension. This can be called the era of innocence in pictorial art and it mostly extends up to the World War I; in conventional discourse even further.

The following, as the heading already indicates, will concentrate on the interrelationship between what is seen and what is said. It is one of the key issues in the history of philosophy from the Stoics' theories up to modern linguistic philosophy and semiotics. Traditionally relations between the visual and the verbal have been treated as relations between the word and the notion, or between the word and the object, departing primarily from the process designated by the term signification. In the present case, however, the angle of approach is slightly shifted and we are interested in the counter-effect of the visible and the verbal and in their coexistence in the visual art. Primary difference from the above-mentioned limits the subject to the secondary and concentrates on the secondary use of the word in the intentional creative process. To some extent it includes signification, meanings and connotations. First and foremost the counter-effect operates on the textual, not on the notional plane.

The most typical examples of the use of verbal means in pictorial art are the letters, words or textual extracts (collage) torn out of

printed texts and used in Cubist or Dadaist paintings (first and foremost Kurt Schwitters). Possibilities, however, diverge:

(1) Title. Depending on the picture, trend or era connected with the picture in a loose or organic way.

(2) Provisionally and indirectly also the author's name, informing us of his reputation, the period he comes from, etc.

(3) A word in the title carrying with its connotations a potential visual text and guiding, together with the picture, its reception to a particular direction. Presuming, of course, that the word is clearly recognised and distinguished from the rest of the text, since mostly metaphorical relations are going to be discussed here. For example, *Yellow Christ*, *Blue Nude*, *Black Square*. On the other hand an emphasised meaningless title can carry connotations associated with meaninglessness.

(4) Part of the picture perceived as a written text, possessing, no direct meaning. Meaningless text or letters affect us differently from the rest of the picture.

(5) Part of the picture perceived as a written text conveying a particular meaning.

At this point two sub-cases can be pointed at. The written text can be in a language, which is not known to the audience, or the viewer can just not bother to go into it (in the context of an actual exhibition the latter is quite often the case and worth to be examined separately — like any other partial “reading” of a work, skipping over a book, omitting paragraphs, reading a page diagonally, watching only a fragment of a film, rushing through an exhibition hall without watching all the pictures). In this case the written text becomes just a visual component, affecting the onlooker in a different way from the other details of the work. This rather concerns reception than the work itself.

Flourishing verbalism or its total manifestation in visual art comes up in conceptualism. Conceptualism is naturally based on different points of departure — but at its roots one can see, on the one hand, withdrawal of the title becoming independent, and on the other hand, script on the surface of the painting.

One of the first examples of verbal text was the written title on the surface of the painting fixing either names of those portrayed, the subject, or hinting at the subject by quoting a canonical text. There is

no doubt that a title written on the surface of the painting makes a different impact from the situation, where the text is attached to the wall next to the painting, or when it is on the price-list of the gallery. (An intermediate possibility is the frame attached to the painting — although a separate item — carrying a label with the title.) In case the script is on the surface of the text, one cannot speak of a looser or tighter connection with the text. A written text always attracts attention, it is aggressive. It is true even, when the script is illegible or in a language that is not understood. Probably we perceive the written text so differently from the pictorial image, that the metaphorical tension created is insurmountable.

Besides the direct verbal components of a painting — its title or script elements — the depicted narrative should also be considered as a verbal component. Narrative as such has been viewed as a linguistic act (Bal 1985: 7–8). The story depicted on the picture, the source of its plot, can be seen as a part of the painting that can be verbalised. The verbal part can be treated in a wider sense, too, including the whole verbal context of a piece of art — the texts accompanying it, the context, reviews, critical analyses. The present study will concentrate on two narrow topics: the title of the painting and the script as it is used in visual art.

Until the break in art tradition in the second half of the 19th century the verbal part of a picture could foremost be seen in the narrative related to it. Narrative source for the medieval art was the Bible which at the time determined the development of art based on the story. Orientation on the narrative is the major and one of the most solid features of the Western painting.

The treatment of painting in *Laocoon* by Lessing is based on the verbal aspect of a picture which is conveyed by a narrative easily recognised. The story was the same for both poetry and painting, only the way of telling it was different. But in any case the story could be verbalised, presented with linear means.

In medieval paintings, stained glass windows and frescoes, the viewer (at least an informed viewer) could detect the corresponding plot that he knew beforehand from specific features of the picture. He was able to adhere it to the picture without considerable deviations and thus the title was of no importance — iconic signs performed signification anyhow. With later high style paintings on mythological and historical subjects the process is analogous. The title is but a

formal text, a label, perhaps a catalyst which has to point out the right story.

While Christian narrative dominated the titles were just formal labels like *The Virgin and the Child*, *St. Luke*, *The Birth of Christ*, *The Last Judgement*, et al. These were actually just names, conventional designations that could have been left unfixed in case there sufficed visual elements which enabled to recognise the plot. Such names could be used while speaking about the pictures, but writing them down was superfluous. Of course, late Middle Ages and Renaissance paintings are familiar with the tradition of writing the name straight on the surface of the picture. This, however, was more important in case of portraits than of narrative paintings. The re-emergence of portraits at that period brought along the need to fix the name of the person portrayed and frequently this was presented as part of the picture, as a writing on its surface. This text, however, like name of the story the picture depicts, is by no means the title of a picture as we understand it now.

Later, in the period of mythological and historical paintings, foremost in the eras of Baroque, Rococo and Classicism, the signature text could be more complicated while its role was practically the same — to recall a familiar story: *Embarquement pour l'Île de Cythère* (Antoine Watteau), *The Oath of the Horatii* (Jacques Louis David) or *The Golden Age* (Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres).

Of the factors determining the emergence of the titles in the modern sense of the word three basic moments must be considered: exhibitions, catalogues and art criticism. It is natural that, as the painting became independent of the former chain of author and contractor, a way of signifying it permanently and uniquely had to be developed. Primarily the painting was recognized by the author's name but also by the name of the painting itself which generally was fixed by the author and was not altered.

In the course of time, up to the Romanticism, the importance of one of the verbal texts, that of the author's name, has increased. In the 20th century, too, personality of the author and his activity have been of greater importance than the materialised work itself.

One aspect that should be mentioned is the metonymical replacement of a particular art work as an item by its author's name, e.g. *in the museum there were two Manets, I looked at a Rubens, the Picasso cost ...* This is, no doubt, one of the most typical cases of metonymy

where name of the author substitutes his work and it is naturally used in other arts, too, in music and literature perhaps more often than in architecture, film or theatre. The impression is, however, that use of metonymy is most frequent in visual art. Reasons for that can only be hypothesised. One of them could be the fact that visual art has been commercialised. In the art market, which has enlivened mostly in the last century, the author has been more important than his work, or at least his name has been the major factor in establishing the market value. The commercial character is probably more important in visual arts than elsewhere and depends mostly on the fact that visual arts are “objective”. Another reason could be that one author can produce more paintings or etchings than, for example, novels. In sketches the author’s name is usually the only accompanying verbal text which helps to signify them.

Other verbal texts adhered to a picture, like data concerning the technique, form and size, are related to the work loosely and thus are rather insignificant. Of greater importance is the date of a work.

Further, I would centre my attention on the title of a painting, treating it as the most characteristic part of the verbal context.

The name of a piece of art, its title, is its most characteristic and at the same time its inevitable verbal companion. Pieces of art must be signified, mentioned, spoken about, they have to be included in catalogues; with the help of the title the author communicates with the audience. It would probably be quite difficult to establish a situation in which any verbal fixation of a given piece of art, any reference to it could be avoided. So every piece of art has got a name, in general it is the intentional title.

The names given for visual art form an intriguing genre in themselves — insofar as their independent existence is possible at all. In literary research investigation in the genre has recently been called titology (Fr. *titologie*, Genette 1997: 55) and probably the term can be applied for studying the titles of visual art-works as well.

Studies on the titles of visual art, however, are quite rare and stress mostly certain aspects of the subject only (e.g. Fisher 1984; Bann 1985; Gombrich 1985; Levinson 1985). It seems that the similar field — titles of fiction — has been studied more frequently and thoroughly (see Genette 1997: 55). Yet especially the titles of visual art seem to offer plenty of material: both in terms of the quantity and variety of scale.

The most common point of departure is to view a title on the background of the philosophy of language. In this case the title is treated as a name, a proper name, creating analogous philosophical problems: connotation and denotation, the problem of meaning, the relationship between the common and the proper noun, etc.

The present paper is focused on another aspect — the title with no meaning, so semiotics of the negative. The meaning of non-existence, of negation, is of course vaguer and more difficult to interpret, having more connotations than that of a fixed, positive sign. At the same time it implies a primordial capacity, rich in information like the voice and meaning of silence.

To simplify the subject we have to admit, that up to now titology has always tried to cut the notion of the title, discussing *the real* or *the true* title which is usually the name the artist has intentionally given to the piece of art: “The only titles I am concerned with are the *true* titles — those given by the *artist* roughly at the time of creation.” (Levinson 1985: 34). This approach is the simpler way in which part of the names, as fallen angels, have been thrown out with the explanation that these do not meet the requirements set on a title well enough. In case we proceed from the independent existence of a piece of art, that is not tied with its author, and focus our attention not on the intention of the author but on the title’s actual influence on the reception of the work, we can enlarge the notion of the title: everything in reality (in other words — in the communication process), that functions as a title, can be treated as a title.

A catalogue as well as any talk or written text about the work of art can be viewed as a communicative situation. So, further as titles are seen any alpha-numerical series used to signify a work for the time being irrespective of the genesis of the series. Equivalent are the title given by the author, a later title given by anyone, its nickname — everything that is used in oral or written reference to the piece of art.

The questions arising thus are numerous, one of the major one is that of homonyms. Let us take for example the title *Untitled (Sans titre)* which has been used to designate an innumerable quantity of works. Or just three asterisks (\*\*\*) that substitute the title. The ability of those titles of performing one of the initial functions of the title — to differentiate it from all the others — is probably next to non-existent. One author could have made several works of the same title, made in one and the same year, etc. Thus, there are more exact ways

to differentiate a piece of art, e.g. the number in the museum catalogue. The title alone without the name of the author, and frequently without the year of creation, present location and size of the work, cannot sort it out from all the others with the same title. The function of specification is certainly better performed by, for example, the ISBN or catalogue number of a book. Is this also a title in a wider sense? I would prefer the notion substitute title for the ways of specification just described. The substitute title helps to find the original title although the specification function of the latter is minimal analogically to the personal code that helps to make difference between all the people called John Brown or Ivan Popov. It helps to restore the title proper. Although a numerical system is efficient in differentiating works on the catalogue level, it cannot be used in traditional art communication. As the initial function of a title is to signify the work, one has to add that the title is indispensable in verbal communication. In former art criticism of the early 20th century the catalogue numbers of an exhibition were substitute titles, functioning in the process of writing about the works. So the 1916 annual show has been reviewed as follows: “There *The Landscape* (No 177) of a lonely bay burning in sunshine of blue flames ... Then *The Landscape* (No 168) of a droughty afternoon sun with pink, as if feverish clouds ... or *The Landscape* (No 189) with a red field as if screaming in fear, with a path disappearing into a valley and emerging nowhere, stormy clouds rolling above in the sky”. The paintings are well-known today, but recognised by more clear-cut titles.

Another common feature in the reviews up to the present day is, that they proceed from what has been depicted on the picture, which is definitely of primary importance. Hence another significant function of the title — to guide the audience in perceiving and interpreting the picture. Like the title failed to be an ideal means of signifying the picture one-to-one, so one need not overestimate its capability to function as the decisive factor in interpretation. Playing with the effect of different titles has been one of the favourite children of post-modernism but not the only one. On the one hand it surely reaches back to conceptualism, and on the other hand, to the possibilities suggested by S. Eisenstein in his montage. If compared with the latter, the situation is quite similar — in both cases the context influences the interpretation of the details and of the signs. Like in a film where understanding of what is going on depends on having seen the previ-

ous shots, title of the picture should have an influence on our understanding of it. It is tempting to study these possibilities but one can exaggerate at that easily, especially when bearing in mind the experience of contemporary conceptualism and post-structuralism. The wish to throw the meaning as a whole into interpretation keeps haunting. Several familiar situations resist the decisive role of the title in interpretation. First, numerous artists and schools have declared, that the title has secondary importance for the picture: the latter has to communicate with no assisting features, and its visual possibilities are sufficient for guiding the interpretation. This idea is emphasised by the title *Untitled*. Secondly, the situation where the viewer does not bother to read the title is frequent enough, or where he thinks that it is irrelevant, or he cannot understand the language of the title. Can we say that when the viewer does not read the title, the picture remains meaningless to him? Evidently it depends: in some works the title is an irreplaceable component of the text of the work, but in some works it is not. It is easier to influence the plot-component of a work. In case a person depicted is named just with another name it could be either ignorance or a lie. Both options offer new material for the verbal interpretation of the picture, in paraphrasing it. The interrelations between the title and the picture often depend on the reception, on the single act of reading and interpretation. The more directive the title intentionally is, the more it affects the interpretation, and the more general or abstract it is, the more possibilities for reading will it leave open.

One could presume that iconic works are less influenced by their title. In case we have developed an opinion of our own about a piece of art before interpreting it, the impact of different titles or changes in them is smaller than in the case of perceiving a hitherto unknown work. A good comparison is the translation of film and book titles. As far as the Estonian practice goes, the translation title can be entirely different. The aim of the translation is to make the name attractive, memorable and “transparent” as far as the content is concerned. In this case interpretation of the work cannot rely on the text of the title. In picture titles the translation practice has been different: the purpose is to find an equivalent as close to the original as possible.

The name of a picture need not be related to it in a unique and the only possible way: shifts in the meaning are inevitable. The intention of the author is an act of the past and cannot be always restored



historically. Several works acquire a fixed nickname and are known by them. At the same time the connotations of a title can change in time as projected on the background of other works and titles.

The title of the picture became more independent and lost part of its picture-conditioned character, but still influenced it in a metaphorical way, in the Symbolist paintings.

Titles of the Impressionist paintings are just of an opposite character, their significance is reduced, they are never seen as irrelevant. The works can be successfully viewed without the titles which just name the picture without stressing their negativity: Claude Monet's *Impression. Sunrise (Impression, soleil levant)*, *The Capuchin Avenue (Boulevard des Capucines)*, *Rouen Cathedral (La cathédrale de Rouen)*, *West Portal (Le portail)*, *Foggy Day (Temps gris)*.

A neutral relationship between the art-works and their titles characterises the paintings of the Post-Impressionists (foremost the works of Cézanne) and even more the drawings of *Les Fauves*. Characteristically the title becomes more and more conditional — it could be just a common noun like “landscape”, “house”, “man”, “woman” or a modified phrase “man’s portrait”, “man with a hat”, “man with a pipe”.

Here the parallel with the theory of natural categories, popular in perception psychology since 1970s and associated mostly with the name of Eleanor Rosch Heider, is valid. The notion of category and the principle of categorizing the surrounding world is nothing new, of course; its development in philosophy can be traced back to Aristotle. Using language, the man inevitably categorizes the world: this is the basis for his cognitive abilities. Rosch applied the notion to abstract phenomena of perception — colour, form — and distinguished between artificial and natural categories. The latter are treated as “real”, actually existent and designated generally in natural speech by words. A natural category develops after the knowledge acquired in human life including personal experience, semantic correlations, etc. The theory of natural categories introduced the notion of the best member, the prototype, and thus the members of a category turned unequal.

Within the framework of this theory a category is a set of objects designated by a word, i.e. a general name (*a car, a chair*), while the members of a category are related to each other in a system — the taxonomy. Within a taxonomy different layers can be distinguished with a different level of abstraction. The categories of a lower level are members of an upper level category. An abstraction level can be

brought out on this scale, the so-called basic level with basic categories. The latter are most informative for the man, they are distinguished most clearly. In their linguistic development children acquire names of the basic categories first. Before that they learn to group familiar objects into basic categories. From the point of view of human consciousness the dismemberment of the surrounding world in this way is the easiest and most economical (e.g. table, chair, dog, man, woman, house).

Returning to the titles of *Les Fauves* composed of general names one could point out their analogy to the notions of basic categories or prototypes. This is not an absolute statement, of course, but it refers to the general tendency with numerous exceptions. On the other hand, sometimes authorship of the titles is not clear, because they may have been added later, and in this case the title of a general name is understandable. On the other hand, to the present viewer the late origin of the title does not matter, because he sees the picture with a particular title only, and receives it with those particular associations. Such name of a picture does not specify the objects on it, but it is detached from the actual content, remaining loose and general. While the impressionists retained exact references to the place, time and person, it seems that *Les Fauves* concerned themselves with signifying the general objects only, reducing both the person and the place depicted. Frequently the title is markedly more general than the depicted scene. The painting named *A Man with a Pipe* should, departing from the title, depict an ordinary-looking man with an ordinary-looking pipe in his mouth in a recognisable way. The picture could be used in an ABC-book where it would successfully help a child spell A-MAN-WITH-A-PIPE, or it could be in an elementary level German textbook to help a learner remember the phrase EIN MENSCH MIT DER PFEIFE. Most of the Post-Impressionist or Fauve men with pipes, however, are not as unequivocal as that. Probably the interference of the actual picture with the words *a man with a pipe* is slightly more complicated.

Another noteworthy phenomenon of the same period, last decade of the 19th century and the first two decades of the 20th century, introduces secondary vision into the title. First and foremost it includes colour names. Since the Fauves and German Expressionists the visible has been depicted with decreasing "correctness", especially in colour. The form is conditional, too, not aimed at copying the reality,

but in colours it is more conspicuous reducing a picture into a set of splashes subject to their visual qualities, the artist's discretion and will. In this case the title of a general name usually includes a colour name. Like the noun — being general or of basic category — so is usually general the colour name. Without performing a statistical investigation it can be said that red, yellow, blue, green, white and black are the most frequent colours, less used are violet and green. Thus, the words corresponding more or less to basic colours.

The second deviation would recall the notions of colour categories and basic colour terms. The latter notion — basic colour term — was combined by Bernt Berlin and Paul Kay (1969) and listed 11 colour words. The authors have suggested that diachronic development of the colour terms is subject to similar regularities irrespective of the language. Every colour term has got its best equivalent, a fixed point in the three-dimensional colour space or the focal colour, as well as various colours that can be designated with the word. These equivalents in their turn form a three-dimensional section of space, a colour space or range corresponding to the term. Departing from Berlin and Kay and their numerous disciples it is almost axiomatic that the foci of basic terms are quite similar for the people speaking different languages irrespective of their age or the existence of a separate term for the colour in the particular language. The ranges of colour terms, at that, can vary also within one language, their development can depend on age, dialect or cultural background. The hypothesis of basic terms and experiments enabled Rosch to speak of natural perception categories, i.e. categories referring to abstract visual qualities and principally depending on the neurophysiology of human sight. Thus, the analogues of basic categories are colour spaces corresponding to basic colour terms, all colours that can be designated with the word, the best example being the focal colour and sub-categories for example *light red, carmine, brick red*.

It is quite clear that the colour spaces of different colour names are different. Thus, the colour space of white and black is quite limited (of course in case these are not word groups), blue, green and brown are of wider range. The range of a colour space would definitely enlarge, should one take into account word groups, i.e. considers colour names, that are not abstract only. So, when we speak of red bricks, ochre, flag, sky, hair, cow and fire, the colours that we actually perceive are quite different from each other. At the same time the

word “red” has got a corresponding association with the colour in our consciousness which with high probability corresponds to the focal colour of the colour word. The preliminary reference to the colour word is primal for it inevitably influences the judgement of what is observed. In the case of word groups the process is probably slightly different. Customary associations like *red cow*, *white house* or *green tree* have in all likelihood no effect on what we see if the visible is not in marked dissonance with the phrase (for example, the cow is green). Unusual compounds — *blue nude*, *blue horse*, *green woman*, *yellow Christ* — are liable to sharpen our perception of what will be looked at and influence to see the colour as closer to the focal one.

Returning to the Fauves and the Expressionists one must say that while the titles frequently included colour names or general names, these were often illogical and combined items that one could not have experienced. The strangeness implies two cases. First, red could be called a pinkish animal, blue a horse or a nude, in which colour did not correspond exactly to the focal tone of blue. In this case the aim of the title was probably to make the otherwise more or less natural object seem more in the colour named, thus creating a certain attentive dissonance. In the other case the object depicted has probably been of an unusual colour and struck the eye in the picture already, while the title just confirmed and stressed the experience. Thus, the general name has been used in the above-described way as MAN WITH A PIPE and the dissonance emerging from a name inevitably has its influence on the picture.

A few examples. Paul Gauguin’s *Yellow Christ* (*Le Christ jaune*, 1889):

In a way *Christ* is a general name in the Western culture. Yellow of the body of Christ depicted in the picture is by no means the focal colour, yet it is perceived as natural; as far as the title is concerned, however, it creates symbolic echoes departing namely from the possible connotations of the word *yellow* (in Medieval iconography it was mostly associated with Judas, *face can turn yellow*, *skin can be sickly yellow*, but these, of course, are not the only connotations). The titles *Crucifixion* or *Christ on the Cross*, most natural in art tradition, would leave a totally different impression departing from what has been depicted in the picture and perceived, thus, as most natural.

The same picture has been used by Gauguin as a background in his double painting *The Portrait of an Artist with Yellow Christ* (*Portrait*

*de l'artiste au Christ jaune*, 1889–90) depicting Gauguin himself. Here, too, the familiar generalization of naming has taken place — an actual and recognizable person has been reduced to “an artist”. The same period includes another painting with a colour word: *White Angel. Mme Satre (La belle angéle. Mme Satre. 1889)* the title of which has been written on the surface of the picture. The phenomenon is more or less the same: the colour word possesses a direct symbolic value and the person — who has been mentioned this time — has been given a general name, too. Since the title on the picture surface was exceptional at that time, it had to be significant for the author. However, the writing is not perceived as an element of the painting like in the Cubist pictures but just as a title written on the surface of the picture.

Frequent are colour words in the Fauve titles, especially with Henri Matisse:

*Red Studio (L'Atelier rouge, 1911), Red Room (Dessert. Harmony in Red) (La chambre rouge (Desserte. Harmonie en rouge), 1908), Blue Nude (Nu bleu, 1907), Nude (black and gold) (Nu (noir et or), 1908), Moroccan in Green (Marocain en vert debout, 1913), Yellow Curtain (Le Rideau jaune, 1914–15).*

These titles by Matisse, that emphasise colours, name actual focal tones already. Red fish are really truly red as well as the room. The green line on the nose of *Madame Marisse* is of interest in many respects. The painting has been called in different sources differently either as *The Portrait of Madame Matisse* or *The Portrait with a Green Line* (1905) and in the latter case the green line, no doubt, becomes significant. Looking at the picture under the first title and being familiar with the manner of the Fauves it is possible to leave the line unnoticed altogether. The second version, however, makes the line one of the most important details in the picture.

Simultaneously the German Expressionists also had a number of colourful titles. It concerns *Die Brücke*, but especially the works of the group *Blauer Reiter* which were more Symbolist in their approach. The name of the group is derived from the picture of a Blue Rider by Kandinsky and it could be viewed as the decisive one. The nude in *Blue Nude with Straw Hat* by Ernst Kirchner (1910) is blue enough, true, it is not in the focal colour corresponding to the word *blue*, but perceived as such that can be designated with the word. Most colourful, no doubt, are the animals of Franz Marc: *Red Horses*

(1911). *Blue Horse I and II* (1911), *Big Blue Horses* (1911), *White Bull* (1911), *Yellow Horses* (1912), *Yellow Cow* (1911), *The Tower of Blue Horses* (*Der Turm der blauen Pferde*. 1913), *White Cat* (1912), *A Red and a Blue Horse* (1912), *Blue Deer* (1912), et al. Conspicuous is the difference from the Fauves. *Les Fauves* painted with simple pure tones and withdrew from the reality mostly by the vividness and purity of their colours. *Die Brücke* Expressionists depicted their objects in colours which were never met in reality (blue nude) and the titles of the picture just stated and emphasised the difference created on the surface of the picture. The difference was included in the titles that harmonised with the picture. The coloured animals by Marc can be treated in terms of personal mythology of colour symbolism which the artist himself has confessed and explained: “Blue is the masculine force, strict and spiritual. Yellow is the feminine force, gentle and serene, while red is the matter, brutal and heavy, and always the colour which has to fight with the two others and be overcome by them.” (März 1987: 7–8). The quotation comes from the year 1911 and *Red Horses* exemplifies its first manifestations.

In the history of titles the common name titles were subjected to a total change or revolution which introduced the extremities valid at the present day. The key figure here is Vassily Kandinsky, later the Dada and Russian Constructivist movements had a part to play. Kandinsky made the specific denominations — *Improvisation* and *Composition* — as significant as all the other titles. True, in earlier catalogues it was common to leave less important works nameless and call them just by their specification (*Landscape, Drawing, Blanc-et-noir*). Kandinsky, however, used them intentionally as titles, numbered them, and sometimes added a reference pointing at a particular improvisation. The connection with music and the use of titles is evident: *Opus No 56*. So titles of musical pieces can be considered one source of abstract, genre and numbered titles of pictures (by abstract titles I mean the use of numbers and words that have no direct meaning, as well as neologisms, like e.g. E. Lissitsky *Proun R.V.N. 2*, 1923).

Those “ambiguous” titles, neologisms, numbers and letters in the titles, can be treated as a poetics in their own, with rules which are more strict than those for the titles with a meaning, as the peculiar Constructivist Sonnet form. It reveals their reverse significance — representation of a certain pattern, in thinking. The difference is

especially marked in comparison with the literary titles of the Abstract Expressionism of the post-World War II era.

Comparing the titles of visual art and literature, we can see various differences. In literary titles the poetic value and sound aspects are indispensable (the title as the mandala). Some genres prefer a transparent hint at the content like films (detective, gothic and action stories). The key to the genre has to be grasped quickly in case of reference books and companions. A dictionary with the title *At Night* or *The Red and the Black* would be meaningless. The title of a piece of art can stress its banal or dull aspect, it can be abstract or unpronounceable. Literary titles are read in a different way.

Gerard Genette (1988) brings out the main difference between the titles of works of fiction and those of visual art: in case of a book, the title can represent the whole text, the text itself is often not known, not read, while the title is familiar. In visual arts the situation is just the opposite: the work itself or its reproduction is known (looking — or reading — of a visual text can take only a moment) while the title is either not known or not read, the same goes for other accompanying texts (the name of the author, year etc.) — like with fiction, film, music or a play, where the whole text is not read. In case of the latter, title could be the metonym replacement of a work, with visual arts it is impossible. Titles in the visual art form a literary genre of their own.

The audience of literary titles (that of fiction) is wider than that actually reading the books (one stage is the book-shop as a huge catalogue where one reads the titles only). The potential reader often decides on a book just by the title: “The title addresses itself to a larger number of people than does the text, people who, in one way or another, receive and transmit it, and thereby contribute to its circulation. For, if the text is an object of reading, the title, like the author’s name, is an object of circulation — or if you wish, an object of communication” (Genette 1988: 707).

The relations between the picture and its title are various. First the independence of the title or — vice versa — its inclusion in the text of the picture. Further one could speak of the distance between the named and the depicted. These relations are not really related, rather they aim at different directions. If the difference between the title and the depicted is great, it proceeds from the tight unity of the text of the title and the text of the work while the simple naming of what has been depicted usually has a loose connection. Analysis of this distance

presupposes that the visual part and the name are treated as equal texts. A greater distance usually means an intentional title which is of major significance in interpreting the text appropriately. The two have a mutual influence on each other as equal components. Simple naming of what has been depicted presupposes a small distance and does not create the tension urging to interpretation. At first sight the title seems to be just a label. The former discussion of neutral titles of common names should convince us, however, that the problem cannot be as simple as that. Title as a common name carries a kind of negative information — its aim is to direct attention to the purely visual character of the work, avoiding or even denying any narrative interpretation. The accompanying text is inevitably a sign and always has an impact on the text of the picture.

Let us take the wide-spread title *A Head* as an illustration. The title became prominent in the sculpture of the early 20th century. At first (at least in the Estonian art) the *head*-title was used when the artist wanted to emphasise his interest in the form of the face, not in the person. Often the model could be someone close to the artist, but he thought that it was irrelevant or even misleading for the audience to inform about the person with the title. No doubt, the interpretations are different depending on whether the work is called *The Head of a Woman* or *The Portrait of my Wife* or *The Portrait of Mrs. Strandmann*. Originally it was still someone close that could be recognised. This situation can be described as the zero-version of the *head*-title. The next possible stage in its development was to distance from the recognisable person in favour of an impersonal head-form within the limits of reality. The *head*-title could designate a Cubist, abstract or Surrealistic work with no recognisable head on it at all (Karl Schmidt-Rottluff *Head* 1917; Pablo Picasso *Woman's Head* 1909; Naum Gabo *Head of a Woman* 1917–1920; Alberto Giacometti *Cubist Head*; Barbara Hepworth *Head (Elegy)* 1952). The greater the dissonance between the word “head” and the depicted form, the more distant is the common noun from a simple label creating new meanings. At the same time the relation between “a head” and a realistic, recognisable portrait is not absolutely neutral for it makes one ask for the actual name of the person.

In the through the 20th century are the following extreme possibilities between relations of the picture and the title texts:



1. meaningful, narrative or symbolic title corresponding to a meaningless (abstract) picture
2. title with zero-meaning (untitled) signifying a picture that has an image, ranging from abstract to recognisable real objects
3. abstract title — abstract picture
4. common noun title — recognisable image
5. meaningful, designating title — narrative picture
6. title referring to the genre (composition, painting, still-life, landscape).

The indicated diachronic changes and relations between the title and the picture texts are represented on two axes: the image, depiction change (relation to reality) and the signification (narrative). The zero-point of the two variables is the *Untitled* as the title of zero-meaning corresponding to a totally abstract work. The abstract titles (e.g. *Proun 23 N*) have a negative meaning (although still significant for their absolute value). Of relatively flimsy meaning are the common noun titles and so in case with both abstract and figurative works (*Head, Black Square*, further *Man with a Pipe*). Literary and narrative titles are of higher significance. Zero-level on the depiction axis includes the abstract works, the positive axis is directed towards the image becoming more realistic on the picture. The Surrealistic pictures include the negative reality (expressing antithetic or irony-based relations between the title and the picture like *Ceci n'est pas une pipe* by Magritte). The virtue of graphic presentation is the clear representation of the distance between the title and the picture text. Titles of the works with minimum distance are projected on the diagonal of the positive sector. The further is the contact surface of the texts from the axis, the greater is the difference between the picture and the title.

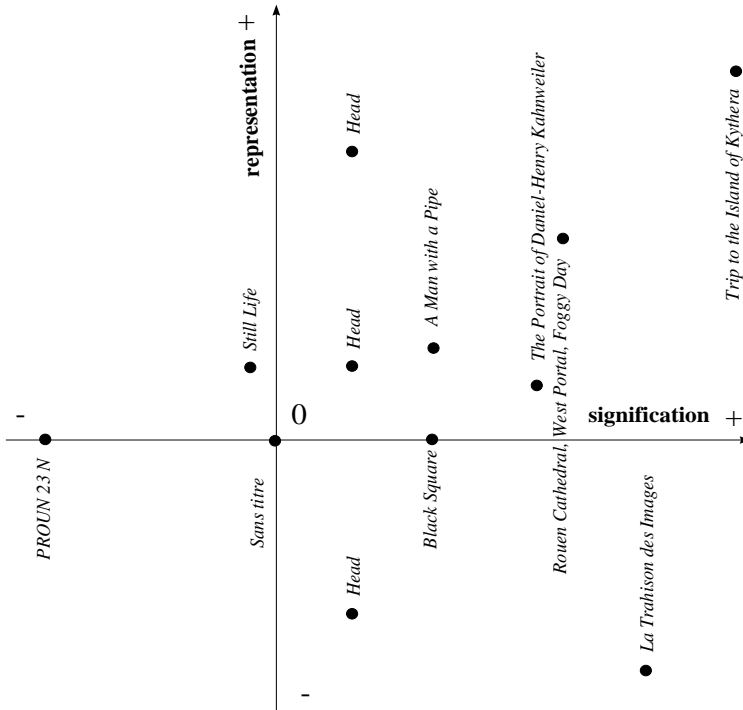


Fig. 1.

The figure, of course, is schematic which is a drawback: the picture texts have been simplified and reduced to one axis. This, however, is inevitable — a more refined figure would lose in its clarity.

It is clear that visual arts would never get rid of their linguistic Procrustean bed in spite of all the repeated attempts. As long as natural language will be the initial means of human communication it has to be so. So long as ideas will be exchanged about pictures, or these will be catalogued, the verbal part will inevitably be one of the accompanying elements.

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## Проблемы подписи художественного произведения

В статье рассматривается роль вербального в визуальном искусстве. Анализируются два типа вербальных сообщений: подпись под картиной (название) и надпись на картине как часть художественного произведения. Главная проблема состоит в том, *что* брать за основу при рассмотрении связи между словом и картиной — примарность вербального мышления, вербальные модели познания или “визуальное мышление” определенного типа. Отдельный вопрос — вербальный текст, сопровождающий картину. Можно его рассмотреть в более узком аспекте: подписи под картиной, имя автора и иная словесная или цифровая информация, которая обычно присовокупляется к картине в виде отдельной таблички на стене музея или выставочного зала; и физически существующие надписи на самой картине. Возможна и более широкая точка зрения, которая учитывает всякие

вербальные сообщения, связанные с контекстом данного произведения (критика, сопроводительная информация и т.п.).

Мы рассматриваем подписи под произведениями с точки зрения двух параметров — репрезентации и сигнификации. Формально можно соотношения между словом и картиной изображать и в виде графа.

### **Pildi allkirja küsimusi**

Artikkel käsitleb verbaalse osa visuaalses kunstis. Vaatluse all on kaht liiki verbaalsed sõnumid: maali allkiri, nimetus ja kiri kui osa kunstiteosest. Peamiseks probleemiks näib olevat see, mida võtta sõna ja pildi seose aluseks — kas verbaalse mõtlemise primaarsus, verbaalsed tunnetusmudelid või teatud liiki “visuaalne mõtlemine”. Omaette küsimuseks on pildiga kaasnev verbaalne tekst. Seda võib käsitleda kitsamalt — pildi allkirjad, autori nimi jm sõnaline või numbriline informatsioon, mis tavaliselt on teosele lisatud eraldi sildina muuseumi või näitusesemaal, ning pildi pinnal füüsiliselt eksisteerivad kirjad. Võimalik on aga ka avaram vaatepunkt, mis võtab arvesse igasugused antud teose kontekstiga seotud verbaalsed sõnumid, kriitika, kaastekstid jmt.

Antud käsitluses kirjeldatakse teose allkirju kahe parameetri — kujutamise ja tähistamise — kaudu, ning formaalselt võib sõna ja pildi suhteid kujutada ka graafina.