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A Cluster of Mirrors: Constructing Artemisia Gentileschi across the Media

ABSTRACT

With the objective of understanding the historical figure of Artemisia Gentileschi (1593–1653), this article analyses and compares the construction of some works by the artist and the character Artemisia in *The Passion of Artemisia* (2002) Susan Vreeland's novel. Inspired by the life and work of the Italian painter, the narrative uses pictorial markers to tell the story of the character.

Keywords: Artemisia Gentileschi, self-portrait, intermediality, pictorial marker

1. Introduction

Artemisia Gentileschi is an early 17th century historical figure. Born in Rome on July 8, 1593, she was the daughter of the famous painter Orazio Gentileschi. With the death of her mother, Prudenzia Montone, she grew up in the artistic milieu, attending her father's studio and having the opportunity to develop art knowledge and technique from a very young age.

Her presence in a space frequented only by men drew attention, and her tutor, who taught her perspective technique, rapes her. Her father denounces him and the abuser is brought to public trial. However, the complaint was questioned, and Gentileschi subjected to physical and psychological torture as a way to make her admit she was no longer a virgin at the time of the abuse, which would have been accepted as a justification for it then. Due to all these events, her father arranges for her to marry another artist of her acquaintance and she moves to Florence.

And so, the artist begins the most important phase of her career, in Florence, where Gentileschi had her talent recognized, being the first woman to enter the Academy of Fine Arts in Florence. "As far as we are aware, she was the first woman to have been accepted at the Academy of Fine Arts of Florence", historian Cristine Tedesco (2018b, p. 94) states.

As she had her work recognized in this way in her time, being the first woman in history to be accepted in a group of artists created and accessible exclusively for men, it is important to understand the technical characteristics that are repeated in

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different works of the painter, building a professional figure of the artist Artemisia Gentileschi. The novel *The Passion of Artemisia* (2002) creates the character Artemisia, narrating the elaboration of her canvases, her articulations in her social environment and especially the significant way in which she portrayed herself, in the work *Self-portrait as Allegory of Painting* (1638–1639), which according to Tedesco (2018a), is the artist's masterpiece, in which she demonstrates her technique and theoretical knowledge.

The construction of the character Artemisia in the novel *The Passion of Artemisia* (2002) is based on fragments of the life and work of Artemisia Gentileschi. The author Susan Vreeland creates the protagonist of the narrative: an artist who takes her profession as the most important aspect of her life and who moves in her social environment for the benefit of her work. Vreeland writes an “artist's narrative” about Gentileschi, a term proposed and adopted by Izabela do Lago (2017, p. 45)¹ to “designate the narratives that revolve around artists”.

In the elaboration of the narrative, the pictorial markers that, according to Liliane Louvel (2006), allow the perception of the image in the text, are part of the plot. Considering the nuances of pictorial markers, it can be said that on certain scenes, some of them occur in *The Passion of Artemisia* (2002).

Pictorial markers, for Louvel (2006), are references to the visual arts in a literary text, at different levels of perception, which Louvel calls nuances, which are divided into some levels, according to the effect on the reader's perception. The “frame effect” (p. 177), produces suggestions in painting even without direct reference to the work. The “picturesque view” (p. 180) reproduces a scene as if it were a painting. The next level of perception is the “living frame” (p. 182), which arranges the characters in a scene as if reproducing a painting or a historical scene. On the other hand, the “aesthetic arrangement” (p. 184), happens when a character acts or narrates with the intention of producing an artistic effect.

Among all the pictorial markers, the “pictorial description” (Louvel, 2006, p. 185) and the “ekphrasis” (p. 187), are the most noticeable in the novel *The Passion of Artemisia* (2002), they are the most saturated nuances of image in a text. While pictorial description has some operators such as framing, spelling, title, pictorial lexicon, etc. (Louvel, 2006). Ekphrasis has the “highest degree of pictorialization of the text” (p. 187), describes in detail the work indicating what it refers to and makes “the passage between the visible and the legible” (p. 187).

Therefore, during this work we will reflect on some of the pictorial descriptions that appear in the literary narrative, which now have citation value of the

¹ Lago (2017, pp. 45–46), bases the term “artist's narrative” in “accordance to Roland Barthes' understanding in *Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative* (1966)”, claiming that using “a broader term” is “more suited to contemporary literary productions” and also breaks with “the idea that these narratives constitute a subgenre of the novel”.

work in the text, thus connecting them to the original works that will be brought for comparison and reflection on the authors Artemisias, the real and fiction.

Starting with the title of the novel, Vreeland uses the pictorial marker of pictorial description, using the first name of the painter Artemisia Gentileschi, evoking to the reader all the references he may have of the name Artemisia, bringing interest in reading and preparing him to perceive the nuances that she will draw on to construct the character's journey.

As in the narrative sequence, the next chapters bring the artistic trajectory of the character Artemisia from the novel *The Passion of Artemisia* (2002), the way she perceived the history of the women she painted and how this reflected in her work, culminating in the chapter that deals with the way that she perceives her own story and portrays herself. Bringing comparisons with the life and work of the artist in which the character was inspired, Artemisia Gentileschi.

2. Constructions of myths

Biblical motives are a common feature in the Baroque period, to which Gentileschi belongs. Financed by the church and wealthy families of the time, artists presented biblical narratives through pictorial works in order to teach and reinforce Catholic morals to a predominantly illiterate society. Gentileschi followed this movement, in a dialogue with the artists of her time. There are, however, some differences, as she represents the myths from an idiosyncratic perspective.

The painter's best-known works are inspired by historical figures of women and their stories, such as Susanna, Judith, Magdalene and Cleopatra, to which she gave a unique interpretation and which are described in *The Passion of Artemisia*. In the novel, the paintings are represented through various literary devices and functions in the narrative, following Artemisia's professional and personal maturation and the development of the plot. Pictorial markers process the images of Artemisia Gentileschi's works and introduce them into the narrative as part of the protagonist's experience.

Artemisia, painter and character, privileged female protagonists in her representations. According to Miriam Vieira (2016), the myth of Judith (which narrates the story of a woman who, with divine help, beheads the general of an enemy army) is a symbol of the Jewish woman and is repeated in several of Gentileschi's paintings, always conveying the image of a strong woman, in contrast to other works with the same theme. Other artists represented her in the background and without emotion; Gentileschi gave her Judiths prominence on canvas and strength in both image and action.

In the novel *The Passion of Artemisia* (2002), the paintings on the theme of Judith are represented through different literary devices and have different functions in the narrative, following the character's maturation and the plot development. Vreeland achieves this by the use of pictorial markers, which textually process

the images of the artist's works and introduce them into the story as part of the character's experience.

Pictorial description, according to Louvel (2006), is the narrative text "that summons the image" (p. 181). Subsequently, the author refers to the "passage from one mediation to another" (p. 187), with textual criteria that will allow the transition from the textual to the pictorial, "observing the mixing effects between the two media, in order to be possible to say that we are in the presence of a description of a 'pictorial' characteristic" (p. 187). The pictorial description "resists linearity" by adding a space, that of the mental image, whose extension will have as limits only imagination, artistic culture and... the reader's capacity for memorization" (p. 200).

During the narrative, pictorial description is used to describe works by famous artists who inspire the character in her creations and to narrate the elaboration and painting of the canvases. Ekphrasis describes the work of art and "effects the passage between the visible and the legible" (Louvel, 2001, p. 183). The reader refers to the already known works and also adds details of the narrative, updating his artistic reference while advancing in the plot of the text.

From the reading of Vieira's thesis (2016), one can consider that the first pictorial marker in the novel takes place in a Judith painting, which represents the experience of Artemisia's torture, recent in the time of the narrative. From the works entitled *Judith de Gentileschi*, there are several pictorial descriptions that refer to the painter's original canvas. In her study process, Artemisia mentions and describes works by various artists, such as Michelangelo's *Moses*, located in St. Peter's Basilica, or Caravaggio's *Judith and Conversion of St. Paul* (Vreeland, 2002, pp. 26–27). The novel narrates her process of pain and creation along with the ekphrasis of Gentileschi's *Judith Decapitating Holofernes* (1613) (p. 27), and the reader constructs it along with the character, assimilating the parts known to him and adding details inscribed in the narrative:

The next morning, I started *Judith Slaying Holofernes*. I could barely bend my fingers to grasp the egg-shaped muller to pulverize the pigments on my marble slab. Pain is not important. I have to ignore it, I told myself. Only painting is important. Paint out the pain, Graziela had said. I couldn't keep my thumb in the hole of the palette so I put a stool on top of a chair to have the palette up high and close by. The smears of color made me breathe faster. Steeling myself against the pull of my skin when I held a brush, I swirled the shiny wetness of pure ultramarine onto my palette and added a touch of soot black to darken it for Judith's sleeves. Then, awkwardly, I took a stroke to rough it in, sketching with paint. My heart quaked. I felt alive again (Vreeland, 2002, p. 27).

On the other hand, the second painting based on Judith's story to appear in the novel reflects Artemisia's professional side, its ekphrasis being an account of the elaboration of a work intended to delight her client and the public (Vreeland, 2002,

p. 112). Finally, the third and fourth ones address her technique and maturity, referring to Michelangelo's *David* (p. 117) and her own experience (p. 242), respectively:

That violent act seemed retrograde. It held no interest for me now. I let my mind imagine as I sketched. This Judith ought to be a heavier, middle-aged woman, made wiser by experience - not a mere temptress and killer, but a more reasoning individual (p. 242).

Another female figure that Artemisia introduces in her work is Susanna, referring to a myth that begins with a woman during her bath being watched by old men, a theme of voluptuousness also often portrayed in the arts. The elaboration of Susanna's painting was not described in the novel because it belongs to a time outside that of the narrative. However, it gains importance in the plot as it is her first known work. In a dialogue with Artemisia, Sister Graziela gives an ekphrastic description of the painting and compares Artemisia to Susanna, talking about her talent and reflecting on her innocence:

Think of your *Susanna and the Elders*. When that painting becomes famous, the whole world will know your innocence. [...] That's the brilliance of your skill, to have a masterpiece reflect your own feelings and experience. [...] Never forget that the world needs to know what you have to show them (Vreeland, 2002, pp. 20-21)

Susanna and the Elders (1610) is important for Vreeland's novel and for the construction of Artemisia's character. It already reveals her peculiar way of creation, as it gives the female figure an expression of repulsion that was not attributed to her by other artists of the time. With your face and gestures that express your feelings, "Susanna is not representing a passive woman, [...] but a Susanna terrified of the men who observe her" (Loponte, 2002, as cited in Tedesco, 2018b, p. 46).

The Susanna painting also shows that since an early age the artist had knowledge of artistic references, as it reveals "nuances that dialogue with the artists of her time, at the same time that the painter's biblical figure can be considered innovative due to the attitude of repulsion it displays" (Tedesco, 2018b, p. 217). Mary Garrard, one of the leading specialists in Gentileschi's work, has noted that part of Susanna's figure might have been inspired by earlier works, such as the relief of a Roman sarcophagus which, in turn, was an inspiration for Michelangelo's painting of Adam in the Sistine Chapel. This demonstrates that her creation was based on studies since her youth; she developed into "a painter and student of the human figure, exalting her performance in the world of creation" (Tedesco, 2018b, p. 202).

The Passion of Artemisia mentions Michelangelo's *Adam and Eve Expelled from Paradise*. The character Artemisia interacts with the image of Eve, which causes emotion and identification in her: "Between Eve and me, I felt no gulf of centuries" (Vreeland, 2002, p. 64). As in Vreeland's novel, there is an interaction between time and space in Gentileschi's works. Characters in her paintings belong

to a time before that of the artist, yet they dress in the fashion of the painter's time, the 17th century. This results in an image that interacts with those who look at it from another time, which also resignifies it.

These temporal interactions can be considered superposition pictorial descriptions, evoking to the reader several references, such as the artist's canvas, the historical character portrayed, the expression of clothing, which, depending on the reader's cultural background, causes several reflections to take place on the meaning of the work in the narrative and also resignifies the original work, which receives more details from the reading.

Vreeland uses characteristics of Gentileschi's works to elaborate her own text. The novelist employs displacements in time and space and visualisations of the painter's works through pictorial descriptions for the construction of allegory, which confirms Vieira's (2012) idea of contemporary allegory². The author elaborates the term "contemporary allegory" considering the resignification of the Benjaminian allegory by Craig Owens (2004). Vieira (2012) proposes that "the allegorist takes possession of the images, interprets them culturally, adds new meanings in the form of a supplement, thus turning them into something else" (p. 124).

3. Constructions of Artemisias

From the very title of the novel, the pictorial marker *Artemisia* produces a citation effect, as it informs the reader that the text is related to the historical figure of Artemisia Gentileschi, who has remnants of her life and work as the basis for the construction of the narrative and of the protagonist Artemisia.

Amid the many female figures, religious symbols, queens and sinners which appear in Gentileschi's *oeuvre*, she herself appears in self-portraits. In some works, Gentileschi depicts herself as the allegorical figure of painting, as taken from Cesare Ripa's *Iconology* (1593).

From these self-reflections, her "masterpiece" (Tedesco, 2018, p. 71) emerges: the *Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting* (1638-39). According to Pedro Süssekind (2016), "a portrait is about the model, but it is also an expression of the artist's thinking, sensitivity and technical ability" (p. 138). Therefore, when it comes to self-portraits, these expressions are doubled, as the artist reveals both his reflection and his technical capacity.

It is believed that Gentileschi used mirrors to project her image during the production of *Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting*. "Mirrors", in the plural, as

² Vieira (2012), is based on the reading of the essay "The allegorical impulse: on a theory of postmodernism" (1980), in which "Craig Owens resignifies the Benjaminian allegory today" and "examines how allegory, present in the structure of contemporary works of art, offers a new meaning to the form of presentation by confiscating images and appropriating the allegorical imagery". She also considers that "For Owens, allegory re-emerges in contemporary art, since it is conceived both as 'an attitude and a technique, a perception and a procedure'" (p. 124).

the artist probably used a second mirror to capture her profile image while painting, thus “looking at the image of her image reflected in the mirror” (Tedesco, 2018b, p. 275). The allegory of painting was inspired by her studies of the standard emblematic manual of the period, Cesare Ripa’s *Iconology* (1593), in which the drawing is described in an ekphrasis:

with the ingenious innovation of giving himself the attributes of the personification of painting. Although the painter renounces the disturbing symbol of the bandage in the mouth, the chain with the mask she wears around her neck, the iridescent dress, the dishevelled hair, the brush and the palette lead unmistakably to Ripa’s voice (Maffei & Procaccioli, 2012, p. 152).

And the novel, citing Ripa’s *Iconology*, also describes the allegory of the Painting, “he showed me the allegorical figure of Painting- a beautiful woman with a brush in one hand, a palette in the other, and around her neck a gold chain with a medallion of a stage mask” (Vreeland, 2002, p. 314).

In regard to Gentileschi’s technique, recent radiographic studies of her self-portrait reveal a perfect elaboration of the image and movements of the brush, recognizing the playful use of light and shadow of the art of her time. The painting also presents movements that appear in other of her works, indicating study and elaboration of the image. This demonstrates that Gentileschi studied discussions on art from the Baroque period and was also concerned with demonstrating his professional side by portraying himself in the act of creation.

In this self-portrait, Gentileschi associates herself with the personification of painting, merging two traditions into a single image and creating a pioneering work of art. Introducing herself into a painting as an allegorical representation demonstrates that Gentileschi was aware of current discussions about art and was still concerned about demonstrating her professional side by portraying herself in the act of creation and with the technique of pictorial production. “In addition to inspiration, [...] we can say that the artist is constantly constructed from visual metaphor” (Garrard, 2001, as cited in Tedesco, 2018b, p. 265).

The elaboration of her masterpiece, *Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting*, appears as the symbol of her life and work in *The Passion of Artemisia*. In the last pages, the protagonist Artemisia finally reunites with her father. She shows him the brush she had been given by Buonarroti, great-nephew of Michelangelo, at the beginning of the narrative, a brush which was Michelangelo’s own work tool. Referring to the works of one of the greatest artists in history, Orazio exclaims that “with this [brush] he painted souls, Artemisia” (Vreeland, 2002, p. 310).

The narrative reaches its climax at the end, with the character’s personal and artistic maturity. On his deathbed, her father tells her: “Use his brush. Do a self-portrait. An Allegory of Painting. For all time” (Vreeland, 2002, p. 315). The father’s recommendation to use the brush that had been the work tool of

Michelangelo himself is like an indication for Artemisia to produce a masterpiece, as if the talent of its former owner would contribute to her painting. Sophie Bertho's (2015) description of the functions of art work references within narratives are relevant for the analysis of Vreeland's novel. Using Bertho's terms, one can say that *Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting* has an ontological function in *The Passion of Artemisia*. The final dialogue that describes the artist's self-portrait and introduces it into the novel, immobilises the image of the work, which passes from a narrative function and becomes a symbol of the meaning of the work itself, the climax of the story of the character Artemisia and the masterpiece of the painter Artemisia Gentileschi.

Gentileschi's *Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting* reflects "how she wanted to be seen" (Tedesco, 2018b, p. 276), representing herself as an allegory of painting with such a technique that she "converted her self-portrait and the figure of the allegory of painting into a unique and original image" (Tedesco, 2018b, p. 278). It is an image that symbolises many simultaneous perceptions of Artemisia.

Vreeland's novel uses pictorial markers to perform the multiplication of reflections, constructing the character in a way that, in the end, we understand the importance of her self-portrait that everything that had action and reflection on hers, her image as a result of all personal experience and professional. With the multiplication of mirrors, she began the multiplication of Artemisias.

4. Final considerations

In Gentileschi's works and how she created them, we reflect continuing her connection with so many historical women who made their trajectories and who were an inspiration for Gentileschi in her canvas. In the mirror effect the *Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting* creates, one can see many different Artemisias: painter, model and allegory for painting, the major symbol of her art in the iconology of her time, causing a superposition of references in the image.

The novel *The Passion of Artemisia* (2002) narrates the entire trajectory of the character Artemisia, inspired by the life and work of the painter Artemisia Gentileschi. In Susan Vreeland's narrative (2002), the elaboration of the self-portrait as an allegory of the painting becomes the symbol of the character's life and work, influencing the perception of the historical figure in which she was inspired. To fully understand it, it is necessary to capture in each pictorial nuance a reflection of the mirrors she uses to construct her final image. The entire trajectory of the novel happens so that the reader understands the climax-canvas in its entirety, *The Self-Portrait as Allegory of Painting*, symbolises all of Artemisia's work and the meaning of the entire novel, which makes her self-portrait an icon of all Artemisia's construct around his historical figure.

Louvel's (2006) concepts of pictorial markers are at the same time the basis for interpreting the phenomena of Gentileschi's work and Artemisia's journey through the novel *The Passion of Artemisia* (2002); as well as the connection between these two worlds, real and imaginary. For it is these data that help us to evoke the real to interpret fiction, and capture the invention to complete the image of the historical figure of Artemisia Gentileschi.

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