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Edited by Vítor Moura and Connell Vaughan



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From Concept to Image and Vice Versa: the Philosophical Frontispiece

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Università degli Studi Roma Tre

ABSTRACT. The presence of engraved illustrations and artistic frontispieces in philosophical books published between the 17th and 18th centuries pose a specific problem: the adherence of images to the concepts treated in the text. To this end, collaboration between philosophers and artists becomes essential in order to develop visual strategies that closely connect images and ideas. We can therefore consider two ways of approaching the issue. The first can be defined as ‘contextual’ since its purpose is the ‘staging’ of the narrative content of the work, like for example in dialogues. The second category, instead, attempts an iconic translation of the conceptual content: within such ‘conceptual’ frontispieces, allegories and symbols become elements of a code, taking on a sign value depending on their relationship to the other parts that build up a system of meanings. This is the path followed by philosophers such as Bacon, Hobbes and Shaftesbury. A particularly significant case is the engraving of the *New Science* by Vico (1730), which is intended to represent the dynamic nature of thought and social evolution.

The interest in symbols and emblems, typical of the early modern age, influenced the entirety of literary and philosophical production, increasing the presence of engraved illustrations in books. This paper is dedicated to the analysis of remarkable engravings printed in famous philosophical books published between the 17th and 18th centuries. What I intend to do is to reflect and maybe stimulate reflection on the relationship between image and concept and on the ability, or inability, of the image to represent abstract notions. I intend to do this using specific examples drawn from a disused publishing practice - the artistic frontispiece - but

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nevertheless rich in speculative and theoretical motifs.

For the field of naturalistic research, illustrations have become an integral part of knowledge as a didactic-explanatory support that can actively contribute to the exposition of new scientific theories. On the other hand, the presence and function of images within a philosophical book must be conceived on a different basis since it poses the problem of the adherence of images to the concepts treated in the text. In relation to this, scholars such as Panofsky have affirmed how Neo-Platonism, especially in its Renaissance developments, consolidated an interpretation in a participatory sense of the relationship between ideas and pictures, paving the way for a conception of art as a representation of philosophical knowledge (Panofsky, 1924). In this sense, the image finds its place within the philosophical book, becoming a moment in the manifestation of thought, if not, in the case of frontispieces, an iconic translation of a conceptual content (Simonutti, 2001).²⁶⁸

To this end, collaboration between philosophers and painters becomes essential in order to develop visual strategies that closely connect ‘philosophical ideas’ with ‘pictorial ideas’. We can thus distinguish two typical representational modes of philosophical frontispieces. The first can be defined as ‘contextual’ since its purpose is not the transposition of the philosophical concept but the ‘staging’ of the narrative content of the work. In this sense, it is particularly suitable for dialogical texts, as demonstrated by Stefano Della Bella’s well-known engraving for Galileo’s *Dialogue* (1632) or by Robert White’s engraving for the first English translation of the *Apology of Socrates and Phaedo* (1675).

²⁶⁸ The presence of artistic frontispieces is indeed widespread until the end of eighteenth century when philosophers started to comment only on pre-existing images and works of art to expound their theories rather than commission and elaborate original ones.



Figure 1. Plato (1675), *Apology of Socrates and Phaedo or Dialogue concerning the immortality of soul*,

London: J. Magnes and R. Bentley, frontispiece by Robert White.

To the same category, but in a different way (because here there is a certain use of allegory), belong those frontispieces that intend to quickly frame the polemical content of the treatise. For example, the scene of the frontispiece of Ralph Cudworth's *True Intellectual System of the Universe* (1678), drawn by Robert White, is divided into two sections in order to distinguish the philosopher's opponents from his allies: in the centre of the image is positioned an altar symbolising the object of contention (religion), on the left, are the theistic philosophers (Aristotle, Pythagoras and Socrates), surmounted by a laurel wreath, while opposite, on the other side of the altar, is an undone wreath, under which in a melancholic attitude are portrayed the 'atheists' (Strato, Epicurus and Anaximander). It is not difficult to imagine which party the author supports.



Figure 2. Cudworth, Ralph (1678), *The True Intellectual System of the Universe: the first part; wherein, All the*

Reason and Philosophy of Atheism is Confuted; and its Impossibility Demonstrated, London: Royston, frontispiece by Robert White.

The second category is more interesting to us because it is properly ‘conceptual’. The ‘pictorialisation of concepts’ takes place fundamentally through allegory, leading philosophers and illustrators to draw heavily on that articulate repertoire of figures codified in numerous collections, such as the famous *Iconology* (1593) by Cesare Ripa, reprinted over the centuries and illustrated countless times. As you can observe from this page of the 1764 edition, science is represented as a woman with winged temples holding a mirror, symbol of reflection, and a globe, symbol of non-contradiction, with a triangle on top, indicating demonstration.



Figure 3. Ripa, Cesare, *Iconologia* (2010), M. Gabriele e C. Galassi (eds.), Vol. 4, Lavis: La Finestra [anastatic printing from 1764-1767 edition], allegory of science by Carlo Grandi.

Concerning allegory, and especially in its baroque evolution and intricacy, Walter Benjamin’s analysis of allegory as a visual dissimulation of a conceptual content, signifying “the notness

of what it represents” is well known (Benjamin, 1974). However, it is not the individual allegories that need to be examined here, but rather the compositional aspect of the frontispiece: allegories and symbols are placed within it as elements of a code, taking on a sign value depending on their relationship to the other parts that build up a system of meanings. From this point of view, the visual image can aspire to communicate a complex content such as a philosophical work.

We can find a particularly creative use of the allegorical image in the frontispieces of works by Bacon, Hobbes and Shaftesbury. As for the former, the *Instauratio magna* and reprints published from 1626 onwards of the *Advancement and Proficiency of Learning* (1605) present the famous image of a ship crossing the Pillars of Hercules. In particular, the 1640 re-elaboration by William Marshall, has a more complex symbolism in which the two pyramid-shaped columns, the first illuminated by sunlight and the second placed under the moon shadow, represent the natural and philosophical sciences respectively. These are surmounted by the two globes, the *Mundus visibilis* and the *Mundus intellectualis*, from which two arms extend in a handshake, sealed by the inscription: *Ratione et experientia foederantur*. In this way, the Baconian image contributes to consolidate what will become some of the imageries of Baroque frontispieces: the use of classical architecture, the distinction of ‘worlds’ reinforced by the play of light and shadow.

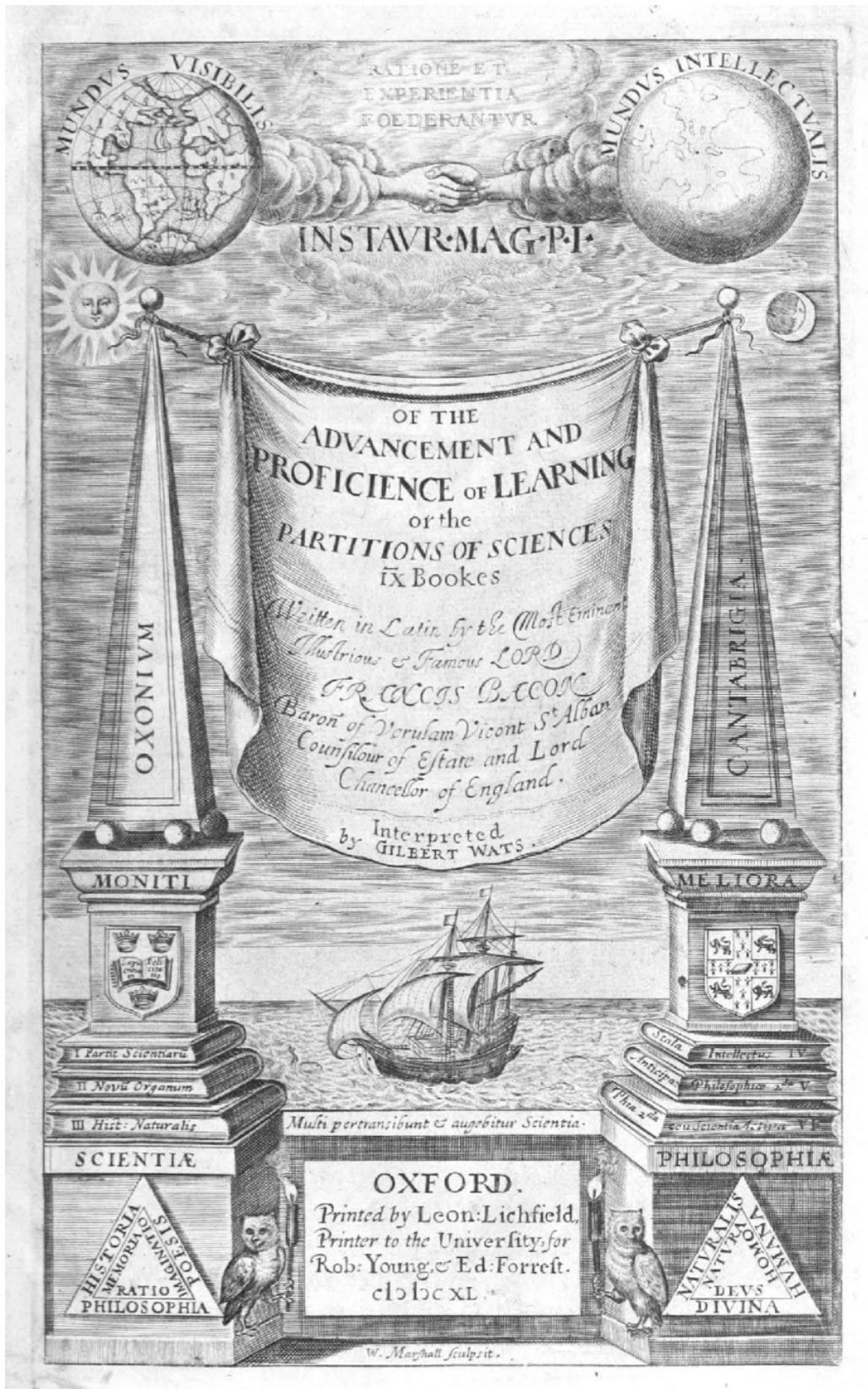


Figure 4. Bacon, Francis (1640), *Of the Proficiency and Advancement of Learning, Divine and Human*

[1605], Oxford: Young & Forrest, title page by William Marshall.

But the most famous philosophical icon of the seventeenth century is the engraving of *Leviathan* (1651) depicting the monstrous biblical creature that gives the book its title. Attributed to the French engraver, Abraham Bosse, the drawing presents the half-length image of what is defined by Hobbes himself as an “*automata*” or an “artificial man”: the great body of the state, made up of the assemblage of the bodies of its subjects, holding in its hands the symbols of political-military power (the sword) and spiritual authority (the pastoral staff). In his studies, art historian H. Bredekamp suggests to read the Hobbesian image of the social body in relation to a series of precise artistic references - such as, for example, the cosmic bodies of Renaissance iconography or Arcimboldo’s composite portraits - and philosophical ones, emphasizing the influence of the modern interest in the automaton and the body-machine (Bredekamp 1999). This famous image represents an important attempt to translate thought into a sophisticated visual solution with a bipartite structure, in which the higher part is dominated by a complex and original allegory while the lower part is characterised by a multiplication of symbols.

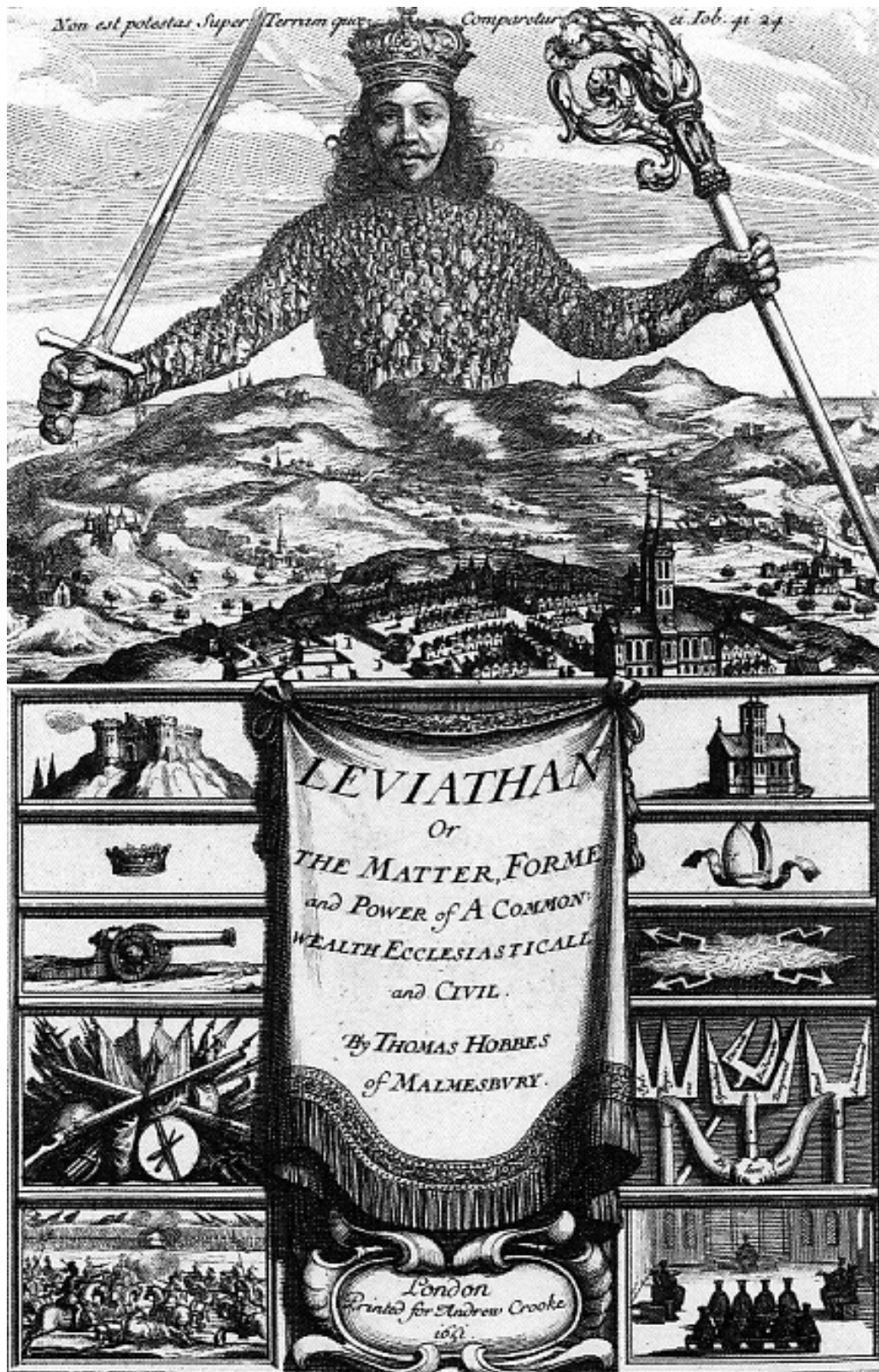


Figure 5. Hobbes, Thomas (1651), *Leviathan or The Matter, Forme and Power of a Commonwealth Ecclesiasticall and Civil*, London: A. Crooke, frontispiece by Abraham Bosse.

The case concerning Shaftesbury, however, is quite different. It is well known how the English philosopher, aware of the power with which images can express philosophical notions and arguments - not by replacing them, but by reinforcing their content and highlighting new meanings - commissioned rich allegorical engravings for each of the works contained in the three volumes of the second edition of *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (1714). What distinguishes Shaftesbury's use of visual allegory is the intention to go beyond Renaissance and Baroque emblem books, which merely codified pre-existing ideas. The elaboration of a profound weaving of figures capable of giving shape to new meanings, matures in the context of a thought in which aesthetic sentiment is analogous to ethical sentiment. A particular value is to be attributed to the *Letter concerning Design* in which are collected the instructions addressed to the painter who was commissioned to draw the frontispiece of the treatise *A Notion of the Historical Draught or Tablature of the Judgment of Hercules* (Paknadel, 1974). The complexity of the allegories therefore requires a paratextual circuit that links the text to the frontispieces, stimulating a comparative reading.

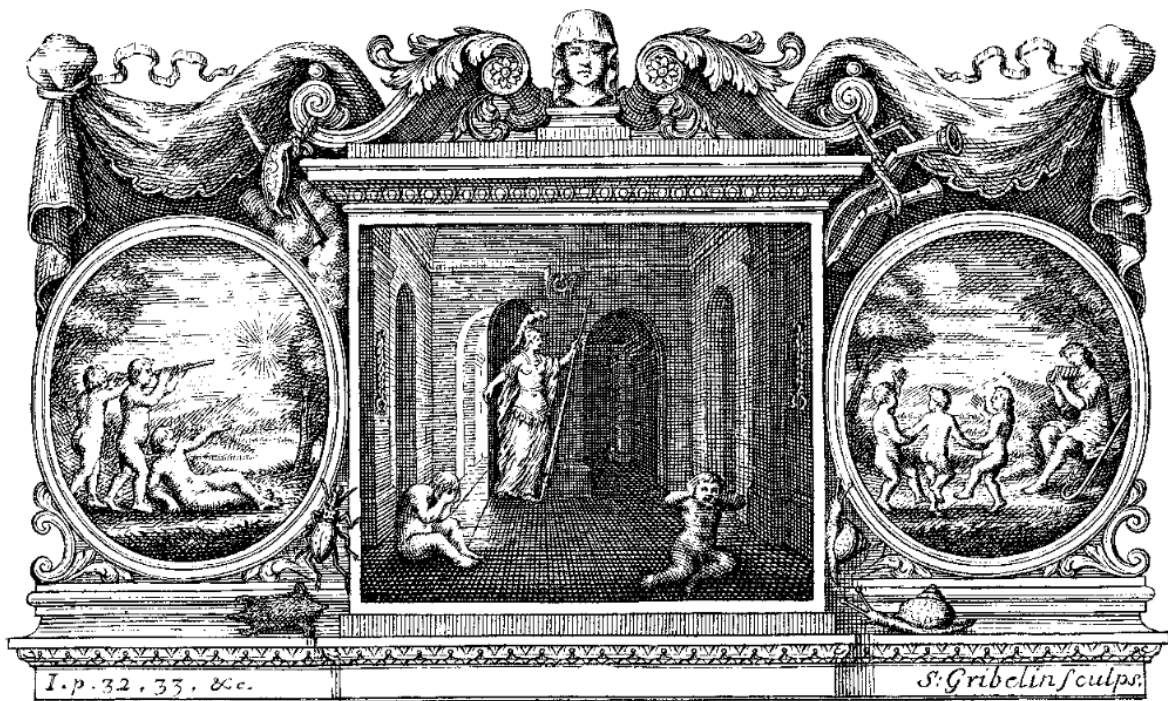


Figure 6. Lord Shaftesbury [Anthony Ashley Cooper, 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury] (1714), *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, Vol. 1, London: John Darby, illustration by Simon Gribelin accompanying *A Letter*

Concerning Enthusiasm.

A final image I would like to discuss is the *Dipintura*, the allegorical engraving that opens the second edition of Giambattista Vico's *Scienza nuova* commissioned to Domenico Antonio Vaccaro.



Figure 7. Vico, Giambattista (1744), *Principj di Scienza nuova d'intorno alla comune natura delle nazioni*,

Napoli: Muziana, frontispiece by Domenico Antonio Vaccaro.

As in Shaftesbury, we have here an attempt to visually summarise the content of the work through a complex allegory which is followed by an explanation. In fact, the *Spiegazione della Dipintura* (the explanation of the painting) constitutes the introduction of the *New Science*: it is a long and detailed *ekphrasis* - a verbal description of a visual element - in which every symbol assumes a precise meaning in relation to the concepts that Vico will elaborate in the text (Crasta, 2019). In Vico's words, the purpose of this introduction is to make the reader conceive *l'Idea dell'opera* (the idea of the work) before reading it and to summarise it with the help of imagination and memory after reading. It must be remembered in this regard that Vico is always attentive to etymologies and therefore the visual meaning of the term *idea* - from the theme of ἰδεῖν "to see" - must be considered.

Moreover, the *Dipintura* is connected with a minor image placed on the title page. In this illustration we can see the same allegory of the metaphysics - the women with the winged temples - present in the major one, but in a different position and in a more traditional iconic representation: it is no coincidence that this is the same allegory of science we found in Ripa's *Iconologia*. Indeed, as the inscription on the altar also indicates - *Ignota latebat* (she was hidden unknown) - the minor image shows metaphysics as polemically understood by Vico before his proposal of a new science: a purely speculative activity and thus the producer of mere abstractions (Verene, 1987).

PRINCIPJ
D I
SCIENZA NUOVA
D I
GIAMBATTISTA VICO
D'INTORNO ALLA COMUNE NATURA
DELLE NAZIONI

IN QUESTA TERZA IMPRESSIONE

Dal medesimo Autore in un gran numero di luoghi
Corretta, Schiarita, e notabilmente Accreosciuta.

T O M O I.



IN NAPOLI MDCCXLIV.
NELLA STAMPERIA MUZIANA
A spese di Gaetano, e Stefano Elia.
CON LICENZA DE' SUPERIORI.

Figure 8. Vico, Giambattista (1744), *Principj di Scienza nuova d'intorno alla comune natura delle*

nazioni, Napoli: Muziana, title page.

On the contrary the *Dipintura* shows metaphysics as the mediator of the divine and the civil world, and in this way as a moment of connection between the determinism of providence and human action. Vico and Vaccaro, construct the drawing dynamically: first of all, it is metaphysics that rises up outside itself, as Vico writes “in an act of ecstasy”, contemplating the triangle, god, no longer in a specular mediation, but through a frontal gaze. Her attribute is no longer the mirror but a convex jewel - placed on her breast - capable of projecting the ray of providence towards the temporal world of human institutions.

In this regard, some evident iconographic sources can be identified. Firstly, it is easy to see how the *Dipintura* takes up a figurative scheme typical of Baroque painting and remotely modelled from Raphael’s famous *Transfiguration*. Within this scheme, the upper part, depicting the empyrean sphere, presents more essential and clean forms, as well as a more diffuse luminosity, in contrast to a lower part, the human world, characterised by convulsive movements and dominated by irregular *chiaroscuro*. Within this figurative scheme, it is therefore the light element, radiating from top to bottom, that creates the dynamic tension between the two halves of the image. On this particular dialectic of light and darkness, the Neapolitan school of painting in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries concentrated its research, giving rise to a well-defined style whose traces can be seen in the *Dipintura*.

From the point of view of frontispieces, such a pictorial structure proves to be extremely adequate to express the metaphysical theme of light, as evident in the scientific and erudite Jesuitic literature, well known by Vico. An important example is the frontispiece of Athanasius Kircher’s, *Ars magna lucis et umbrae* (1646), a treatise on optical phenomena. These images are presented in their compositional form as variations on the theme of light, understood as a physical reality and, at the same time, as a condition of knowledge, transmitting from side to side through the play of reflections and refractions, highlighting the subjects that will be revealed by the unfolding of the text (Lomonaco, 2019).



Figure 9. Kircher, Athanasius (1646), *Ars Magna Lucis et Umbrae*, Roma: L. Grignani, frontispiece by Pierre Miotte.

In fact, the principal dynamic element in Vico and Vaccaro's *Dipintura* is the beam of light that connects the three planes of the image, the three worlds: the metaphysical world, the natural world (symbolized by the globe) and the civil world, all the symbols placed on the ground. We can in this respect distinguish three different movements: the vertical movement of the providential ray, the horizontal movement of the evolution of nations (each symbol represents a moment, a stage in civil progress) but also a third movement 'of depth', from the barbarism to the figures representing social institutions (Saint Girons, 2011). The barbarism is represented by the forest, the *selva*, the confused set of trees in the background, on the right of the image, behind the urn, under the globe. In fact, in his explanation, Vico often repeats that the figures come out from the background, they 'emerge' from a shapeless matter.

I will not focus on individual "hieroglyphs".²⁶⁹ I will simply point out that these are divided into groups. Around the altar are the oldest symbols, those connected with primordial religious rituals. Further on there are symbols related to the fundamental inventions of agriculture (the plough), writing (the alphabet table) and navigation (the rudder). In the foreground, instead, we have hieroglyphs representing the subsequent establishment of political, economic and military power. It is rather on another, more general aspect that I intend to dwell briefly upon and to conclude.

The main theme of the *Scienza nuova* is precisely the emergence of human society - cultural productions such as religion, law, science - through the construction of images; what Vico calls "poetic wisdom", represented in the *Dipintura* by the statue of Homer - the second anthropomorphic figure of the engraving - on which the light beam finally rests. The entire reasoning is in fact based on the assumption that the only sphere that man can really know is the "civil world" because he has made it: so, the principles of a new science of the civil world must be found in what Vico calls the "modifications of human mind". In fact, the origin of the institutions is identified with a creative act: by "poetical" he means the modes of expressions used by the earliest human beings who constructed the "civil world" through "mute acts", pictorial representations that portray ideas by establishing an analogy between images and concepts. It is in this way that Vico elaborates his genealogy of civilisation as an 'iconology'

²⁶⁹ This is the word used by Vico to define the set of symbols in the engraving.

of the human mind (Vitiello, 2002). In fact, the construction and understanding of the world takes place through “imaginative universals” - among which we can include “mute acts” - attempts to refer to whole classes of entities without the aid of proper general terms but through the use of particular images. This is the role of myths and fables, and also of the gods of the polytheistic system. In this sense, the *Dipintura*, synthesising the birth and the evolution of the civil world in a visual representation, can be considered a meta-image.

However, Vico does not invite his reader to identify with the archaic structure of mind, with “poetical wisdom”. The image here is no longer the unique and total expression of thought: but the combination of image and word becomes necessary. Rather, he seems to demonstrate how images in the modern era can still fulfil the task of expressing conceptual content, proposing a new alliance between imagination and reason. This consideration leads again to the problems stated at the beginning of this presentation on the ways of connecting pictorial and philosophical ideas. The solution that seems to be emerging here concerns the insertion of a dynamic element into the image capable of overcoming the static nature of allegory in function of a visual reading that follows the movement of thought. The meaning of the *Dipintura* is not in the individual allegories and symbols, but in their interconnection, in the movement contained in the image, in the play of contrasts and combinations: the understanding of this engraving responds to a constructivist logic according to which the reader-observer is led to retrace the process of composition of the drawing and thus the evolution of the civil world represented in the image.

The *Dipintura* seems to make explicit something common to each of the cases considered: the effort to translate thought into image is expressed in an articulated composition that attempts to free the image from its apparently ‘still’ nature. Understood in this way, the experimentation with images that we observed in these philosophical engravings can provide an additional tool for understanding the nature of the images and their relation with abstract thought in more general sense.

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