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Changing Stillness: Notes on Rhetoric and Ontology in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Still Life

Keywords
Still life, rhetoric, ontology, episteme, metaphor-metonymy, allegory, naturalism

Abstract
This essay examines the distinctive knot of ontology and rhetoric woven by sixteenth- and seventeenth-century still life. Framed against a Foucauldian analysis of the *Âge classique* and its epistemic order, it seeks to illuminate the subtle shifts this minor genre introduced into the culture from which it emerged. The central argument is that, through its pictorial features—meticulous naturalism, the absence of a thematic centre, and indifference to the *historia*—still life made visible the onto-linguistic fabric that structured the classification of beings in its time. Moreover, these very features endowed the genre with a peculiar capacity to shift both the place and the "essence" of the things depicted. In doing so, still life stages a singular form of change that unfolds within the immobility of its representation.

Spreminjajoča se nepremičnost: zapiski o retoriki in ontologiji tihožitij šestnajstega in sedemnajstega stoletja

Ključne besede
tihožitje, retorika, ontologija, episteme, metafora-metonimija, alegorija, naturalizem

Povzetek
Prispevek preučuje značilen preplet ontologije in retorike, ki ga ustvarjajo tihožitja iz 16. in 17. stoletja. Na podlagi Foucaultove analize *Âge classique* in njegovega epistemološkega reda skuša osvetliti subtilne spremembe, ki jih je ta obrobni žanr uvedel v kulturo, iz katere je izšel. Osrednja teza je, da je tihožitje s svojimi likovnimi značilnostmi – natančnim naturalizmom, odsotnostjo tematskega središča in brezbrižnostjo do

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historije – vizualiziralo ontološko-jezikovno strukturo, ki je v tistem času strukturirala klasifikacijo bivajočega. Poleg tega so prav te značilnosti žanru podelile posebno sposobnost, da je premestil tako mesto kot »bistvo« upodobljenih stvari. S tem je tihožitje uprizorilo edinstveno obliko spremembe, ki se odvija znotraj nepremičnosti njegove upodobitve.

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The Boijmans Museum in Rotterdam houses a painting by Balthasar van der Ast dating from the first half of the seventeenth century (fig. 1). It consists primarily of a meticulous depiction of shells from across the globe (Indonesia, Cuba, Florida, and West and South Africa), interspersed with rare instances of fruit, insects, and small animals, and is known as *Still Life with Shells*. There is thus a predominance of objects linked to water, yet with forms that evoke earth and air. On the one hand, this still life belongs to the widespread tradition of cabinets and paintings that, through their collections of marvels, celebrated Dutch maritime commercial power.[1] On the other, it testifies to the taste for naturalistic description that was prevalent at the time, especially in Northern Europe.[2] Finally, insofar as it brings together mainly marine elements, it may also be read as an image of the Sea—or of Water—through the representation of the creatures inhabiting it, a common metonymic device used to allegorize the four elements. All these items are arranged on a table covered with a white cloth, a sign of the will to display and deliberately order the objects portrayed—that is, a sign of human agency. Everything here points toward a paradigmatic example of still life: an almost perfect stillness, interrupted only by scattered "symptoms" of life—a butterfly, a fly,[3] a coiled lizard; a human presence that is implied but never seen; a set of animate and inanimate objects, each clearly defined in its individual

1 On this, see Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting* (London: Reaktion Books, 2018), 104–10.

2 On this, see Ingvar Bergström, *Dutch Still-Life Painting in the Seventeenth Century*, trans. Christina Hedstrom and Gerald Taylor (London: Faber and Faber, 1956), 30, 40–52; Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

3 On the history of the motif of the fly, see in particular Daniel Arasse, *Le detail: Pour une histoire rapprochée de la peinture* (Paris: Flammarion, 1996), 151–64.

Fig. 1: Balthasar van der Ast, *Still Life with Shells*, ca. 1640, Rotterdam, Collection Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen.

character, gathered together in a partition of realms, genera, and species, whose ordering enables a metaphorical transposition of the work of art.

Things, however, are less straightforward than they might appear from this brief description. In fact, what to an attentive eye is clearly a lizard may, to a distracted gaze, resemble a mollusc emerging from its shell; likewise, the siphon of the murex, set against the pale background, might look like a branch to an unfocused viewer; and the leaves of the cherry branch in the left corner of the painting may appear, to an inattentive observer, to be a cluster of wings. Why do these errors of the eye occur? Their cause lies in the peculiar juxtaposition of the objects displayed: the lizard rests upon a shell; the siphon intersects with the cherry branch, whose leaves in turn rise against the background beside a butterfly. Each of these elements, taken in isolation, is rendered with perfect definition, entirely recognizable in its distinctive features. This, indeed, is one of the hallmarks of still-life painting: the clarity of representation, the realism, the naturalism of detail. The source of the perceptual fault lies in the combination of these sharply determined objects: without in any way losing their individuality,

they become—by virtue of their arrangement—something else in a moment of inattention; a transformation that, if only for an instant, calls into question the very classification of beings.

This essay takes its cue from the discovery of this strange metamorphic power of still life—the strangeness lying in the fact that the transformation can occur only by virtue of the stillness that defines the representation. Indeed, a peculiar, paradoxical movement takes place within the suspended state that inhabits these paintings: a movement without animation, without life; or rather, a movement unfolding in an undecidable space between absence, decay, and the mineralization of life. This implies that such metamorphoses will have little to do with nature understood as a creative force[4]; rather, they unfold on a different plane—one that intertwines the problem of the distribution of beings into realms, genera, and species; the rhetoric of representation (the dialectic between metonymy and metaphor); the peculiar naturalism of detail; and the oscillation between attention and distraction.

One might legitimately ask what is to be gained from this discovery. At its core, I believe, lies a possible reconfiguration of the idea of freedom: one that neither reverts to anthropocentrism, nor attributes to a vitalistic matter or nature the possibility of change,[5] nor leaves the problem of being to objects *in themselves*.[6] Rather, it tries to confront the fixity of ontology from the demure angle of a marginal genre, in which natural and artificial things, and all manner of "*cose piccole*"[7]

4 In this sense, the terms used by Romance languages to designate still life (French *nature morte*, Italian *natura morta*) acquire a meaning that goes beyond the academic denigration of a minor genre. On the question of the genre's name, see Charles Sterling, *La nature morte de l'antiquité à nos jours* (Paris: P. Tisné, 1952), 41–42; Victor I. Stoichita, *The Self-Aware Image: An Insight into Early Modern Meta-Painting*, trans. Anne-Marie Glasheen (Turnhout: Brepols, 2015), 53–54; Laurence Bertrand Dorléac, *Pour en finir avec la nature morte* (Paris: Gallimard, 2020).

5 This tendency is characteristic of new materialism. On this, see Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, eds., *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

6 This is the case of Object-Oriented Ontology, which rejects anthropocentrism and privileges the autonomy of objects. Here I limit myself to referring to Graham Harman, *The Quadruple Object* (London: Zero Books, 2011).

7 Giorgio Vasari, *Le Vite de' più eccellenti architetti, pittori, et scultori italiani, da Cimabue, insino a' tempi nostri*, vol. 1 (Turin: Einaudi, 2015), 53.

exist on the same plane. Here, by virtue of their combination and of the fluctuation of the eye's attention, all these things may become something else without ever blurring their contours—without undermining the clarity of painting.[8]

In this sense, still life articulates a paradigm positioned halfway—theoretically and chronologically[9]—between two extremes: Boyle's laboratory, analysed by Bruno Latour as the original site where nonhuman objects and a proliferation of details exchange the medieval ontological hierarchy for the "variable ontologies" of modernity,[10] and Winckelmann's Belvedere Torso, examined by Jacques Rancière as the object marking the emergence of the modern aesthetic regime, defined by the dialectic between suspension (of acts, passions, expression) and freedom.[11] At the same time, the peripheral position these canvases occupy within art history situates them in a marginal space in relation to the truth of the laboratory and the aesthetics of the masterpiece. It is by virtue of the smallness of their subjects, of their very triviality, that perceptual mistakes can occur without giving rise to falsity; likewise, the exchange of objects can take place precisely due to the absence of an ideal beauty that would otherwise fix forms. This tininess, this "insignificance," places still life at the margins of modern revolutions and their most enduring achievements: the clarification of the confusion between qualities and quantities; the acquisition of the subject's perspective; the ordering of beings into classes (to confine ourselves to the cases most relevant to this inquiry). Moreover, insofar as the unimportance of still lifes keeps them on the sidelines of the great pronouncements of their age, it also enables them to register the uncertainties of that body of knowledge: the lingering residues of Renaissance correspondences between signs and nature; the approximate

8 The theoretical appreciation of still life has undergone increased fortune in the past decades. Besides the ones that have already been mentioned and that are central to this argument (Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*; Stoichita, *Self-Aware Image*), see also Hanneke Grootenboer, *The Rhetoric of Perspective: Realism and Illusionism in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Still-Life Painting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Dorléac, *Pour en finir avec la nature morte*; Gérard Wajcman, *Ni nature ni morte: Les vies de la nature morte* (Caen: Nous, 2022).

9 The rise of still life as an autonomous genre and its golden age span across the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. On this, see Sterling, *La nature morte*, 43–79.

10 Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 85.

11 Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2011), 64–65, 120–22.

character of the first modern classifications—in the withdrawal of a higher plane of being that once guaranteed the legitimacy and stability of the order, and in the absence of unifying scientific principles still to be defined.[12] At the same time, the inconsequentiality of these canvases keeps them removed from the effects of the "discovery" of the aesthetic in the folds of classical artworks and masterpieces at the end of the eighteenth century. Their minor character preserves them from the problem of beauty; therefore, the freedom they exhibit must be sought along a path different from the one that intersects with the "beautiful" forms of the ideal.

It is this very marginality that entails the artistic and theoretical "weakness" of still life, a weakness that, in turn, defines both its peculiar atemporal character and its specific metamorphic power—as well as its enduring actuality. In order to grasp the productive mechanism of this uncertainty—its implications for language, ontology, and the subject—it is necessary to study still life at the moment of its emergence and peak, which, tellingly, coincides with what Foucault termed the *Âge classique*. In this sense, the present inquiry unfolds as an archaeological analysis of a different possibility of freedom: a freedom grounded in the "tumult" and the "uprising [. . .] of details [that] displace the 'political totality' of the painting' so that the 'small' do not depend on the 'large,' ultimately ending up prevailing on them."[13]

The Uncanny of Arcimboldo's *Heads*

The peculiar knot of rhetoric, image, and ontology that characterizes still life finds a first configuration before the full rise of the genre, on the threshold between the Renaissance sign-nature nexus and its dissolution.[14] Standing on this threshold is the work of Giuseppe Arcimboldo[15]—active at the court of Maximillian II and Rudolf II in the late sixteenth century—with his unusual portraits: the series of *Reversed Heads* (*The Cook*, 1570; *The Vegetable Gardener*, 1590) which, depending on the viewer's perspective, may appear to be human heads, a plate

12 On this, see Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Routledge, 2005), 79–84, 136–77.

13 Arasse, *Le detail*, 309.

14 On this, see Foucault, *Order of Things*, 28–32.

15 On Arcimboldo and the origin of still life, see Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, *Arcimboldo: Visual Jokes, Natural History, and Still-Life Painting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 167–211.

Fig. 2: Giuseppe Arcimboldo, *The Earth*, 1566, Private collection, Austria.

of meat, or a basket of vegetables; and the series of *Composed Heads*, depicting either natural "characters" (*Elements*, *Seasons*)[16] or human types (*The Librarian*, 1566; *The Jurist*, 1566), each assembled from items intrinsically related to the subject—fish, crustaceans, and pearls for *Water*, flowers for *Spring*, land animals for *Earth* (fig. 2), and so forth.

In many respects, it is safe to say that these works belong to the late Renaissance milieu in which they were conceived and produced, insofar as they give visual form to the idea—common in sixteenth century—of a correlation among all elements across every level of being: whether great or small, insignificant or grand, material or spiritual, all things mirror one another, establishing a perfect correspondence between microcosm and macrocosm.[17] It is the theory of *signatura*, which Foucault examines at length in *The Order of Things*, grounded in the predominance of the tropes of similarity, "*convenientia*, *aemulatio*, analogy, and sympathy [which] tell us how the world must fold in upon itself, duplicate itself, reflect itself, or form a chain with itself so that things can resemble one

16 On the problems of dating Arcimboldo's *Elements*, see DaCosta Kaufmann, 54.

17 DaCosta Kaufmann, 117–22.

another."[18] Within this framework, signatures are the signs that render this network of resemblances and correspondences visible: if "resemblance was the invisible form of that which, from the depths of the world, made things visible," then "a visible figure [must] draw it out from its profound invisibility."[19] As such, signature reveals the "shadow and image of God" of which the things of nature bear traces.[20] Thus, both similarity and signature rest upon a concept of nature that coincides with the diffuse, veiled presence of God and, from there, with the idea of a "readability of the world": "The face of the world is covered with blazons, with characters, with ciphers and obscure words [. . .] And the space inhabited by immediate resemblances becomes like a vast open book."[21]

Arcimboldo's *Heads* fit seamlessly within this framework: they render visible the correlation between the fragments of the world and its most magniloquent forces through signs that are as visual as they are linguistic—or, to stay with Foucault's formulation, signs that occupy that space "filled with the murmur of words,"[22] situated between things and images. The *stoicheia* (air, fire, water, earth) indeed find their correspondences in the smallest beings of which they are composed; at the same time, these beings occupy specific positions within the personified profiles of the elements, thereby combining two pervasive motifs of the time: the human body as a *locus* of correlations,[23] and a reimagining of the bestiary tradition, shaped by a taste for wordplay. For instance, Gregorio Comanini—a contemporary Italian poet and polygraph—explains that the choice of a mouse for the eye in the portrait of *Earth* draws on Pliny's account, itself taken from Theophrastus, according to which mice were capable of gnawing through iron, just as "the light of the eye [. . .] gnaws at and tames the hardest minds with amorous passions."[24] In the case of the *Reversed Heads*, by contrast, painting plays with and subverts the figure of the palindrome: while the sense

18 Foucault, *Order of Things*, 29.

19 Foucault, 30.

20 Foucault, 30, quoting Crollius, *Traité des signatures*, 1633.

21 Foucault, 30.

22 Foucault, 30.

23 Foucault, 147.

24 Gregorio Comanini, *The Figino, or On the Purpose of Painting: Art Theory in the Late Renaissance*, ed. Ann Doyle-Anderson and Giancarlo Maiorino (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 26.

is preserved in the inversion, its meaning shifts: in one direction, it is a plate of meat; in the other, a cook. One way, a gardener; the other, vegetables.

But despite their full integration within the culture of their time, these paintings also register a transformation taking place within that very culture—one that, on the one hand, anticipates later developments, and on the other, preserves them in their strangeness and radical alterity. This shift concerns both the conception of nature and the status of language. On the side of language, it is as if, at times, words take over: puns, allegory, metaphor, metonymy, prosopopoeia—all of these figures coexist simultaneously within the same canvas. The example of the palindrome is particularly telling: as Roland Barthes writes in his essay on Arcimboldo, "'Everything is always the same,' says the true palindrome; whether you take things in one direction or the other, the truth remains. 'Everything can assume an opposite meaning,' says Arcimboldo's palindrome; i.e., everything always has meaning, whichever way you read, but this meaning is never the same."[25] In this sense, Arcimboldo's "canvas becomes," as Barthes puts it, "a real laboratory of tropes,"[26] in that it records a superfetation of meanings.

As for the things that compose the *Heads*, they are extracted from familiar contexts and recombined to serve this excess of meaning, resulting in a series of uncanny, oneiric formations of sorts.[27] The dreamlike (or nightmarish)[28] character of these paintings was already observed by Comanini, who in 1591 writes a dialogue entitled *The Figino, or On the Purpose of Painting*, in which he discusses Arcimboldo's work at length. The dialogue takes part in the late sixteenth-century debate on the purpose and essence of art, framing this discussion within the broader ontological and aesthetic distinction between *icastic* and *fantastic* images[29]: the former are produced as imitation of the "things that are"—as the result of a *mimetic* reproduction—while the latter give rise to "things that do not exist"—as effects of a *poietic* representation.[30]

25 Roland Barthes, "Arcimboldo, or Magician and Rhétoriqueur," in *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art, and Representation*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 141.

26 Barthes, 136.

27 On this process of defamiliarization in Arcimboldo's paintings, see Barthes, 133–34.

28 Barthes, 145–47. See also Comanini, *Figino*, 19–25, on *Vertumnus*.

29 On this, see Doyle-Anderson and Maiorino, "Introduction," in Comanini, *Figino*, ix–xviii.

30 Comanini, 17.

Comanini refers to Arcimboldo's *Heads* as the finest illustrations of "fantastic imitation," grounded in their peculiar combinatory logic. Arcimboldo's "extraordinary imagination" depends not so much on his ability to invent something entirely from nothing, but rather on his capacity to produce images of non-existent things by bringing together and arranging in an original manner various existing objects: "He unites the images of visible things and transforms them into strange inventions and images never before created by the power of fantasy. He makes anything he wants to make by skilfully joining things that seem impossible to link."[31] Arcimboldo is thus the master of fantastic imitation because of his ability to assemble heterogeneous elements—objects that would not ordinarily coexist within the order of *mimesis*—into new chains of meaning and form. In this respect, his creative power is not compared to that of other artists, but rather to that of dreams.[32]

It is, however, from within the very discourse on icastic and fantastic imitation that Arcimboldo's works manifest an oddness which places them in an ambiguous position with respect to Renaissance culture more broadly, and to the artistic debate in particular. While it is true that, due to their original combinatory technique—rooted in the excess of rhetorical figures—they perfectly exemplify the "*imitatione fantastica*," it is equally true that they also make use of the sharpest tools of the "*imitatione icastica*." The "new monster[s]"[33] they portray emerge through the uncanny precision and detailed rendering of the things that compose them. Arcimboldo's *Heads*, as monstrous images, thus result from the assemblage of signifying, self-contained, and sharply defined elements—objects that exist and carry meaning independently of the composition to which they belong. Each piece of his portraits is an existing, identified, and identifiable object: a shell, a fish, a wolf, an ear of wheat, a candle. What is more, these objects are reproduced in an overtly *mimetic* manner, rendered so precisely as to be immediately recognisable in their autonomous shape, function, and meaning. They enter the composition as fully formed and signifying elements that can interact—by virtue of their shape and meaning—with the shape and meaning of the other elements of the composition. Thus, the strangeness of Arcimboldo's work—its eccentricity with respect to the artistic theories of his time, as well as its peculiar

31 Comanini, 28.
32 Comanini, 28.
33 Comanini, 19.

oneiric logic, so different from the "dreams of painting" seen in grotesques[34]—lies precisely in its capacity to blend icastic and fantastic imitation, *mimesis* and *poiesis*, that is, a poietic ability to rhetorically combine disparate elements, and a mimetic, *naturalistic* rendering of each one of them.[35] As Daniel Arasse notes, the law governing the "constitution of the figure" in Arcimboldo's work makes those figures, on the one hand, "perfect examples of 'fantastic imitation' that 'imitates what does not exist'"; and yet, on the other, this fantastic imitation is itself grounded in the most minute details of the figures, "in the meticulous, exact, icastic imitation, an imitation 'in the image of' what exists."[36] In this way, these portraits display a peculiar kind of exchange between fantastic and icastic, one that can be translated in terms of a dialectic between naturalism and imaginary.

This leads from the matter of language (a visual language, that is—but a language nonetheless)[37] to the shift these works exhibit in the idea of nature. The indecision between rhetoric and naturalism seems to encompass many aspects of the late Renaissance relation to nature: a peculiar combination of natural and moral characters marks the two far ends between which similarity and its figures produce knowledge. Over all of this, the presence of Pliny and his *Historia naturalis* looms large—a sort of encyclopaedia of antiquity, mixing together natural history and morality.[38] At the same time, however, as Comanini reports, "Arcimboldo has taken every head from life, since the emperor was accommodating enough to let him see all these animals."[39] Their strikingly realistic representation does indeed seem to imply a form of natural observation—if not from life, then at least from the naturalistic studies of the time, with which Arcimboldo had more than likely come into contact.[40] Furthermore, a collection of drawings (the so-called *Vienna Album*) attests to Arcimboldo's deep commitment

34 On this, see André Chastel, *La grottesque* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), 12–18, 47–52; Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, "The Allegories and Their Meaning," in *The Arcimboldo Effect: Transformations of the Face from the Sixteenth to the Twentieth Century*, ed. Pontus Hultén (New York: Abbeville Press, 1987), 89–108.

35 On this, see DaCosta Kaufmann, *Arcimboldo*, 193–94.

36 Arasse, *Le detail*, 469.

37 Barthes, "Arcimboldo," 134–35, 143–44.

38 On this, see Sarah Blake McHam, *Pliny and the Artistic Culture of the Italian Renaissance: The Legacy of the Natural History* (New Haven: Yale University Press 2013). For Comanini's use of Pliny in his analysis of Arcimboldo's *Earth*, see *Figino*, 26.

39 Comanini, *Figino*, 26.

40 DaCosta Kaufmann, *Arcimboldo*, 162, 154.

to reproducing animals and plants as accurately as possible.[41] It is among the tightly woven mesh of this realism that something different begins to emerge in the representation of nature—something that touches directly upon the rhetorical form of the paintings.

There are numerous sources that can be—and have been—identified for Arcimboldo's compositions. Alongside Renaissance grotesques and the monstrous figures decorating medieval and early modern manuscripts, his *Heads* are undeniably indebted to the tradition of the bestiaries. These were organized as collections of animals whose traits were considered relevant in relation to human morality.[42] During the Renaissance, these collections gave way to the systems of correspondences that, as seen above, structured the world through similitudes and analogies.[43] Arcimboldo's assemblages, however, distance themselves from both traditions: the natural, animate, and inanimate objects brought together belong to the same class; their realism places them within the same frame—both metaphorically and literally.

This means that, alongside the rhetorical motives guiding the composition, a new rule of taxonomy begins to emerge among the tropes. Furthermore, it reconfigures those tropes into a structure that is part and parcel of the classificatory turn of the *Âge classique*[44]: a network of similarities (as in the theory of signatures), to which differences are now added in order to reorganize knowledge. If, on the one hand, the traits of the animals depicted in the allegory of Earth are essentially moral, their naturalistic representation nonetheless displays a series of resemblances and divergences that brings the question of naturalism into the domain of rhetoric. In turn, while—as Barthes argues—reading Arcimboldo's paintings requires both metaphorical and metonymical awareness,[45] both tropes are inscribed within a structure that establishes which things belong together and in what way they differ: fish for water, birds for air, and so on.

41 DaCosta Kaufmann, 138, 153.

42 On bestiaries, I limit myself to referencing Debra Hassig, *Medieval Bestiaries: Text, Image, Ideology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

43 Foucault, *Order of Things*, 19–50.

44 Foucault, 144–50.

45 Barthes, "Arcimboldo," 143–44.

All this seems to suggest a kind of anticipatory quality in Arcimboldo's art with regard to later developments in the theory of language and the study of nature. This quality, however, is not interesting in itself, but rather due to the peculiar emancipatory power it entails for those very classifications of nature—and their ontological implications—that it anticipates: a power that rests upon the dialectic between the *icastic* forms drawn by natural classification and the *fantastic* effects of their rhetorical compositions. We have already seen how the late sixteenth century was marked by a coincidence of God, world, and nature. The *Heads* remain part of this *episteme*, insofar as they do not call into question the epistemic value of similitude and the network of correspondences it sustains—from the most trivial elements up to the emblems of Empire.[46] However, the *irresolution* in which they operate—a language *almost* freed from its ties to nature, a nature *almost* already structured in classes—produces a paradoxical effect: this irresolution lends the transformative power of language (a mouse for an eye, an oyster for an ear, a face made of birds) to the emerging science of natural classification. This classification, in turn, confers upon language the ontological implications of which it still bears traces—an ontology no longer constrained by the hierarchical order of things that the new epistemic paradigm was beginning to discard, yet still an ontology nonetheless. It is by virtue of this peculiar knot of nature, language, and being that Arcimboldo's *Heads* display an original form of freedom. As Barthes states, Arcimboldo's "painting is *mobile*,"[47] insofar as all elements, by virtue of their clarity, can be reassembled over and over again, without any loss of meaning: "What has been combined forms aggregates which can combine again among themselves a second, a third time. I imagine that an ingenious artist could take all of Arcimboldo's composite heads, combine them with a view to a new effect of meaning, and from their arrangement produce, for instance, a landscape, a city, a forest."[48]

The realism and precision of the representation guarantee the conservation of meaning within a constant shift of sense. What is more, this mobility does not concern language and art alone: it extends to natural classifications and the order of animate and inanimate beings. It is through the interplay of mimesis—the naturalism of detail—and rhetorical figures that "an authentic catastrophe

46 As in the case of the portrait of Rudolf II as Vertumnus.

47 Barthes, 142.

48 Barthes, 141–42.

of appearances" occurs: a stumbling in meaning from which there emerges "a figure able to elaborate and transmit its own sense."[49] Or rather, it is a figure changing along with the never-ending shifts of sense, shifts which both presuppose and produce a transformation in the order of beings—without either the figure or the sense being lost.

The Stillness of Still Life

Arcimboldo's work, despite its widespread imitations, remains an isolated case[50]—both due to its liminal position between two epistemes, and because of the quaintness of his combinatory art, its mixture of naturalism and imaginary. Thus, the peculiar emancipation (of language from its verbal limits, of nature and ontology from the hierarchical order, before the fixity of classifications is asserted) that his paintings display would seem too specific and irregular to serve an archaeology of the freedom we are looking for—let alone a theory thereof.

However, if one follows the trail of the concurrence of realism and rhetorical tropes within art history, one is led down a path to an ideal lineage of this peculiar ontological and rhetorical dialectic, one that leads from Arcimboldo to still-life painting—where the term "ideal" must be understood here simply in opposition to a historical reconstruction of the genre. This does not mean that his *Heads* must be excluded as possible historical sources of still life[51]; but if one is to embark on a historical reconstruction, one would have to go back to ancient illusionism and the tradition of *xenia*,[52] then pass through the *parerga* of medieval and Renaissance art—the vegetal, animal, and monstrous decorations of manuscripts, the discovery of the grotesque, and so on.[53] Along this line, a range of interpretations unfold, depending on whether the focus is placed on symbolism, socio-economic aspects, or artistic techniques. Here instead—and this bears repeating—the interest in still lifes depends on the side position they occupy, and the role they play form such a position, within the *épistémè classique*. It is in this sense that they share an ability to question the *order of things*,

49 Barthes, 466.

50 On Arcimboldo's fortune, see *Arcimboldo Effect*, 207–363.

51 On this, see DaCosta Kaufmann, *Arcimboldo*, 167–211.

52 Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*, 17–69.

53 On the birth of still life as the effect of the autonomization of the study of detail, see Arasse, *Le detail*, 174–79; Stoichita, *Self-Aware Image*, 53–65.

which goes hand in hand with their marginality—similar to that of Arcimboldo's works—thus placing them side by side on an ideal continuum. Yet an important difference separates still life from the *Heads*: its codification as a proper genre; the subalternity of that genre; its diffusion; and the absence of clear allegory—that is, in most cases,[54] a "withdrawal" of its rhetoric, as opposed to the tropological discernibility of the *Reversed* and *Composed* portraits—render its challenge to the natural and ontological order less visible, and therefore, as will be seen, all the more pervasive.

The connection between still-life painting and the forms of knowledge developed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—particularly with the emerging organization of natural studies—has been well documented. As Norman Bryson notes in his analysis of Ambrosius Boschaert's *Bouquet in a Niche* (1618) and its "naturalistic eye," in still life, the painting "is a space of diagrammatic clarity, of *tabulation*. This is the reason why flowers, shells, and specimens of insect or saurian life enter into the same scene (with, to our eyes, such *surreal results*). All are subject to the labour of classification, in an era of natural history when taxonomy is the dominant mode of producing scientific knowledge."[55] It is fair to say that all still-life paintings, at least to some extent, fit this description—from Fancisco de Zurbarán's pottery and lemons and Pieter Claesz's breakfasts, to Willem Kalf's tableware—insofar as they all bring together objects that are related to one another by some analogy and differ from one another in their details. Furthermore, despite their differences, still lifes share a fundamental representational scheme: they portray a collection of various objects in the absence of *historia*[56] and in a near-perfect stillness. In this context, the subject of the representation is nothing but this very assortment of things.[57]

54 This is less true in the case of the series of *vanitas* paintings, regarding which, see Stoichita, *Self-Aware Image*; Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*, 114–21.

55 Bryson, 106; my italics.

56 This stands explicitly in opposition to Leon Battista Alberti's prescriptions, according to which the painter must select objects in relation to the narrative. On this, see Arasse, *Le detail*, 194–95. On the opposition of northern European art and Italian Renaissance art on the basis of the preponderance or absence of narration in favour of a taste for description, see Alpers, *Art of Describing*, xvii–xviii.

57 On this, see Anne W. Lowenthal's introduction in *The Object as Subject: Studies in the Interpretation of Still Life*, ed. Anne W. Lowenthal (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 3–12.

The homogeneous character of still life is such that one could almost imagine removing the frames[58] and arranging all the paintings side by side, forming a continuum of knives, glasses, fruits, vegetables, flowers, animals, books, skulls, vases, clocks, tables, rugs, tablecloths, pipes, and plates. Some parts would appear more similar, others would differ greatly, but all would fit in a structure—in the most general sense of the term: a complex of elements defined in their specificity by their similarities and differences.[59] Within this "structural" framework and its taste for classification, still lifes seem to perfectly reflect the epistemic paradigm of their time, insofar as they make visible the rules that organize reality into classes of beings—whether animate or inanimate, artificial or natural.

Yet, when one examines more closely the composition of these collections, a heterogeneity at odds with this paradigm comes to light. To grasp the reasons for such diversity, it is necessary to look at these canvases with greater attention. The first and most evident feature is the variety of the items represented on the canvas: even within subgenres that follow a clear thematic unity—breakfasts, banquets, flowers, garlands—the painters often play,[60] within a same class, with the multiplicity and the improbability of the assemblage. In Jan Davidsz de Heem's *Still Life with Fruit and Lobster* (1649), for example, a lobster lies on the same table with prawns, shrimps, bunches of grapes, peaches, apricots, pears, lemons, tangerines—fruits associated with different seasons[61]—and is accompanied by shells and an array of glasses and dishes (fig. 3). Here, two main classes (food and tableware) are brought together, suggesting a network of associations related to various modes of human nourishment. At the same time, the presence of the shells introduces a chain of connections to the sea, shifting the interpretation of the lobster, the prawns, and the shrimps from food items to aquatic beings. Moreover, the prunts on the rummer, and on the stem glass to

58 On the peculiar status of the frame in northern European art, see Alpers, *Art of Describing*, xxv. For a theory of the frame, I limit myself to referencing Louis Marin, "The Frame of Representation and Some of Its Figures," in *On Representation*, trans. Catherine Porter (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 352–72.

59 This is not to suggest that the still-life genre lacks significant—even radical—differences within itself. On this, I limit myself to referencing Grootenboer, *Rhetoric of Perspective*, 61–95.

60 There are cases in which, on the contrary, the unity of the composition prevails over the variety of the objects depicted. This is the case with Pieter Claesz and Willem Claesz. Heda's *Ontbijtjes* (on this, see Grootenboer, *Rhetoric of Perspective*, 39, 71–73).

61 A similar effect is found in the treatment of flowers and shells in Ambrosius Boschaert the Elder's *Bouquet in a Niche* (Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*, 105–6).

Fig. 3: Jan Davidsz. de Heem, *Still Life with Fruit and Lobster*, 1648–1649, Berlin, Gemäldegalerie.

the left are painted in the same way as the grapes—in form, glare, and colour—thus creating a correlation between artificial and natural units, grounded in the techniques and elements of painting itself, and almost ironically alluding to the age-old debate on the relation between nature and *techne*.

This canvas, like many other still lifes, stages—consciously or unconsciously—different series of associations based on both a metaphorical principle, grounded in formal analogies between different objects (as in the case of the glasses and the grapes), and a metonymical one, grounded in contextual and material links (as in the case of shells and crustaceans belonging to the same realm, and of shellfish and fruit as edible items). Here, unlike in the canvas by van der Ast analysed above, the "critique" of classificatory fixity does not result from the ambiguity concerning a single object—its undecidability between two options (crustacean or lizard, leaf or wing)—but rather from the simultaneous presence of the

same elements in different *signifying* chains (sea, food). Indeed, as Arasse argues, in the proliferation of the "'accessory parts,' the *eye* [. . .] unravels the overly serious chain (*the concatenation, the syntax, syntagm*) of the painting."[62] Yet this work of disentanglement does not lead to a loss of meaning; on the contrary, as in the case of Arcimboldo, it generates an excess of meaning that follows the displacement of things from one class to another, from one form to another.

Within this framework, it becomes clear that in still life the difference in structure concerns not only the characters but the beings themselves. These indeed shift because of the immobility of the representation (as we shall see), both in position, as in the case of de Heem's *Still Life*, and in essence, here understood as the point at which something coincides with itself, as in the case of van der Ast's *coquillages*. The reference to the ancient and magniloquent question of essence is here softened by the rhetorical perspective from which it is approached, bringing us back to the metaphor and metonymy already examined through Barthes's reading of Arcimboldo. Yet compared to his *Heads*, in still life these tropes take on a different configuration: whereas there they were both framed by and served to frame a clear allegory—the land animals made it possible to attribute the outline they formed to the personification of Earth, just as the fish and shells did for Water—in still life this allegorical dimension is far less pervasive.

This does not mean that allegory is entirely absent: the *Vanitas* series is a clear example. Moreover, most still lifes depict objects that are symbolically charged: walnuts, pomegranates, and fish (to name but a few) were at the time transparent Christian symbols, just as the depiction of fallen objects, food remnants, and decaying fruits or leaves had a clear allegorical meaning.[63] What is of interest here, regarding this symbolism, is the way in which its undeniable presence is forcefully countered by the naturalism with which these symbolic objects are rendered. This naturalism disrupts any transposition of the object's form, as perceived by a "descriptive" eye, into a rhetorical trope.[64] What obstructs the rhetorical dimension of still life, then, is precisely this attention to description and the realism it entails—both of which hold the allegorical translation of the objects in check. These objects are never fully exhausted (not even in vanitas

62 Bryson, 309; my italics.

63 Bryson, 121–23.

64 On this, see Alpers, *Art of Describing*, xxv.

canvases) by the symbolism attached to them, since their visual rendering continually shifts them from rhetorical figures to classificatory tables. If this is the case—that is, if rhetoric and naturalism appear to contradict one another—one might legitimately ask how it is possible that, as argued here, rhetoric, ontology, and art are nonetheless interlinked in a way that produces the heterogeneous character of this genre in relation to the episteme of the time.

The Weave of Language

To address this contradiction, one must look more closely at the complexity of rhetoric—its ambiguities and variations. The best way to do so is to return to De Heem's still life. Here, the distance can be measured between an allegorical interpretation of the canvas and what emerges along the lines of its naturalistic features. In the first case, a web of Christian symbols unfolds: empty shells as an allusion to the sepulchre, the lobster as a reference to Christ's resurrection, the grapes as symbols of the Eucharist, the glasses of wine as indicators of the Last Supper.[65] In the second case, the naturalism of the representation and its details opens up a series of associations that are able to shift both the syntax of the painting—that is, the composition of its elements (the lobster with the bunches of grapes, or with the shells)—and, in turn, the position of the objects within the structure (the lobster as part of the marine world, or as food on the table).

In both instances, the issue remains one of rhetoric, although it operates in markedly different ways. In the first case, the dialectic between metaphor (two similar voids) and metonymy (the connection of grapes with wine, leading to the Last Supper, and from there to the Eucharist) forms a coherent ensemble in which every element is held together by Christian symbolism. All the objects, therefore, stand for something else, and the painting itself stands for the allegorical meaning it displays. Here, the rhetorical function is governed by metaphor, understood as the overarching figure encompassing allegory, symbol, and all figures of similarity and substitution—while also drawing metonymic associations along with it. Within this framework, everything depends on pulling the right thread (glasses–grapes–shells–lobster): from there, everything else falls

65 Lucia Impelluso, *Nature and Its Symbols*, trans. Stephen Sartarelli (Los Angeles: J. P. Getty Museum, 2003), 352.

into place, the enigma is deciphered, and the unity of meaning preserved, along with the wholeness of the painting.

By contrast, on the side of syntactical variations, the naturalistic and realistic character of the painting produces connections of proximity (the lobster next to the grape, or the lobster next to the shells) and similarity (the spheres of the grape, the spheres of the glasses) between objects, but these do not lead to a series of substitutions. These connections too unfold within a rhetorical structure—juxtaposition and resemblance—but here, the metonymic and metaphoric threads (food, sea, nature–*techne*) lead in different directions. The objects are caught between these threads, unable to determine which path to follow, trapped—as one might say using Lacanian vocabulary—in the absence of a "master signifier" that would order the elements (the other signifiers) into a coherent discourse, into a coherent allegory. And they are further trapped in the immobility into which the lack of *diegesis* plunges them. This configuration, however, does not correspond—as in the case of metaphor within allegorical hermeneutics—to a simple predominance of metonymy over metaphor: things are far more complex than in a specular system.

Clearly, as the discussion now turns to matters of syntax, meaning, and signifiers, a different register of rhetoric has come into focus—one concerned less with persuasion or the ornamentation of discourse than with language itself. It is the register discovered by Roman Jakobson, for whom language is to be conceived as a structure unfolding along two axes: metaphor, signifying through similarity and substitution (on the nominal axis), and metonymy, signifying through contiguity and proximity (on the syntactic axis). It is within this theoretical horizon that the present analysis seeks to address the apparent contradiction between the naturalism of still life and its rhetorical character.

In 1981, the Italian philosopher Luisa Muraro took up Jakobson's theory against its Lacanian reinterpretation. According to a certain phase in Lacan's thought, there must be a predominance of metaphor over metonymy, insofar as the metaphorical substitution is what anchors the chain of metonymical shifts from one signifier to another to a single signifier capable of linking signifier and signified,

and thereby instituting meaning.[66] This is, famously, the role of the phallus around which the symbolic order is structured, an order that is above all an order of language. Outside of it, there seems to be only madness.[67] Muraro's return to Jakobson challenges precisely this dominance of metaphor over metonymy. For Jakobson, it is in fact the equal participation of both figures that enables language to unfold. The usual predominance of metaphor in Western culture does not result from an intrinsic necessity of linguistic structure, but from a series of social, political, and historical causes that have produced—and continue to sustain—this particular configuration of meaning.[68]

Building on these premises, Muraro pushes the theory of the rhetorical nature of language to its extreme: if language is constituted by the combination of—or rather, the conflict between—metaphor and metonymy, there is no need to posit, as linguists have often done, a zero degree of language, that is, a non-rhetorical level at which language names things as they are. Or, to put it more precisely, the zero degree of language corresponds to the "point of equilibrium or compromise that can establish itself—in symbolic production—between the metonymic and metaphoric directrices."[69] This equilibrium is so close to the things it names that it gives the impression that those things simply exist on their own, that they simply *are*. This is the case in most scientific contexts—laboratory experiments, botanical collections—where things seem to "impose themselves on an objective registration" by virtue of the way in which "the metonymical and metaphorical procedures are articulated together in a manner that is both elastic and stable."[70] In such cases—and this is what interests us the most—"the rhetoricity intrinsic to language becomes *almost invisible*: what stands out are only those rhetorical figures about which something is no longer apparent—either what

66 Here I limit myself to referencing Jacques Lacan, *The Psychoses, 1955–1956*, trans. Russell Grigg (London: Routledge, 1993), 196–230, 258–69.

67 Luisa Muraro, *Maglia o uncinetto: Racconto linguistico-politico sulla inimicizia tra metafora e metonimia* (Rome: Manifestolibri, 1998), 83. This book is partially translated as "To Knit or to Crochet: A Political-Linguistic Tale on the Enmity Between Metaphor and Metonymy," in *Another Mother: Diotima and the Symbolic Order of Italian Feminism*, ed. Cesare Casarino and Andrea Righi, trans. Mark William Epstein (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 67–120.

68 Muraro, *Maglia o uncinetto*, 83–86.

69 Muraro, "To Knit or to Crochet," 81.

70 Muraro, 81–82.

relation they might have with the constitutive processes of language or whatever destabilizing [squilibrante] opposition might occur between them."[71]

This distinctive interpretation of the zero degree of language can serve to illuminate the rhetorical dimension of still life—a dimension that weaves through still-life canvases and operates within their realism: the precision of their descriptions, the "scientific" gaze that names things as they are and organizes them into classes, corresponds to the faint presence of a withdrawn rhetoric. It is within this framework that the opposition between allegory and naturalism—and the apparent contradiction it entails—can be understood. Allegory belongs to those rhetorical figures that remain "visible" precisely because their linguistic involvement can no longer be recognized. Naturalism, by contrast, names the apparent transparency of reality—one that exists only along the fault line between metaphor and metonymy, where rhetoric is so tightly bound to language that it becomes indistinguishable from it.

There is, however, a fundamental difference between the apparent transparency of scientific language and the naturalism of still life—a difference on which the genre's heterogeneity and its ontological emancipatory power depend. On the one hand, in comparison to vegetal collections (to stick with Muraro's example and move beyond it), still-life paintings bring together—as previously noted—all kinds of objects, not only those belonging to the same class. On the other hand, in comparison to objects in the laboratory, which are always arranged within a temporal framework and follow the order of cause and effect, the objects in still life are immobile, frozen in perfect stillness. It is precisely due to this stillness, which removes them from the order of time and its necessity, and because of the "boredom" brought about by the absence of stories and natural movements, that other kinds of transformations can occur: leaves that become wings, the metamorphosis of a shell into a branch, or the passage of a lobster from the table back to the sea.

It is here that the elasticity and stability of metonymy and metaphor become apparent, revealing both the rhetorical nature of language and its ontological implications. The changes in form and function observed so far always take place within a framework of sense, since in still lifes there is no place for nonsense:

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[71] Muraro, 82; my italics.

a glass sphere remains what it is on a goblet, and shifts into a grape by virtue of its proximity to the bunch, never losing its shape—just as metaphorical and metonymical movements lead from one thing (an object, a detail, or a set of details) to another without ever passing through the "formless." These movements, however, complicate the apparent simplicity and unity of the being of these things with linguistic threads that the stillness of pictorial fiction brings to the foreground, making them (barely) visible. It is this faint visibility of rhetoric that connects the naturalism of still life to ontology: in the clarity and realism of still representation, this subtle, almost imperceptible rhetoric slips between things and their details, altering their position, and infiltrating their essence.

It is now possible to better measure the distance of still-life canvases and Arcimboldo's *Heads*. Arcimboldo's oneiric, nightmarish art is imbued, as seen above, with the Renaissance conception of the monstrous as "what transgresses the separation of the realms, mingles animal and vegetal, animal and human."[72] Its metamorphic power transforms all of its figures into a "*malaise* of substance"[73] where "the swarm of living things [. . .], arranged in a close-packed disorder [. . .] evokes an entire larval life, the entanglement of vegetative beings, worms, [. . .] which are at the limits of life, not yet born and yet already putrescible."[74] Behind his painting lies the "principle [. . .] that *Nature does not stop*."[75] In seventeenth-century still life, the opposite is true: nature has finally come to a halt, along with agitations and metamorphoses. Furthermore, the Renaissance conception of nature is dissolving, while a proper concept of life has not yet fully formed.[76] In this suspension of movement, animate and inanimate things stand side by side, with the hierarchy of realms giving way to the horizontality of classification. Here, objects change places and substance not by virtue of monstrous transformations, but through the naturalism of the details, which allow us to glimpse the rhetoric that structures the composition—and, more importantly, to perceive shifts within that very structure.

It is these movements between heterogeneous objects from different classes, brought together on the same surface without hierarchy or directionality, that

72 Barthes, "Arcimboldo," 147.
73 Barthes, 146.
74 Barthes, 146.
75 Barthes, 147.
76 Foucault, *Order of Things*, 174–75.

open the way to a peculiar epistemic and ontological freedom. This freedom relies on rhetorical tools within the framework of a fictional paralysis of nature: a lizard can be—and for a moment is—a crustacean, just as a shell becomes a branch; a lobster occupies its place on the table as food and, simultaneously, its position on the classificatory table, alongside other specimens of its kind. These are just a few of the "surreal results" of still-life composition.

The Slip of the Eye

So far, the ontological and linguistic metamorphoses that occur in still life were discussed from the perspective of things and structure: how these transformations depend on the relations among heterogeneous objects and how they interact with scientific classification and ontological order. There is, however, still a missing piece and a question that needs to be answered: How do these movements actually happen? If it is true that they occur in and through language—a language that does and undoes things and their being—then something else must be involved. Or rather, someone or something else must be able to witness and register these transformations. This "something" has already made occasional appearances in the discourse: the eye—intent, distracted, naturalistic, descriptive. It is now a matter of defining the characteristics of this eye in relation to the ontological and rhetorical entanglement that still life brings to the surface.

If rhetoric, as argued, functions as a device that shapes reality along the axes of metaphor and metonymy—and even, in rare cases, when the balance between the two is good and everything can stand still for a while, transform it—then the eye, too, must be caught within this onto-linguistic web. Its analysis must therefore account for its involvement in the same compositional process that touches upon the nature of things, their being, and their linguistic dimension. To understand how this participation takes place, it is useful to return to Barthes's reflections on the "mobility" of Arcimboldo's paintings. As Barthes writes, his art

> dictates to the "reader," by its very project, the obligation to come closer or to step back, assuring him that by this movement he will lose no meaning and that he will always remain in a vital relation with the image. [. . .] Including the reader's gaze within the very structure of the canvas, Arcimboldo virtually shifts from a Newtonian painting based on the fixity of the objects represented to

> an Einsteinian art according to which the observer's movement participates in the work's status.[77]

In the *Heads*, the change in composition depends not only on how the elements are assembled, resemble one another, and differ, but also on the shifts of the gaze. In this sense, Barthes's "ingenious artist" is able to create new profiles from the same set of objects by means of a "deferral of perception," which entails a series of movements—back and forth—on the part of the observer.[78] Thus, in Arcimboldo's paintings, the eye participates in the metamorphic process through its capacity to move, and through the dialectic between proximity and distance that this movement entails.

If one compares this eye to the one mentioned in relation to van der Ast's painting, a key difference emerges: while in the *Heads* metamorphoses are monstrous outcomes of an engaged gaze, in still life they appear as errors of a distracted, absent-minded gaze. Moreover, this distraction seems to reside not only in the subject who looks: the objects themselves seem to "lose interest" in human presence and care. As Bryson writes of Kalf's still lifes, "divorced from use, things revert to absurdity; anticipating nothing from human *attention*, they seem to have dispensed with human attention, whose purpose and even existence they come to challenge."[79] In still-life canvases, the objects exist on their own—they derive their reason for being neither from human use and comfort, nor from human contemplation or pleasure. This implies a detachment of the objects from the subject and, reciprocally, of the subject from the objects depicted. Thus, their oscillation between classes and kingdoms—a crustacean or a reptile, a shellfish or a plant, a plant or an insect—depends on the observer's inattention rather than on his or her attention: the less attentive the gaze, the more readily things shift place and substance.

Still life thus seems to stage yet another paradox. On one side, it demands a taste for description and a pleasure in the minutiae of detail, requiring intense focus and close proximity to the canvas. On the other, it is marked by the neglect reserved for a minor genre, in which the absence of a clear thematic centre

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77 Barthes, "Arcimboldo," 142.

78 Barthes, 142. A similar argument can be seen in Arasse, *Le detail*, 364.

79 Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*, 128.

entails a lack of interest on the part of the observer. It is in the swing between these two poles that the transformations described above take place. So, to the dialectic of proximity and distance that Barthes identifies, still life adds another: that between attention and distraction, which involves both object and subject, and which, rooted as it is in the rhetorical fabric, gives rise to the onto-linguistic shifts that have been analysed.

Within this framework, this peculiar subject–object reciprocity should not be mistaken for a perceptual chiasm in the Merleau-Pontian sense—just as the aforementioned divorce from use does not lead to a Heideggerian *Dasein*. A subject who carelessly looks at indifferent objects and mistakes them for something else—thus participating in their rhetorical and ontological shifts—has little in common with phenomenological consciousness or its variations.[80] Rather, it belongs to the side of language that accounts for mistakes, distractions, and nominal or syntactical errors. That is, it aligns more with the unconscious than with consciousness. Since the framework is that of the "surreal results" of onto-linguistic visual operations of disbanding and reassembling, it is worth clarifying that the unconscious referenced here is not the Surrealist unconscious—nor the censored contents excluded from consciousness that the Surrealists sought to unlock through various techniques. There are at least two reasons for making this distinction. First, as seen above, still life distances itself from the oneiric formations of Arcimboldo—those very formations on which the Surrealists would later insist.[81] This is because its emancipatory power, unlike the Surrealists' conception of freedom, does not depend on imagination (*phantasia*),[82] but rather on the tension between realism and rhetoric that defines the genre. Secondly, Surrealism requires practice and, as Breton notes, "concentration of your mind upon itself,"[83] whereas the onto-linguistic movements of still life occur largely in a state of distraction, when it becomes easier to "mistake" one thing for another.

Therefore, the analogy—imperfect, as all analogies are—is not with the dreaming process emphasized in Breton's 1924 *Manifesto*, following Freud's *Interpretation*

80 On this, see Grootenboer, *Rhetoric of Perspective*, 35–42.

81 On this, see André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1974).

82 Breton, 4–18.

83 Breton, 29.

of Dreams, but rather with the segmentation errors that occur in moments of fatigue or drowsiness: when, for instance, one mistakes a sheet and a purse on a chair for a person, or—remaining within Freud's framework—one makes a slip of the tongue or any other kind of mistake associated with a lack of concentration. In this analogy, the relation between a distracted eye and an attentive one mirrors the relationship between a slip of the tongue and the discourse in which it occurs: the latter provides the frame within which the mistake "makes sense." Yet, here, meaning does not stem from a constellation of individual drives and desires.[84] Moreover, there is no "correct" sense to be recovered, because, within the stillness of fiction, and in the rhetorical balance between metaphor and metonymy, there is no master signifier—only a language that seeps into the cracks of being. The distracted eye, therefore, does precisely this: it goes along with the absence of a fixed signifying chain and records the shifts in meaning that unfold within it. There is always meaning—or better stated: as many meanings as there are possible combinations and rearrangements of things and their being. Thus, in the stillness of still life, the absence of a master signifier does not entail the collapse of the linguistic and social order—beyond which lies madness—but rather opens the possibility of a freedom of language and being yet to be discovered.

This is, perhaps, where the freedom we have been seeking is to be found: in the infinite possibilities of meaning and being that arise within the context of a fictional stillness—one that illuminates the entanglement of rhetoric and ontology. Such freedom appears, for the first time in so pervasive and radical a form, in the still lifes of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—a pervasiveness and radicality made possible, paradoxically, by the modesty and marginality of the genre itself, which enabled the still lifes of the *Âge classique* to question the very *episteme* they also recorded. What is found here, then, is a paradoxical freedom that exists only in the immobility of stillness—a freedom that may serve as a fragment of a new paradigm for rethinking the relations between subject, object, language, and ontology in an age of shifting boundaries between the human and the nonhuman.

84 On this type of psychanalytical interpretation of still life, see Meyer Schapiro, "The Apples of Cezanne: An Essay on the Meaning of Still-life," in *Modern Art: 19th & 20th Centuries; Selected Papers* (New York: George Braziller, 1982), 1–38.

Data availability statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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