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PICTURE, POETRY AND THEATRICALITY. WRITING THE *SALONS* IS 'DESCRIBING' THE SALONS

1. Ekphrasis

Any acknowledgment of 'artisticity' implies the acknowledgement of a 'judgement of value' as well. Diderot's *Salons* prove, once again, the accuracy of this statement. Thus, when Diderot 'describes' the paintings shown at the Salon Carré du Louvre (from 1759 to 1781 every two years, with the exception of 1773, 1777 and 1779), and he recognizes the 'artisticity' of one work over another, that 'description' also results in a judgement of value.

I would like to *mettre en abyme* the term 'description'. Over the XVIII century, this very term assumed different connotations, all of them implied in Diderot's critical analysis. But there is more. In order to clarify Diderot's very complex *representational apparatus*, it is essential to problematize the transition from the *ut pictura poesis* to the less predictable *ut pictura theatrum*. However, I will not take into account the relationship between painting and theatre as a variation of the painting-poetry relation. I will rather look at the possibility of a radical change of perspective, claiming that Diderot's *ut pictura poesis* often overlaps with the *ut pictura theatrum* (see Hénin 2003).

Hence, what I want to show here is that the *mise en abyme* of the 'description' along with the reform of theatre – which Diderot was developing in those years (the *Salons* will inspire *D'Alembert's dream* and especially *Rameau's nephew* and the *Paradox of the actor*) – allows a new approach to the *representational apparatus of pictures*, and casts new light on the contemporary theory of pictures.

First of all, the *Salons* are not just meant to be 'read'. They are conceived as a *representational apparatus* – which often adopts the *metalepsis* and *preterintention* – aimed at encouraging

the readers to use their imagination. As Winckelmann stated, «allein die Kunst ist unerschöpflich, und man muß nicht alles schreiben wollen» (Winckelmann 2011, 98). Lessing and Diderot agreed with him, with respect to the *pregnant moment*, in what follows.

As readers of the *Salons*, and also as translators (as I happened to be, see Mazzocut-Mis 2012), we are therefore called to perform a difficult task: an imaginative and nearly creative task (a good example of which is, for instance, the *Promenade Vernet*, which invites the reader to walk, stand, sit, listen, and again to walk etc., surrounded by a three-dimensional space that reaches beyond the two-dimensionality of the painting).

Also for this reason, within the context of a 'visual culture', the *interplay* between subjects and objects is particularly complex. As shown by Diderot, the *representational apparatus* should not be regarded as the mere *objective reality* of the described objects (see Lojkin 2007, 19); the *subjective representation* needs also to be taken into account, as this is after all what determines and leads the interpretation, especially in absence of a reproduction of the picture. Nevertheless, this is still a prejudice that inevitably undermines the general meaning.

Diderot's approach could be put in relation with a *notional ékphrasis* (see Davidson 1983; Hagstrum 1958; Heffernan 1991; Mitchell 1992, 1994 and 2005), as defined by Hollander (see Hollander 1988), about artworks that never existed in the real world¹. In this case, the *mimetic or actual ékphrasis* – «intended to express in words existing artworks that can be verified» – is just a stage of the process (see Cometa 2012, 48 and Hollander 1988, 209-219).

It is worth stressing that, while assessing the issue strictly from an XVIII century perspective, it would not be possible to properly refer to *ékphrasis*. Diderot was arguably not familiar with the meaning of ancient *ékphrasis*, and probably did not know Philostratus the Elder (see Lojkin 2007, 102-103). In other words, he was not aware of the meaning of *ékphrasis* related to the epideictic genre. Diderot's rhetoric does not aim to prove the excellence of the painter! In contrast, it is possible to talk of *ékphrasis* in a wider sense, as a traditional relation between literature and visual arts.

¹ The *Antre de Platon* and *Promenade Vernet* by Diderot are the most relevant examples of the employment of a *notional ékphrasis*.

Given the above, it is useful to remember that even the *mimetic ékphrasis* can be considered as «the ‘falsification’ of an original», the deconstruction of an original into a verbal form. And that, on the contrary, «each *notional ékphrasis* represents a sort of ‘true-lisation’» that is made real by literature through its media (Cometa 2012, 53). We cannot forget that the *notional ékphrasis* is also related to a surplus of pleasure – but I will expand this thread later.

The *notional ékphrasis* plays a pivotal role in Diderot’s system, and also for the readers of the *Salons*. On the one hand, because the paintings were often lost, on the other because, even when the paintings are still available now, Diderot describes elements that are missing from the paintings themselves: the descriptive performance often becomes a mere invention.

As an illustration, we can consider Diderot’s words used to depict *L’Ulysse qui reconnaît Achille* by Hallé (*Salon* 1769) where he explicitly says:

O le beau sujet, mon ami [that friend is Grimm]! C’est *Ulysse qui reconnaît Achille au milieu des filles de Lycomède* par la ruse que vous savez. Vous imaginez un troupeau de jeunes folles que la curiosité précipite sur les bijoux que le faux marchand leur étale; entre elles vous en discernez une plus svelte qui, oubliant les vêtements de femme sous lesquels le vieux Pélée, son père, s’était proposé de tromper la recherche des Grecs, et n’écoutant que son courage et son penchant naturel, s’est saisie d’un cimenterre, le tire à demi de son fourreau et prend subitement une attitude martiale. Vous voyez Déidamie attacher sur elle des regards mêlés d’inquiétude et de surprise. Vous voyez le rusé Ulysse, la tête appuyée sur sa main, la regarder en souriant et se dire en lui-même : ‘Voilà celui que je cherche...’ Eh bien, mon ami, vous voyez dans votre tête je ne sais combien de belles choses dont il n’y a pas le moindre vestige sur la toile de Hallé. (Diderot 1975-, T. XVI, 582-583)

It is well known that Hallé was not amongst Diderot’s favourite painters.

2. Description

I will now work on the *mise en abyme* of the term ‘description’. The ‘description’ *à la Diderot* can be investigated from at least five different perspectives (see Bukdahl 1980):

- description-enumeration of subjects and objects,
- description-presentification,
- description-characterisation of the subjects through a link to mythology and/or through the analysis of common daily-life moments,
- comparative description (comparisons are often used, sometimes with coeval authors – for instance in the case of Doyen-Vien² – sometimes with well-known painters Diderot particularly liked, such as Raphael, Rembrandt, Domenichino and Poussin),
- description-pleasure principle.

When approaching the term ‘description’, one must also consider the philosophical and historical background of Diderot’s work, and look at that great establishment that was the *Encyclopédie*. In the *Encyclopédie*, the entry ‘Description’, written by Mallet, follows after two other major entries: ‘Description-Histoire naturelle’ by Daubenton and ‘Description-Géométrie’ by D’Alembert. Furthermore, the entry authored by Mallet ended with an interesting contribution by Jaucourt.

When Mallet writes about the description related to the *Belles-Lettres*, he notably affirms that the description is «définition imparfaite & peu exacte, dans laquelle on tâche de faire connoître une chose par quelques propriétés & circonstances qui lui sont particulières, suffisantes pour en donner une idée & la faire distinguer des autres, mais qui ne développent point sa nature & son essence. Les Grammairiens se contentent de descriptions; les Philosophes veulent des définitions» (Mallet 1751, 878-879). Description is also explained as «l’énumération des attributs d’une chose, dont plusieurs sont accidentelles, comme lorsqu’on décrit une personne par ses actions, ses paroles, ses écrits, ses charges, &c» (Mallet 1751, 878-879).

The differences between description and definition could be then outlined as follows:

- description means an enumeration linked to visual elements which are not essential properties of the object but just accidental properties,
- definition means a process that enables us to identify the essential properties,

² See *Salon 1767: Le miracle des Ardents* - Doyen; *Saint Denis prêchant la foi en France* - Joseph Marie Vien.

- therefore, in the field of the *Belles lettres*, a description is just a bad definition. (see Lojkin 2007, 90)

A definition allows us to determine the identity of multiple objects, putting them into abstract categories, whereas a description can only tell the difference between one individual and another (the descriptive difference between Alexander and Socrates does not inform on what makes them both men). In Lojkin's word:

force est de constater un véritable tabou français de la description, parce que la description n'a réellement de valeur ni en tant que processus logique de raisonnement, ni comme figure du discours. La description vaut comme image; elle est l'art de 'présenter' des images qui rendent les objets comme 'présents'. (Lojkin 2007, 93)

In this case, 'description' is presented as the capacity of presentification – we are in the field of hypotyposis (the references known by Diderot are Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria* and Dumasais, *Traité des tropes*, 1730) – and, secondly, it is connected to a pleasure principle (not surprisingly, Jaucourt refers to Milton and Addison). Pleasure is activated by the descriptive performance, which turns the absent object into a present one. As a result, in contrast to the enumerative description, stands a description which idealises the object. This idealisation relies on the reader's imagination. This is an idealisation that seems to be close to Batteux's «beautiful nature» (see Batteux 1989) (though it is well known that Diderot argued against Batteux's idea). However – and this is the key point – Jaucourt's words turns the describing poet into a real artist creator. We can recall Diderot's definitions of Vernet and Chardin as, respectively, «the opponent of God» and «the great wizard» (see Lojkin 2007, 98); we should also recall Diderot's *Promenade Vernet* or *Antre de Platon*, where Diderot himself becomes the «creator»³.

³ *Promenade Vernet* see Diderot 1975-, T. XVI, 175-237; *Antre de Platon* see Diderot 1975-, T. XIV, 253-264. But there is more. Diderot's descriptive performance, although it owes much to Jaucourt, echoes Baumgarten's «extensive clarity» without directly quoting it (see Baumgarten 2007). The «extensive clarity» is considered to be the capacity of embracing variety and diversity within an inclusive sight, with vivid and potentially limitless representations.

3. Ideal models

Diderot identifies two 'ideal models' in the *Salons*, the distinction of which is more unclear than it may appear at first.

The first one – as theorised in the *Essays on painting*, 1766⁴ – deals with nature as a great living organism whose parts are related and interconnected and as a model of organisation and composition. The second one – as theorised in the *Salon*, 1767 – is again inspired by nature, but this time nature is perfectible by the painter's perpetual experience, detached from any reproductive-mimetic principle.

The first model is inspired by Diderot's vision of nature as monistic and metamorphic altogether. Diderot develops a theory on the sensitivity of the organic components, which re-evaluates the mechanistic doctrine of interaction between particles. At the same time, he also re-evaluates the Newtonian idea of matter as intrinsically capable of motion and action. «Tout change, tout passe, il n'y a que le tout qui reste» (Diderot 1975-, T. XVII, 128).

It is clear that each element of a painting aims for the beauty of the whole «le beau tout et le bel ensemble», and consequently the work of art (painting, sculpture, poetry) requires unity, since nature is a unity as well. There is no room for theodicy, but we are rather in the presence of a 'constituent principle' that is blindly followed by nature and by the painter. Writing the entry 'Composition' for the *Encyclopédie*, Diderot states that composition is the art of making a whole out of the different parts of a painting, a unity so well organised as an animal body can be.

The second model is represented by the *ligne vraie*. A sort of ideal of nature – which has to be constantly searched for by the artist through a repeated number of experiences – takes over the naturalistic vision. The Ancients first and perfectly managed to grasp the model, to 'drag' it out of the nature. Nature is indeed just a starting point, while the Ancients' work, experience and technique are the highest examples of artisticity. The *ligne vraie* is the point of separation between the truth and the image of truth, between nature and the image of nature, patiently sought by the work of a genius. The model does not exist before its own realisation.

⁴ Written in 1766 for the *Correspondance littéraire* by Grimm and then published along with the *Salons* of 1765 and 1767. D. Diderot, *Essais sur la peinture*, in Diderot 1975-, T. XIV, 343-411.

To grasp the technique means to have the qualities to strive and reach the ideal. On this topic, the pages of the *Salons* meet the *Paradox of the actor*, where the value of technique and intelligence are praised. An actor, not being forced to conform to the «petit modèle qui est en lui, il sera aussi grand, aussi étonnant, aussi parfait imitateur de la sensibilité que de l'avarice, de l'hypocrisie, de la duplicité et de tout autre caractère qui ne sera pas si sien, de toute autre passion qu'il n'aura pas» (Diderot 1975-, T. XX, 122-123).

4. Ut pictura theatrum

I would like to start to draw my conclusions and to demonstrate that the theoretical framework discussed so far can acquire a deeper meaning thanks to the transition from the *ut pictura poesis* to the *ut pictura theatrum*⁵. It is necessary to strongly reaffirm the close connection between pictures and words. In that time the scopic regime was dominated by the *ut pictura poesis* – recalled in epigraph also by abbot Du Bos (see Du Bos 1993). Pictures can work as a text as effectively as texts can work as pictures (see Lojkin 2007, 18).

But there is more to say. First of all, I would like to take into account Greuze's famous painting *Accordée de village*. The comment on the *Accordée de village* (the moment when the son-in-law receives the dowry) was written in 1761 (Diderot 1975-, T. XIII, 266-272) and can be considered as the first time Diderot's method was put to the test. The painting is objectively not excellent, but is subjectively enjoyable (and this statement presents more than one problem to the eighteenth-century aesthetics).

Looking into Diderot's words, we can point out how the pleasure aroused by the painting is strictly related to:

- the unity of the representation (the *pregnant moment*: according to both Diderot and Lessing – who focused on this issue in the *Laocoon* – the painter should carefully choose it. If it tells too much, it will not arouse the beholders' imagination, but if does not tell enough it will not comply with the subject),
- the geometric-pyramidal composition of the scene (the objective element: the main figures of the painting are standing at the cen-

⁵ When I stress the transition from the *ut pictura poesis* to the *ut pictura theatrum* it is not my intention to infer that Diderot longed for paintings styled on a theatre fashion: nature should always be the inspiration of the ideal model.

- tre of the scene whereas the secondary figures are sitting on the sides or placed in the background),
- a symmetry which excites an «idea of relations» (subjective element: in this case, Diderot mentions the capacity of a painting of evoking the idea of «harmonious relations» – according to the entry 'Beautiful' of the *Encyclopedie*, written by Diderot himself),
 - a scopic game (which makes the spatial order overlap with the hierarchical order of the figures).

Looking at the body poses and gestures of the secondary figures featured in the scene, we can see that the solemn speech of the father – who stretches his arms out toward his son-in-law, in order to point out his daughter's honesty – juxtaposes the inner speech of the mother, who is reflected in the appearance of a hen with its chicks. Diderot analyses the silent language of the jealous elder sister and of the maids, who would like to get married as well. It is well known that Diderot thought of this genre of painting as an artistic expression that pleases the eyes. The mind trusts the eyes because they 'are the window to the soul'. «La pantomime est le tableau qui existait dans l'imagination du poète, lorsqu'il écrivait» (Diderot 1975-, T. X, 417). It is easy to point out that the actor's body enjoys a privileged access to what, according to Diderot and his contemporaries, is the most complete and valuable sense: sight. It is through the eyes indeed that the emotions are most quickly transmitted. Therefore, the following assertion is fundamental: according to Diderot, poetry has an exciting effect when, through the written word, it reaches the intensity of a single instantaneous impression.

The advantage of poetry is its capacity to reiterate the emotions experienced, whereas the excitement provoked by a painting can only last for a moment. But the art of acting, as already mentioned, combines the features proper of both poetry and painting. When a man is silent, his body is still talking. Cureau de La Chambre thought that a man in love does not need his ears – he would not listen anyway, blinded by his passion – but most certainly needs his eyes⁶.

The language of gestures is valuable because of its immedia-

⁶ Cureau de La Chambre 1640, 37-39: «Je ne croy pas que celui qui le premier peignit l'Amour avec un bandeau sur les yeux, eust dessein de marquer l'aveuglement qui se trouve en cette Passion, mais que par l'impuissance ou par le privilège de son Art il fut obligé de cacher ce qu'il ne pouvait pas dépeindre. En effet quelles couleurs, voire mesme quelles paroles pourroient exprimer tous les changements que l'Amour cause dans les yeux ? [...] Enfin les Oreilles ne seruent presque rien à un Amant».

teness, and because it cannot be translated into other languages. Diderot's statement is the result of his comparison between verbal language and the theatrical use of the language of gestures. He draws this conclusion after having studied pathetic situations which provoke a deep emotional rejoinder – which he calls *sublime de situation* or *sublime du geste*. The language of gestures is therefore capable of signifying and communicating emotions which, in their semantic ambiguity, need to have the 'simultaneity' that language cannot have. Looking at the entry 'Composition' of the *Encyclopédie*, we can find the definition of *pregnant moment*:

On accorde vingt-quatre heures à celui-ci [le poète], c'est-à-dire qu'il peut, sans pécher contre la vraisemblance, rassembler dans l'intervalle de trois heures que dure une représentation, tous les événemens qui ont pû se succéder naturellement dans l'espace d'un jour. Mais le peintre n'a qu'un instant presque indivisible; c'est à cet instant que tous les mouvemens de sa composition doivent se rapporter: entre ces mouvemens, si j'en remarque quelques-uns qui soient de l'instant qui précède ou de l'instant qui suit, la loi de l'unité de tems est enfreinte. (Diderot 1753, 772)

It is not surprising, then, that the thorough analysis of theatre Diderot wrote in 1758 leaned toward the *tableaux vivants*. In these living pictures, one act of a tragedy or a drama is effectively summarized through gestures carefully constructed. The *tableaux vivants* were appreciated by Diderot because of their expressivity and unicity, and also because the actors were performing within a 'frame', which left the audience outside of the action and allowed them to contemplate, rejoice and cry. Theatricality emerges: the scene is put together and, as it happens in nature, every slight change affects the whole. Diderot's interest in pantomime is embedded in this context (see Goodden 2001). To him, the actor is not just the centre of the representation, the keystone in the dramatic action: not everything is due to the performers' faces or expressions, as they are part of a bigger picture.

As Michael Fried has argued (see Fried 1988²), Diderot's favourite artists, such as Greuze, depict subjects absorbed in activities that are enclosed within the painting frame, that are self-sufficient and circumscribed by the pregnant moment; every figure in the scene is focusing on nothing but the object of their absorption, oblivious to the external beholders who are standing outside of the frame. Fried brings as an example Chardin's paintings: in these, the

subjects are completely absorbed in their everyday tasks. In fact, no concern about the observers should ever influence either the painter or the actor. «Le peintre sort de sa toile, comme l'acteur qui parle au parterre sort de la scène» (Diderot 1955, 57). Furthermore : «J'ai remarqué que l'acteur jouait mal tout ce que le poète avait composé pour le spectateur» (Diderot 1975-, T. X, 373).

While absorption is a 'centripetal' force – the self-sufficiency of the aesthetic mimesis is preserved by denying or ignoring the presence of the beholders – the notion of 'theatricality' according to Fried is a centrifugal force – the subjects in the scene establish a connection with the beholders, giving up their self-sufficiency. This is also true for the performer who, in order to keep the audience's interest up, rely on the 'tirade'. The illusion that the audience is not there allows the dramatic illusion that the audience can be absorbed into the work of art. Conversely, the effective representation of absorption creates the ontological illusion that the beholders are radically excluded from the dramatic action. Diderot «used the term *le théâtral*, the theatrical, implying consciousness of being beheld, as synonymous with falseness. The opposite of the grimacing, the mannered, and the theatrical was *le naïf*, the naïve characterised by Diderot in the *Pensées détachées* as 'tout voisin du sublime' (very close to the sublime) and summed up by the phrase: 'C'est la chose, mais la chose pure, sans la moindre altération. L'art n'y est plus'» (Fried 1988², 100). The absence of the beholders from the scene, in Diderot's understanding, does not lead to their disengagement from the painting. On the contrary, this absence allows the beholders to see the scene from the right point of view, establishing an adequate correspondence with the subjects of the painting. Diderot thinks that the object (meaning the depicted subject and the way this is represented) influences the spectator's point of view.

Back to Greuze, his paintings feature a profusion of mute passions and intense, languid, absorbed, aggressive gazes; there are old people, poor women, harmless children, miserable characters: the whole spectrum of melancholy and melodramatic representations (see Wagner 1986, 28-31). Greuze's works are rooted into a universe of traditional family values, a small portion of nature and life already lived and idealised (see Ehrard 1986, 79-80). His paintings are like stories that freeze the evolution of the narration into an image, a gesture (see Wagner 1986). *Le Fils puni* is

«beau, très beau, sublime, tout, tout» (Diderot 1975-, T. XIV, 199); a family life scene, which resembles the bourgeois theatre. *Le Fils ingrat* and *Le Fils puni* are a two-act drama which are set in motion thanks to his narrative-descriptive writing. The spatial disposition of the figures and their ‘realism’, besides their appearances and face expressions, contribute to give the impression of the drama. Narrativity and expression of pathetic are the main features of this emotional painting, which has its pivot in the language of gestures and expressions; an expressive communication that involves all the elements in the frame.

Applying the reform of theatre to painting and vice versa, Diderot comes to a reformulation of the spectatorial status, and frames the essential elements of a theory of pictures. The purpose is to elevate theatre to the ‘noblesse’ of poetry, and to elevate painting to the full expressivity of theatre.

5. A counterexample

Charles-Antoine Coypel’s *Médée et Jason* (1715) can be compared to Val Loo’s painting of the same subject, the latter having been harshly criticised by Diderot in his *Salons*. Coypel’s painting is strongly influenced by the scenic action. The subjects’ body poses and faces are overly expressive: the light, similar to a theatre, is directed toward the subjects, who are positioned into an elaborate ‘scenic apparatus’. In the various descriptions of the *Salons*, which precede the ones thoroughly analysed by Diderot, Coypel seems to have adopted the philosopher’s point of view, stressing that the actors, as well as the subjects of a painting, can express themselves only through their body poses and expressive qualities.

Puisque la Peinture et la Poésie sont Soeurs, pourquoi ne seroient-elles pas également soumises au tribunal de la Critique? [...] Il faut, soit dans un Tableau, soit dans un Ouvrage Dramatique imaginer un sujet, trouver les objets qui doivent rentrer dans la composition. Voilà l’invention. Cette distribution, cette économie, ce bon ordre qui fait tout valoi; dans la Peinture c’est la disposition, au Théâtre c’est l’intrigue ou la conduite. L’unité d’action, de lieu, & de tems sont encores des regles communes de part et d’autre. (Coypel 1751, 4-6)

The composition of a painting, that is the distribution of the objects, their size and proportion, has its equivalent in the well-constructed characters of a play. The ‘local colour’ can be compared to versification and style. But the relationship between Coypel

and Diderot is consumed only on a theoretical level. In the *Salons*, Diderot makes a repeated criticism of Coypel, who he considers as a cold and emotionless painter. Coypel's principles, which were also followed by many of the artists who constituted the French school of the time – such as Carle Van Loo, La Grenée l'Ainé – seemed to Diderot to be nothing but a mere affectation. Coypel's mannerism did not meet the taste of the philosopher, who had an appreciation for Greuze and preferred a more natural style, also with regard to historical painting, where the artificiality was fading more and more into an exacerbated study on body poses and gestures that resulted in subjects overly expressive and pathetic but lifeless and unnatural. It is not surprising, thus, that Coypel's *Medée et Jason* had also been an inspiration to the criticised painting by Van Loo.

Enfin nous l'avons vu ce tableau fameux de *Jason et Medée*, par Carl Van Loo. O mon ami, la mauvaise chose! C'est une décoration théâtrale avec toute sa fausseté; un faste de couleur qu'on ne peut supporter; un Jason d'une bêtise inconcevable. L'imbécile tire son épée contre une magicienne qui s'envole dans les airs, qui est hors de sa portée et qui laisse à ses pieds ses enfants égorgés. C'est bien cela! Il fallait lever au ciel des bras désespérés, avoir la tête renversée en arrière; les cheveux hérissés! Une bouche ouverte qui poussât de longs cris; des yeux égarés... Et puis, une petite Medée, courte, raide, engoncée, surchargée d'étoffes; une Medée de coulisse; pas une goutte de sang qui tombe de la pointe de son poignard et qui coule sur ses bras; point de désordre; point de terreur. On regarde, on est ébloui et on reste froid. [...] Ce peintre ne pense ni ne sent. (Diderot 2007, 91-92)

It is known that Clairon had been the model for Medea and Lekain for Jason. Leaving aside Diderot's harsh criticism, it is true that the interaction of painting and acting was so strong that it was customary for painters to take their inspiration from theatre roles, and actors did sometimes work as painters, although with poor success. Diderot mentions it in *Salon 1765*, writing that: «le talent ne se décide pas en un moment; ce n'est pas au premier essai qu'on a la franchise de s'avouer son incapacité». A young man may fail and fall on the edge of poverty. But someone who fails as a painter has nonetheless some alternatives, one of them being to become an actor. «Ce que je vous dis là, c'est l'histoire de Belcourt, de Le Kain et de Brisart, mauvais comédiens de désespoir d'être mauvais peintres» (Diderot 1975-, T. XIV, 23-24).

Therefore, the great painters are those who have also learnt

all the secrets of the theatrical scene. Not of a stereotypical 'scene' though, but rather of those representations that engage the perfectibility of human nature and aim to the Ideal, to the *ligne vraie*. A theatrical scene that, relying on a very elaborate composition and disposition of the subjects, complies with the reform of theatre as outlined by Diderot, and that he relentlessly pursued through his writings on theatre as well as through the ones on painting.

In conclusion, it is possible to state that poetry and theatricality are both serving pictures, due to the fact that to write the *Salons* is indeed to describe the Salons. To describe the Salons means to know what pictures want and what Diderot wants from pictures, within a *representational apparatus* that perfectly satisfies their ontology. It also means to be aware that sometimes a picture may be meaningless or irrelevant; and this is due not to a failure of the *representational apparatus* but rather to a failure of the original reference. When describing the Salons – and therefore writing the *Salons* – Diderot put description and theatricality at the centre of his unique and nearly incomparable account.