

*Contributi/7*

## *The Salon Metaphysics*

### Diderot and the Triad of Truth

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This paper focuses on the art criticism of Denis Diderot and proposes that in his *Salon* writings there is a consistent search for truth (*la vérité*) in painting. This specific notion of truth can be dissected and understood by the proposed triad, which is a hierarchical system of three seemingly necessary conditions for Diderot to recognise *la vérité* in a painting: the truthful imitation of nature, the coherence and logic of the painting and an emotion-provoking effect. This triad was one of the ways Diderot functioned as a *parrhesiastes* in the Enlightenment art world, navigating between different expressions of truth, changing and creating the narratives around them. This paper aims to unfold the proposed triad, illustrating it with examples from the *Salon* of 1765.

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#### 1. Of Truth and triads

It has become increasingly clear that in our age of rapid information, the search for truth can be one of the most challenging tasks. However, the declaration of truth to influence society is in no way a new challenge. Since the beginning of time, various tools using the claim for truth have been used to influence and rule. In the case of Denis Diderot and his search for truth in both art and other areas of life, researchers have often talked about the *philosophe's* conception of truth, morality and aesthetics being inalienably intertwined with each other<sup>1</sup>.

Denis Diderot described in his *Essai sur les règnes de Claude et de Néron* (1778) how everyone has a certain role to play in society, but the role of the philosopher is to stand by those people, educate them and explain to them the context of their actions. The title of a philosopher should only be granted to those, who constantly both seek and speak the truth<sup>2</sup>. He adds: «Si le philosophe ne croyait pas que la périlleuse vérité qu'il va dire fructifierait dans l'avenir, il se

<sup>1</sup> C. Duflo, Introduction. Diderot: roman, morale et vérité, «Littérature», 171, 2013, p. 11.

<sup>2</sup> D. Diderot, *Essai sur les règnes de Claude et de Néron*, in L. Versini (ed.), *Diderot: OEuvres. T. I: Philosophie*, Paris 1994, pp. 1119-1142.

tairait ... Je n'accorde le titre de philosophe qu'à celui qui s'exerce constamment à la recherche de la vérité et à la pratique de la vertu»<sup>3</sup>.

Inspired by his constant search for truth, the notion of the *parrhesiastes* (παρρησιαδής) has been often used to help describe Diderot's will and agency. However, Diderot's frequent expression of theatricality has made this approach quite polarised, as the act of dramatisation and actorship goes against the original notion of *parrhesiastes*. For example, Diderot's way of writing can be interpreted as working towards freeing the actor and actorship from the negative connotations related to not being truthful<sup>4</sup>. However, his choices on what and how to write have also been used to point out some elements of hypocrisy and contradictions in his works and way of thinking<sup>5</sup>.

It has been argued that Diderot's thought was in a perpetual flux just like he thought nature to be, with both his mental and physical attributes and capabilities in a constant change<sup>6</sup>. This issue has been looked at from multiple different viewpoints, for example from Diderot's favouring of poetry and fiction to historical writing, with it being able to convey the bigger, more vague but complete truth than the half-truths of incomplete history studies<sup>7</sup>. This gives the reader a possibility to consider different potential truths understood in various ways. Other approaches tackle the question of the artist's subjectivity in deciding both the most beautiful aspects of nature and the best way to imitate them, which contradicts Diderot's views on the existence of true imitation of nature, which sometimes comes across as more universal<sup>8</sup>.

When Diderot started writing art criticism with the *Salon* of 1759, it was immediately clear that he had a reasonable distaste for the policies and ways of the *Académie de la Peinture*: «S'il y a peu de gens qui sachent regarder un tableau, y a-t-il bien des peintres qui sachent regarder la nature»<sup>9</sup>. The *Académie* was famous for its specific ways of teaching and producing art, with stringent development of genre hierarchy. French culture echoing the voice of the monarchy had been a recurring theme in previous writings, paving the way for his ability to criticise without getting cut by the censors<sup>10</sup>.

In many of his *Salon* criticisms he speaks about paintings or artists while saying that they contain the truth (*la vérité*). More importantly, he mentions on multiple occasions the absence of truth, accusing them also of being overly

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1112.

<sup>4</sup> D. Thomä, *Actorship, parrhesia, and Representation: Remarks on Theatricality and Politics in Hobbes, Rousseau, and Diderot*, «Anglia», 136, 2018, pp. 174, 188.

<sup>5</sup> C. Vincent, *Diderot et la parrèsia prérévolutionnaire: l'éloquence de la vérité en question*, «Littératures Classiques», 94, 2017, pp. 61-69.

<sup>6</sup> M. Bozovic, *Diderot on Nature and Pantomime*, «The European Legacy», 23, 2018, p. 12.

<sup>7</sup> C. Dufflo, *Le système du dégoût. Diderot critique de Boucher*, «Recherches sur Diderot et sur l'Encyclopédie», 29, 2000, p. 94.

<sup>8</sup> A. Mestahi, *La notion de Nature chez Diderot: de l'appréhension ambivalente au dialogue pluridisciplinaire*, Tours 2022, pp. 85, 95.

<sup>9</sup> D. Diderot, *Salon de 1759*, in L. Versini (ed.), *Diderot: OEuvres. T. IV: Esthétique. Théâtre*, Paris 1996, pp. 193-200.

<sup>10</sup> S. Lojkiné, *L'Oeil Révolté. Les Salons de Diderot*, Paris 2007, pp. 66-67.

decorative or immoral. These examples present us with the three necessary conditions for the possibility of finding truth: faithful imitation of nature, coherence and logic, and the emotion-provoking effect the painting has on the *philosophe*.

The idea of triads has been entertained on Diderot's works and search for truth before. For example, a tripartition (consisting of the notions of the spectator, the critic and the philosopher) has been proposed as a tool for analysing the different stages Diderot goes through when looking at an artwork. The spectator experiences the effect, the critic analyses the physical attributes that caused the effect, and the philosopher tackles the relationship between ethics, truth and nature. When the elements of this tripartition join together, the philosopher gains the ability to fully comprehend and appreciate the artwork<sup>11</sup>.

Accompanying this tripartition is the presupposition that truth in painting lies in the unity of the piece and not in the faithful imitation of nature<sup>12</sup>. A vaguely similar conclusion has been reached in some of the research made in theater studies, more specifically Diderot's understanding of the libretto as a form that depicts naturalness completely different from other cultural mediums, which allows more sacrifice for unity and truth<sup>13</sup>.

This approach works well when looking at the entire outcome of experiencing an artwork. It does not, however, help us understand what the actual notion of truth in painting stood for. Neither does it give enough room to consider Diderot's fluctuating emotions – his feelings constantly evolve and change during the course of describing various details or contemplate over the good and moral.

Another great proposal for looking at Diderot's criticism consists of two triads: the triad of geometric, scopic and symbolic, and the triad of order, visibility and judgement, which were used to successfully demonstrate the ambivalence and dubiety of the act and result of describing and judging an artwork from memory<sup>14</sup>. This is excellent for a textual analysis of the *Salon* critiques, but is again a bit too broad for the problem at hand.

Thus the process of experiencing and critiquing an artwork should not only be looked at from a consequential, but also from an enveloping hierarchical perspective. While the understanding of truth in painting might seem like a complicated thing to grasp, the actual artworks containing (or not containing) it can be easily identified by understanding Diderot's perspective and opinion on the truthful imitation of nature, logic, and effect.

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<sup>11</sup> G. Di Liberti, *Dans le corps de l'œuvre: pour une préhistoire du médium chez Diderot*, «Appareil», 17, 2016, p. 2.

<sup>12</sup> G. Di Liberti, *Dans le corps de l'œuvre: pour une préhistoire du médium chez Diderot*, p. 5.

<sup>13</sup> B. Didier, Diderot and the aesthetics of the libretto, in J. Fowler (Ed.), *New Essays on Diderot*, Cambridge 2011, p. 226.

<sup>14</sup> S. Lojkin, *Le problème de la description dans les "Salons" de Diderot*, «Diderot Studies», 30, 2007, p. 69.

## 2. The Triad of Truth

When looking at any of Diderot's Salon criticism, one encounters the notion of *la vérité*. This, however, raises the question of what does this notion consist of for Diderot? In many ages of painting, the notion of truth was closely associated with morality, natural beauty, the sublime, often mixing *le vrai* (the true) with *la vérité* (the truth) to a degree. Since Diderot was one of the first philosophers who considered various metaphysical notions – like beauty, ugliness, inspiration, genius – to also be partly subjective, the same case can be attributed to his concept of *la vérité* in painting. If wishing to fully understand the extent of Diderot's view on the subjectivity of various notions, one might consider Foucault's advice:

..whoever wishes to study the history of subjectivity – or rather, the history of the relations between the subject and truth – will have to try to uncover the very long and slow transformation of an apparatus (dispositif) of subjectivity, defined by the spirituality of knowledge (*savoir*) and the subject's practise of truth, into this other apparatus of subjectivity which is our own<sup>15</sup>.

In his article *Métaphysique*, Diderot stated that science without metaphysics is an imperfect science, since every practice requires a reason for things. If anyone who practises something is asked to explain their activity, they speak of the metaphysics of their art<sup>16</sup>. So by definition, the asker would be getting completely different views of the same practices that either affirm or disaffirm them depending on the response.

Before diving into the first necessary condition to achieve truth in painting, one must first deal with the encountering of two seemingly similar terms he uses to describe various pieces: *la vérité* and *le vrai*. When under *le vrai*, Diderot often references the direct similarity to the truthful imitation of nature, then the notion *la vérité* considers something much more complicated than masterful imitation, involving the emotions of the subject. However, both indisputably root from nature.

There are some hints to what Diderot thinks of as truth in nature from his work *Pensées sur l'interprétation de la nature* (*Thoughts on the Interpretation of Nature*, 1754), where he brought out several ways of understanding how the concept of *la vérité* might develop from the understanding of nature. Our primary perception of nature can never be the truth that nature in its essence has. Our idea of nature needs to be supported by the objective truth in nature and natural laws, but our perception of it is also influenced by countless *rappports*,

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<sup>15</sup> M. Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject, lectures at the College de France, 1981-1982*, F. Gros, A. I. Davidson (eds.), New York 2005, p. 319.

<sup>16</sup> D. Diderot, *Métaphysique*, in *Encyclopédie, Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, 10, 1765, p. 440.

distancing us from the objective notion of truth in nature<sup>17</sup>. So the truth always present in nature is *la vérité*, but perceived and imitated nature is *le vrai*.

This gives an understanding of how Diderot understood the concept of 'natural truths', but what happens when dealing with more metaphorical interpretations of nature? One can look for a little bit of clarification from the articles of his *Encyclopédie* written by Chevalier Louis de Jaucourt (1704-1779), who produced multiple entries about the different forms of truth and truthfulness – articles like *Vérité éternelle (Eternal Truth)*, *Vérité morale (Moral Truth)*, and most importantly *Vrai, Véritable (True, Truthful)*. According to Jaucourt, *le vrai* stands for objective truth, following directly the reality of things. *Véritable* on the other hand designates truth as it's expressed, being largely subjective and dependent on a person's personal truth being spoken<sup>18</sup>.

The distinction between *le vrai* and *véritable* was first made by Abbé Girard (1677-1748), about whom Jaucourt writes the following: «..presque tous ses ouvrages respirent le vrai ; c'est-à-dire qu'ils sont une copie fidèle de la nature. Ce vrai doit se trouver dans l'historique, dans la morale, dans la fiction, dans les sentences, dans les descriptions, dans l'allégorie» implying that *le vrai* stands for being a faithful copy of nature<sup>19</sup>.

It gets more interesting when we are looking at the undesignated but all encompassing article *La vérité*, which states that truth is always related to our own knowledge, so there would be no truth if there was no knowledge or thought. The article proposes the existence of two different kinds of truth: external and internal truth, or in other words, objective truth and logical truth:<sup>20</sup>

L'objet de la vérité interne est purement dans notre esprit, et celui de la vérité externe est non-seulement dans notre esprit, mais encore il existe effectivement et réellement hors de notre esprit, tel que notre esprit le conçoit. Ainsi toute vérité est interne, puisqu'elle ne serait pas vérité si elle n'était dans l'esprit ; mais une vérité interne n'est pas toujours externe<sup>21</sup>.

External or objective truths have a separate independent external existence from our thoughts, internal or logical truths look at the object of thought solely in the mind. Jaucourt had also written a sentence for the separate *Encyclopédie* entry about truth called *Vérité, (Peint.) (Truth, (Painting))*, which states that truth in painting marks the proper expression of the character of each object in the painting. Without expression there is no painting<sup>22</sup>. Jaucourt's notions of

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<sup>17</sup> D. Diderot, *Pensées sur l'interprétation de la nature*, in L. Versini (ed.), *Diderot: OEuvres. T. I: Philosophie*, Paris 1994, pp. 564-567.

<sup>18</sup> C. L. de Jaucourt, *Vrai, Véritable*, in *Encyclopédie, Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, 17, Paris 1765, p. 482.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 482.

<sup>20</sup> *Vérité*, in *Encyclopédie, Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, 17, 1765, pp. 68-70.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

<sup>22</sup> C. L. de Jaucourt, *Vérité, (Peint.)*, in *Encyclopédie, Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, 17, Paris 1765, p. 72.

*véritable* and expressive truth bear quite many similarities in them being both the truth as expressed by someone, not existing as a universal unit.

Since Diderot himself has not provided us with a definition of his own, it's up to us to shed light on his unique look on truth with the help of his contemporaries. Diderot's understanding of truth in painting can be distributed into three separate conditions or the triad of truth: a masterful imitation of nature, the logical and reasonable structure of the composition and narrative of the painting, and the presence of an effect that gives rise to emotion in the subject. This triad works in a strict hierarchy: without truthful imitation, there can be no overall coherence. Without coherence there can't be an emotion-provoking effect. Without effect and emotion, there is no truth. This falls in nicely with Jaucourt's definition of *Vérité*, (*Peint.*), according to which this kind of truth comes from a proper expression of every aspect of the painting, as perceived by the subject. Since there is no painting without expression, an artwork without expression and emotion is unable to also express *la vérité*.

All parts of this triad of truth rely heavily upon the perceptual field of the subject, bringing in Diderot's notion of *rappports*, first introduced in his *Lettre sur les aveugles à l'usage de ceux qui voient* (*Letter on the Blind for the Use of Those Who Can See*, 1749)<sup>23</sup>, later elaborated and improved in his definition of beauty. The goal of *rappports* was to ultimately explain the effects different external and internal conditions have on a person that influence their own personal notions of beauty. Until now, *la vérité* seemed to be the highest praise attributed to works of art that on first encounter left him figuratively speechless. However, there is clearly a path he requires from artists to traverse to be worthy of this praise.

### 2.1 Imitation of nature

The first step in the triad is the imitation of nature. Understanding nature is liberating: it helps people understand not only themselves but the relations between them and everything else. Diderot has a similarly faithful relationship with the understanding of nature. He is certain that nature has always been the first model for art – the birth of the arts happened when people connected the products of nature and their own diligence, to satisfy their natural curiosity and various needs. Referencing Francis Bacon (1561-1626), he says that there would not be a history of nature without art, because art has offered us the tools and ways to understand, approach and research nature<sup>24</sup>. In his essay *Traité du Beau* (*Treatise on beauty*, 1772), which was a continuation to his *Encyclopédie* article from 1752 titled *Beau* (*Beautiful*), Diderot brings out that nature is actually

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<sup>23</sup> D. Diderot, *Lettre sur les aveugles à l'usage de ceux qui voient*, in L. Versini (ed.), *Diderot: Oeuvres. T. I: Philosophie*, Paris 1994, pp. 176-177.

<sup>24</sup> D. Diderot, *Art*, in *Encyclopédie, Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, 1, Paris 1751, pp. 713-717.

the first starting point for the development of sublime taste and judgement<sup>25</sup>. However, he and one of his contemporaries, colleague and friend Jean Le Rond d'Alembert (1717-1783) often had conversations on the question if nature can be normatively interpreted. Since everyone's perspective is fundamentally different, they thought no borders should be applied to the separate forms of experience people get from nature<sup>26</sup>.

Regarding the imitation of nature, Diderot has a lot of negative opinions about the way the young artists of the nation are being taught. He thinks that the *Académie* does not provide their students with enough forms of natural reality – you are not able to achieve the understanding of the truth of the human body when imitating only the specific ideal body of the model presented to you<sup>27</sup>. Due to this, Diderot thought that many artists had forgotten the truth of nature: the only things that had remained were the superficial and false images that had been carved into their brain<sup>28</sup>.

Since they heavily relied on the practice of *écorché*, to teach students to recognize and imitate the various muscles and their ways of moving when a person changes their position. Diderot feared that heavily relying on this way of teaching could possibly take away the young artist's ability to find the balance between forced and natural poses in their own paintings<sup>29</sup>. In his continuation of the criticism of the *Salon* of 1765 called *Essais sur la peinture, pour faire suite au Salon de 1765 (Essays on Painting, to Serve as an Appendix to the Salon of 1765)* he wrote: «Toutes les fois que l'artiste prendra ses crayons ou son pinceau, ces maussades fantômes se réveilleront, se présenteront à lui; il ne pourra s'en distraire et ce sera un prodige s'il réussit à les exorciser pour les chasser de sa tête»<sup>30</sup>.

Instead of this, Diderot proposed that students should frequent public places with different social classes, workers etc., to give them an understanding of how complex the human body actually is<sup>31</sup>. The face of a painted figure should be able to reflect their personality and history<sup>32</sup>. It is important to understand the social, personal, economic etc. contexts and how they influence how a person interacts with the outside world. For example how some situations result in the stiffness or relaxation of select muscles in their body and face. The human body is actively changing and the artists should be able to recognise this: «Autre chose est une attitude, autre chose une action. Toute attitude est fautive et petite;

<sup>25</sup> D. Diderot, *Traité du Beau*, in L. Versini (ed.), *Diderot: OEuvres. T. IV: Esthétique. Théâtre*, Paris 1996, p. 89.

<sup>26</sup> L. Dupre, *The Enlightenment & the Intellectual Foundations of Modern Culture*, New Haven and London 2004, p. 117.

<sup>27</sup> D. Diderot, *Art*, p. 716.

<sup>28</sup> D. Diderot, *Essais sur la peinture, pour faire suite au Salon de 1765*, in L. Versini (ed.), *Diderot: OEuvres. T. IV: Esthétique. Théâtre*, Paris 1996, p. 470.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 469-471.

<sup>30</sup> D. Diderot, *Essais sur la peinture*, p. 470.

<sup>31</sup> D. Diderot, *Art*, p. 716.

<sup>32</sup> D. Diderot, *Composition, en Peinture*, in *Encyclopédie, Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, 3, Paris 1753, pp. 772-774.

toute action est belle et vraie»<sup>33</sup>. Diderot thought that the dominating religious and political climate in France is not letting artists depict the real reality – for example the abnormally narrow shoes painted on people’s feet to exaggerate the fashion style in both the high society and the dominating decorative painting style. This mindless exaggeration results in it being not truthful to nature<sup>34</sup>.

Another important factor in the stage of imitating nature was the masterful handling of colour, light and shadow, and the connections between the three of them. Artists must be able to imitate the harmony of the colour of nature. The handling of colour later moves to the last step of the triad: the painting still needs to achieve harmony between the colours used, but this does not mean the artist needs to imitate the specific colours of nature, more so they need to stand up to the challenge to create their own new harmony. This improvisation on the basis of nature is, however, possible only when the artist has become fluent in the colours of nature. Diderot considers these artists geniuses, who have the ability to harmonise any colour with the other, no matter the intensity. Same rules apply to light and shadow, since they function based on the same rules as colour<sup>35</sup>.

All of this is needed to create logical connections between truthful objects in a painting. The objects need to be in harmony and appear as natural as possible<sup>36</sup>. The perceiver of the painting must not have doubts about the expressions in the painting – they must look sincere. He talks about the famous sculptural composition: «Le Laocoon souffre, il ne grimace pas», bringing it out as an example of truthful imitation of the expression of suffering and the movement of the body<sup>37</sup>. In his article *Imparfait* (*Imperfect*) from the *Encyclopédie* he says that since art has always had a point of reference in nature, it’s only in art where you can find imperfection<sup>38</sup>.

## 2.2 Logic and coherence

The second step in the triad is logic and coherence, which Diderot looks for in every artwork he encounters – whether it be in composition, narrative or relations between objects and colours. Every work of art should be primarily ruled by coherence. If this is missing, it is not a good artwork<sup>39</sup>. In his *Encyclopédie* article *Bon-Sens* (*Common sense*) he states: «l’homme de sens a de la profondeur dans les connaissances, et beaucoup d’exactitude dans le jugement (...) l’homme

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<sup>33</sup> D. Diderot, *Essais sur la peinture*, p. 471.

<sup>34</sup> D. Diderot, *Salon de 1761*, in L. Versini (ed.), *Diderot: OEuvres. T. IV: Esthétique. Théâtre*, Paris 1996, pp. 209-210.

<sup>35</sup> D. Diderot, *Essais sur la peinture*, pp. 474-482.

<sup>36</sup> D. Diderot, *Pensées détachées sur la Peinture, la Sculpture, l’Architecture et la poésie pour servir de suite aux Salons*, in L. Versini (ed.), *Diderot: OEuvres. T. IV: Esthétique. Théâtre*, Paris 1996, pp. 1017-1018.

<sup>37</sup> D. Diderot, *Essais sur la peinture*, p. 489.

<sup>38</sup> D. Diderot, *Imparfait*, in *Encyclopédie, Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, Paris 1765, p. 584.

<sup>39</sup> D. Diderot, *Composition, en peinture*, p. 772.



de bon-sens au contraire passe pour un homme si ordinaire, qu'on croit pouvoir se donner pour tel sans vanité<sup>40</sup>. Since the conditions he repeatedly emphasises fall more often under *bon-sens* than *sens*, being the bare minimum a painting should have, it by default should be the bare minimum the artist's mind should be able to offer. This provides us a good explanation as to why Diderot holds this quality in such high regard and often reacts quite dramatically to those who go against it.

For example, referencing the works from Ancient-Greece, the composition of an artwork needs to be clear, without extra unnecessary additions. Diderot thinks that artists who prioritise simplicity and truthfulness (*le vrai*) are similar to Homer and Plato, since they also managed to depict the equivalent of a masterful imitation of nature in their literary works<sup>41</sup>. However he also brings out that the usage of symmetry is dooming for any work of art (except in architecture) since it is not convincing to the subject<sup>42</sup>. In the *Encyclopédie* article *Laideur* (*Ugliness*) Diderot speculates that the conception of beauty and ugliness only then comes to play, when social and cultural rules have been applied to the object in question, thus being constantly changing and varying in time and place<sup>43</sup>. So while Diderot strongly encourages many old ideals in painting, bringing in the perceptual view of the subject distances itself from the previously objective symptoms of beauty and truth in painting.

In his *Encyclopédie* article *Composition, en peinture* (*Composition, in painting*) Diderot brings out a more extensive overview and explanation of various types of coherence which play a vital role in the composition of a painting: temporal, actional, locational and the placing of figures. All these require the thorough understanding of context around the theme of the painting, which can't be fully obtained by the current ways of teaching art<sup>44</sup>. All of them also start, however, from understanding nature.

For example, the need for actional coherence requires the artist to understand how various different roles would in reality react and act to the actions of the protagonist of the painting, be it another person or an overall event. This relates closely to the coherence of the placement of the figures, which requires the artist to take their knowledge of actional coherence and tie it with the overall theme of the painting and requires the involvement of the artist's genius – the placement of the central figures needs to be brought forward by means not necessarily available in nature. The artist needs to focus on bringing out the idea of the figures and everything around them. For example, when

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<sup>40</sup> D. Diderot, *Bon-sens*, in *Encyclopédie, Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, 2, Paris 1752, pp. 328-329.

<sup>41</sup> D. Diderot, *Composition, en peinture*, p. 772.

<sup>42</sup> D. Diderot, *Pensées détachées sur la Peinture*, p. 1017.

<sup>43</sup> D. Diderot, *Laideur*, in *Encyclopédie, Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, 9, Paris 1765, p. 176.

<sup>44</sup> D. Diderot, *Composition, en peinture*, p. 772.

wanting to depict the illusion of emptiness, adding unconventional figures to the composition can work better than leaving the space empty<sup>45</sup>.

Temporal and locational coherence rely more on common sense than talent. If the artist understands nature and its truth, they know that objects or figures in nature often don't react as the artist may want them to. The artist may have a vision of a specific action causing a specific reaction, but they might not consider that in many cases, figures need time to form the final, most dramatic reaction. It's even simpler with locational coherence – Diderot explains this by comparing artists to poets: artists need to choose a central perspective, a certain point in time and place. But using words and verses, the poet can navigate us through endless rooms, buildings and places<sup>46</sup>.

However, Diderot emphasises that the achievement of technical brilliance can not come at the expense of the ability to provoke emotion in the subject. Diderot prefers the artwork to first stimulate the senses of the viewer, the mathematical side of the composition is in this case secondary<sup>47</sup>. So if the artist can find a way to distance from nature and logic while achieving the perfect illusion of unity and harmony, then Diderot considers this artist to have a great understanding of *la vérité* in painting. As he states in his Encyclopédie article Ingénuité (Ingenuousness): «Voyez Agnès dans l'école des femmes. Leur vérité donne de l'intérêt et de la grace aux choses les plus indifférentes. Le petit chat est mort ; qu'est-ce que cela? rien: mais ce rien est de caractère, et il plaît»<sup>48</sup>.

### 2.3 *Effect and emotion*

If the artist has managed to achieve the masterful imitation of nature as well as logical and coherent composition, then they have filled the qualifications to be able to add the final missing link in the triad of truth: an effect that provokes emotion. This notion of effect has both subjective and objective properties by depending partly on the rules of nature and partly on the artist's ability to create a sublime illusion or effect by often unconventional means. An effect of this importance is achieved by the ultimate victory and harmony between opposing aspects of a painting. Creating something like this gives the artist as much pleasure and enjoyment as it gives to the people standing in front of their paintings. This is often a great challenge to artists, since according to Diderot it requires the artist to be extremely confident and free, without being afraid to put both their soul and passion into their artwork<sup>49</sup>.

Thus only the imitation of nature and coherent composition are not enough to achieve this effect that Diderot is looking for. This is the stage of

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<sup>45</sup> D. Diderot, *Composition, en peinture*, pp. 772-774.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 772-774.

<sup>47</sup> D. Diderot, *Essais sur la peinture*, p. 498.

<sup>48</sup> D. Diderot, *Ingénuité*, in: *Encyclopédie, Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, 8, Paris 1765, p. 744.

<sup>49</sup> D. Diderot, *Essais sur la peinture*, p. 503.

reaching *la vérité* in painting, when the artist needs to take risks by bending or even breaking the aforementioned rules of painting, distancing themselves from nature and letting their imagination and talent run free. Personality is always more important than beauty, since beauty itself is almost never enough to have such an effect on the subject<sup>50</sup>. In the article *Éclectisme* (*Eclecticism*) he speaks about the need to create enthusiasm in the subject of the artwork: the artist in their endless genius needs to find either truthful or imaginary reasonings to the effects they create. It's exactly the ability to discover and understand these unconventional relations between effects that distance themselves from nature, that result in the strong enthusiasm and emotion in the subject<sup>51</sup>.

One of the possible reasons why Diderot holds enthusiasm in such high regard can be found in his article *Jouissance* (*Enjoyment*), where he associated the highest form of enthusiasm with the overwhelming happiness and pleasure that comes with falling in love with the right person<sup>52</sup>. Similar trends can even be traced back to his first big philosophical work *Pensées philosophiques* (*Philosophical thoughts*, 1745), in which he stated that strong emotions and passion are the key elements in the development of a person's soul and being<sup>53</sup>.

This kind of emotion-provoking effect can best be described and explained by specific examples from Diderot's criticisms, since one can understand the amount of power an effect has over Diderot after how his emotion and enthusiasm rises and falls while describing the painting to his readers. Since the creation of the type of the effect and the different ways it influences people depends and varies due to painting style, genre and context, it is almost impossible to generalise. Diderot understands this, which gives us the ability to see completely unique ways how he expresses and talks about both his and the artist's enthusiasm: «Au milieu de cet esprit de calcul, le gout de l'aisance se repand et l'enthousiasme se perd. J'aurai vu changer les goûts et les mœurs trois ou quatre fois, et je n'aurai pas vécu longtemps»<sup>54</sup>.

If all these three conditions have been fulfilled, Diderot finds there to be truth (*la vérité*). It presents to us, the readers of Diderot, as an intense rise of his emotions, enthusiasm and imagination, creating a complementary narrative around the piece of art. As Diderot himself said: «le philosophe est sobre, l'enthousiaste est ivre»<sup>55</sup>.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., pp. 477-478, p. 489.

<sup>51</sup> D. Diderot, *Éclectisme*, in *Encyclopédie, Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, 5, Paris 1755, pp. 270-293.

<sup>52</sup> D. Diderot, *Jouissance* (*Gram. & Morale.*), in *Encyclopédie, Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, 8, Paris 1765, p. 889.

<sup>53</sup> D. Diderot, *Pensées philosophiques*, in L. Versini (ed.), *Diderot: OEuvres. T. I: Philosophie*, Paris 1994, p. 19.

<sup>54</sup> D. Diderot, *Salon de 1769*, in L. Versini (ed.), *Diderot: OEuvres. T. IV: Esthétique. Théâtre*, Paris 1996, p. 873.

<sup>55</sup> D. Diderot, *Salon de 1767*, p. 620.

### 3. The Triad of Truth in Practice

Translating the language of art to the art of writing had been a long time interest for Diderot, starting out from the interest in the concept of hieroglyphs<sup>56</sup>. For him, art and language could never be separated from each other, for they continuously advance each other. One can see in his criticism and philosophical works that narrative is something he both welcomes and also creates when coming face to face with a painting. Like Horatio (who Diderot quotes regularly) compared poetry with visual arts, Diderot often does the same, attempting to highlight the potential to express the inner world of a person<sup>57</sup>. Like a poet reads and interprets the world around them, an art critic does the same with art. Understanding poetry is also closely related to understanding art – the role of the critic in both cases is to identify and evaluate various symbols, hints, narratives and offer a compatible explanation or reasoning<sup>58</sup>.

As the love Diderot had for theatricality and dramatics, it doesn't come as a surprise that he often uses dramatic narratives to further his point of the idea of the painting, or even imagines himself being a figure in the painting itself<sup>59</sup>. Being the primary link between the artwork and the reader, Diderot took on the role of a lector and most importantly, rhetoric in front of an auditorium, encouraging his 'listeners' to actually think about the art he was describing and dissecting. He was well aware of the preferences of various artists (in the case of symbols, narratives, techniques etc.) and often brought in specific context for the reader, to bring attention to various issues and problems in society at large or the local art scene<sup>60</sup>.

This chapter demonstrates various examples from Diderot's Salon criticisms where he used the concept of truth (*la vérité*) to characterise either select paintings or use the term to generalise some artists. Through these examples one can see how he differentiated *le vrai* from *la vérité*, using the first form of truth (*le vrai*) to describe and praise the ability to imitate nature at its simplest form – either in small details or bigger events. The other truth, the one we're interested in, *la vérité*, comes in only after all the aforementioned conditions are met. The aim of this is to display how both the triad of truth in painting and manipulation of power are clearly present in his criticism. Since the original research (Master's thesis, 2022)<sup>61</sup> was based on the *Salon* of 1765, then this chapter will follow only

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<sup>56</sup> P. Déan, *Diderot's Hieroglyph: Myth of Language and Birth of Art Criticism*, «Word & Image: A Journal of Verbal/Visual Enquiry», 15, 1999, pp. 323-336.

<sup>57</sup> J. Seznec, J. S. D. Glaus, *Introduction*, in D. Diderot, *On Art and Artists: An Anthology of Diderot's Aesthetic Thought*, New York 2011, pp. 2-4.

<sup>58</sup> P. Déan, *Diderot's Hieroglyph*, pp. 323-324.

<sup>59</sup> M. Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot*, Chicago 1988, p. 125.

<sup>60</sup> E. M. Bukdahl, *Diderot et l'art – éducateur de la société*, «Orbis Litterarum», 58, 2003, pp. 30-43.

<sup>61</sup> R. A. Eslas, *Tõde maalikunstis. Denis Diderot' 1765. aasta salongikriitika / Truth in Painting: Denis Diderot's Critique on the Salon of 1765*, Tallinn 2022.

select artists from that *Salon*. All painting titles are as Diderot presented them in his text.

### 3.1 *The Absence of Truth*

In the *Salon* of 1765, three great examples of the triad in relation of the absence of *la vérité* come from the criticism of Nicolas Bernard Lépicié's (1735-1784) painting *La Descente de Guillaume le Conquérant en Angleterre* (*William the Conqueror Disembarking in England*), Louis-Jean-François Lagrenée's (1724-1805) *L'Apothéose de Saint Louis* (*Apotheosis of Saint Louis*) and François Boucher's (1703-1770) *Angélique et Médor* (*Angelica and Medoro*).

In the first painting, Diderot found the scene to be not true (*le vrai*) or realistic in terms of what would actually happen in a fighting scene – the artist had made the appearance of the battle seem neutral, not understanding what would actually happen in reality. In nature, the poses and emotions would have been different. In addition, Diderot found the composition to be lacking in logic and understanding of the theme of the painting, expressing his wish to rearrange almost every object. And finally, the artist had missed a wonderful opportunity to use the emotional and intense nature of a battle to create a sublime effect. Thus this painting did not contain truth (*la vérité*)<sup>62</sup>.

With the second example, it gets a bit more complicated. All in all, Diderot thinks that Lagrenée is a real painter, who always works after nature and who paints truthful (*le vrai*) actions, simple compositions and has beautiful colourwork. The only thing the artist is completely missing is temperament. In the case of this painting, Diderot firstly praises his ability to imitate nature, then the simplicity and coherence of the composition. However he adds that since the composition and idea behind the painting is so simple, the artist should have worked more faithfully to achieve sublimity. In his opinion, the artist failed to achieve truth (*la vérité*) due to not being able to add personality and passion to the painting<sup>63</sup>. He declared: «O le grand peintre, si l'humeur lui vient!»<sup>64</sup>

As referenced before, Diderot had a specific type of distaste for almost everything Boucher produced (however, he did still always give praise where it was due). In the case of this specific painting, Diderot found Boucher failed to do almost anything correctly. Boucher decided to choose a painting depicting a very complex and potential-heavy narrative, derived from the famous epic *Orlando furioso* (*Orlando enraged*, 1532) by the Italian poet Ludovico Ariosto (1474-1533), which in turn was a continuation of the epic *Orlando innamorato* (*Orlando in love*, 1483) by Matteo Maria Boiardo (1440-1494)<sup>65</sup>.

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<sup>62</sup> D. Diderot, *Salon de 1765*, in L. Versini (ed.), *Diderot: OEuvres. T. IV: Esthétique. Théâtre*, Paris 1996, p. 417.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 323.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 323.

<sup>65</sup> M. Leone, *Converting Knights: A Semiotic Reading of Spiritual Change in Four Italian Chivalric Poems*, «Signs and Society», 2, 2014, p. 101.

Diderot starts with a description of the composition, bringing out the consistent incoherence in both the composition and various small details. He separately brings out Medoro's feet and various objects in the background as being too far from nature, being not true (*le vrai*) and bringing nothing to the overall painting. The figures in the painting seem to have no relation to each other, mirroring sentiments and attitudes that were in no way related to the original narrative. Instead of taking inspiration from the theme he himself chose, he instead portrayed empty cold characters in an unrelated scene, thus missing both truthfulness (*le vrai*) and coherence<sup>66</sup>. Since Boucher had not fulfilled the first two necessary conditions for truth (*la vérité*), Diderot didn't even start to speculate on what had been missing to achieve some kind of effect or emotion. To Boucher he said: «J'ose dire que cet homme ne sait vraiment ce que c'est que la grâce; j'ose dire qu'il n'a jamais connu la vérité; j'ose dire que les idées de délicatesse, d'honnêteté, d'innocence, de simplicité lui sont devenues presque étrangères»<sup>67</sup>.

### 3.2 *The Presence of Truth*

Finding and defining *la vérité* is substantially more complicated than the absence of it. It is easy to spot mistakes and suggest changes, but when a painting does have truth, it is often due to something unexplainable by just words. In these cases, Diderot takes use of his emotions. If a painting is dramatic and provokes strong emotions (like the paintings of Claude-Joseph Vernet, 1714-1789), then one can see it in the emotion of Diderot's words. If the painting's effect comes with its calmness (most often by Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin, 1699-1779), Diderot speaks of harmony and silence<sup>68</sup>.

The best examples of this can be found in Jean-Jacques Bachelier's (1724-1806) *Tableau de fruits dans un panier, éclairés d'une bougie* (*A Painting of a Fruit Bowl in Candlelight*), Claude-Joseph Vernet's seascape *Autre naufrage au clair de lune* (*Another Seascape in Moonlight*) and Jean-Baptiste-Henri Deshayes' (1729-1765) drawing *Le Comte de Comminge a la Trappe* (*The Count of Comminge at La Trappe*).

In the case of Bachelier, Diderot actually scolded one of his other chosen paintings in the same Salon, where the normally still life painter attempted to produce a historical painting, and according to Diderot, failed miserably at it. He even mentioned that the secretary of the *Académie* Charles-Pinot Duclos (1704-1772) was asked by a Salon visitor, what kind of a monster is depicted in the painting, thus making a little joke about the *Académie's* committee for choosing this painting to be represented in the Salon<sup>69</sup>.

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<sup>66</sup> D. Diderot, *Salon de 1765*, p. 311.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 309.

<sup>68</sup> D. Diderot, *Salon de 1765*, pp. 346-347.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 338-339.

However, Diderot gave the highest praise to his other chosen work, a still life of fruit. According to Diderot, the artist had taken on a very challenging task, to portray all the different colours when there is only but a candle to light the entire scene. The artist managed to masterfully produce the still life, creating a very natural and true feeling (*le vrai*) and the composition was laid out beautifully. The effect he managed to create was very unconventional and gave off a weird feeling due to the mesmerising colours illuminated by the lone candle, wrote Diderot. However, the bewildering effect had been executed masterfully and as a result the painting portrayed *la vérité*<sup>70</sup>.

A much stronger and emotional truth came from Vernet's seascape, which was a display of dramatic harmony between opposites. Diderot describes him as a great magician, and thinks of his paintings as something that «De près il vous frappe, de loin il vous frappe plus encore»<sup>71</sup>. Vernet and Chardin were the finest colorists in the Salons, which came especially into display in Vernet's seascape. Diderot praised Vernet's closeness to nature and his masterful execution of compositional harmony – every action had the right reaction. He even said «C'est comme le Créateur pour la célérité, c'est comme la nature pour la vérité»<sup>72</sup>, referencing how close Vernet can actually come to understanding the objective truth of nature. The baffling effect came, however, from making various intense colours agree with each other, creating a harmony between the gentle pale whiteness of the moon and the various colours of a raging fire. Inspired by the intense emotion resulting from this painting, Diderot declared it to have *la vérité*<sup>73</sup>. Diderot had also expressed after the Salon that it's much simpler to create harmony with colours that are weak and faint, than with those with intensity and ferocity<sup>74</sup>.

The third example can be taken as a direct opposite to Boucher's painting, for the theme for both was heavily allegorical and presented the artist with countless possibilities regarding time, place, characters etc. Deshay's allegorical drawing was based on a historical novel *Mémoires du comte de Comminge* (*Memories of the Count of Comminge*, 1735) by the famous *salonnière* Claudine-Alexandrine Guérin de Tencin (1682-1749) and others<sup>75</sup>.

Similarly to others, Diderot first brings out the truthful depiction of characters and scenery and praises the logic clearly present in the painting – the character's emotions are a logical result of the events taking place, their actions seem natural and real (*le vrai*). In this case, the effect derives from the emotions and actions of the characters, that have been painted with passion and *la vérité*<sup>76</sup>. Diderot's enthusiasm can be seen in the very first declaration upon

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<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 340-341.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 356.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 355.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 356-357.

<sup>74</sup> D. Diderot, *Essais sur la peinture*, pp. 474-475.

<sup>75</sup> D. Diderot, *Salon de 1765*, p. 334.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 334.

seeing the paintings: «Oh ma foi! on retrouve ici le génie de l'homme en entier. Ces deux esquisses sont excellentes. La première est pleine de vérité, d'intérêt et de pathétique»<sup>77</sup>.

In conclusion, It can thus be said that all the paintings containing truth have three main things in common: truthful imitation of nature, logical composition and actions, and some kind of effect that results in some kind of an emotional response from the subject. When looking at the examples for the absence of truth, the presence of some kind of hierarchy becomes clear, when Diderot starts to look and judge a painting. There can be no logic if there is no truthful imitation of nature as a base. There can't be an effect if the potential for one is ruined by faults in the overall logic of the painting. A painter needs to put a part of themselves in their painting – if the painter has no emotion or enthusiasm, the subject can't feel it either.

Truth found in painting is thus in theory subjective, as being dependent on the person's perception and influenced by countless *rappports*. However, Diderot's personal conceptions of the understanding and imitating nature were often seemingly a little steadfast in their unwillingness to succumb to the subjective liberty of the artist. Although he sometimes contradicted himself and swung from one meaning to another, using the notion of truth to describe paintings was a big step forward in his personal journey of metaphysics.

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<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 334.



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