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Alberti on the Surface

Marco Ruffini

This essay on Alberti's definition of painting as a surface or plane in the *De Pictura* is part of a larger study concerning early modern attention to the "surface" as a privileged locus of knowledge. Overall, my aim is not to recuperate a founding narrative of the Italian Renaissance, as much as to highlight a fundamental tension between a phenomenological approach to knowledge, in which the material and visual values of the "surface" acquire heuristic primacy, and an ethical conception of knowledge as invisible and hidden, as emphasized by long established hermeneutical traditions which read "depth" as the metaphorical locus of truth and authenticity. I am also not arguing for "art for art's sake," or the birth of aesthetics. I claim instead that attention to the surface in this period produced a dialectical relationship with its figurative opposite, which generated continuous attempts to redefine and re-signify that same surface. I also suggest that this tension is essential to the development of early modern art practice and theory.

1.

Scholars of Renaissance art have long recognized that Alberti's treatises *De Pictura* (1535), *De Re Aedificatoria* (ca. 1450), and *De Statua* (ca. 1462) offered an original comprehensive theory of the figurative arts. Born in Genoa in 1404, the illegitimate son of a wealthy Florentine merchant in exile, Alberti was in Florence by 1434, or perhaps as early as 1429 (Mancini 188).¹ He was mesmerized by the innovations in the figurative arts he recognized in the works of the new generation of artists active in the city, among them the bronze *Gates of Paradise* of the Baptistery of San Giovanni by Lorenzo Ghiberti, the dome of Santa Maria del Fiore by Filippo Brunelleschi, the statues *St Mark* and *Habakkuk* by Donatello, the *Brancacci Chapel* and the *Trinity* that Masaccio had just frescoed in Santa Maria del Carmine and Santa Maria Novella.

Also celebrated for their ingenuity and unprecedented naturalism by Alberti as well as his contemporaries were the famous experiments in linear perspective conducted by Brunelleschi less than two decades before Alberti's arrival in Florence. Indeed, linear perspective characterizes the major pictorial works Alberti must have admired, especially Masaccio's *Trinity* (1425-27), with its perspectival setting, which, as has often been suggested, may have been designed by Brunelleschi himself. These examples, Alberti claimed in his prologue, inspired him to write the *De Pictura*, which he considered the first treatise on art written by a modern author. The book was not meant to be a history of art on the model of Pliny the Elder in his *Naturalis Historia* (77-79 CE), the most famous source for classical art, but rather an explanation of the means and aims of painting for

¹ See also Boschetto (2000, 77-81), who postpones Alberti's arrival in Florence to the early '30s.

the use of painters. He dedicated the Italian version of the treatise to Brunelleschi in 1436.²

It is true, as Alberti says, that no past literary treatment of art by Italian authors was comparable to the *De Pictura*. The eminently technical purposes of its most famous precursor, the *Libro dell'arte* by Cennino Cennini, written one or two decades before it, were dramatically different. Even greater is the gap between Alberti's work and late medieval technical and pedagogical treatises such as the *De Diversis Artibus* by the priest Theophilus (early XII century). *De Pictura* is original above all for its theoretical breadth and phenomenological approach to painting as the discipline of the visible. "Delle cose quali non possiamo vedere," Alberti writes, "neuno nega nulla appartenersene al pittore. Solo studia il pittore fingere quello che si vede" (1973, 10).³ Mathematical and philosophical considerations, which address inner invisible qualities, he claims, are useless to artists. In his *Libro dell'arte* Cennini had stated exactly the opposite. In painting, Cennini wrote, "conviene avere fantasia e operazione di mano, di trovare cose non vedute, cacciandosi sotto ombra di naturali, e fermarle con la mano, dando a dimostrare quello che non è, sia" (1991, 17).⁴

Alberti's interpretation of painting as the discipline of the visible is centered on the surface or plane as its founding formal and material principle. Painting is not an idea or symbol, Alberti writes, but is all on a surface. This claim is grounded in a physiology of vision, fully explained in the treatise, according to which the visible world appears as a surface. Even the most complex composition of figures is virtually plane: "Parte della istoria sono i corpi, parte de' corpi sono i membri: parte de' membri sono le superficie" (58),⁵ as if reflected on a surface of water. For this reason Alberti attributed the invention of painting to Narcissus. "Però usai di dire tra i miei amici, secondo la sentenza de' poeti, quel Narcisso convertito in fiore essere della pittura stato inventore.... Che dirai tu essere dipingere altra cosa che simile abbracciare con arte quella ivi superficie del fonte?" (46).⁶

The notion of surface also emerges in Alberti's architectural treatise, where he writes that the aim of the architectural outlines is to define the surfaces of buildings: "Lineamentorum omnis vis et ratio consumitur, ut recta absolutaque habeatur via coaptandi iugendique lineas et angulos, quibus aedificii facies comprehendatur atque concludatur" (1966, 1, 19 [1988, 7: The correct, infallible way of joining and fitting

² The Italian version was probably written before the Latin version, but the question is still debated.

[Editors' note: on this question see the essay by Horton in this issue; and on the issue of whether Alberti really intended his works to guide artistic practice, see both Horton and Trachtenberg].

³ "No one will deny that things which are not visible do not concern the painter, for he strives to represent only the things that are seen" (Alberti 1991, 37). All future page references in this essay to the original and translation of *De Pictura* are to these editions.

⁴ "Painting calls for imagination, and skill of hand, in order to discover things not seen... presenting to plain sight what does not actually exist" (Cennini 1933, 1). Cennini's definition of the invisible as the subject of painting is consistent with the theological function Cennini and Theophilus attributed to this art. According to them, art and artists primarily serve God. There is no evidence of or interest at this point in a theory of images that would challenge this assumption.

⁵ "Parts of the 'historia' are the bodies, part of the body is the member, and part of the member is the surface" (68). This principle is repeated in Alberti (1991, 71).

⁶ "I used to tell my friends that the inventor of painting, according to the poets, was Narcissus, who was turned into a flower.... What is painting but the act of embracing by means of art the surface of the pool (61).

together those lines and angles which define and enclose the surfaces of the building]).⁷ This formal principle even applies to sculpture, the most plastic of the arts, which Alberti defined as a system of points applied to an infinite series of parallel cylindrical surfaces containing the object (*De Statua*; 1998, esp. 16-17). Alberti's notion of surface, or plane, is pervasive. It also informs his theory of linear perspective, the representational device that creates the illusion of spatial depth. Perspectival paintings, just like any other form of painting according to Albertian theory, call attention to the bi-dimensional quality of vision and painting.

2.

The definition of painting as a visible surface or plane in the *De Pictura* is informed by the underlying principle that art should imitate the natural world. A great deal has been written on mimesis, but it is nonetheless worth discussing a few of its principles to clarify the sense of Alberti's definition of painting as well as the thematic structure of the treatise.⁸

The production and reception of mimetic visual art revolves around two discrete visual experiences: when the eye is deceived by the work, and when it detects its deception. The first perception implies the possibility for the viewer to share, at least for one moment, the space and time of the representation. Objects or events look as if they were taking place in front of the viewer's eyes. In Pliny's *Naturalis Historia*, the most important classical text on mimesis in the visual arts, we are told of human figures so vividly depicted that viewers could experience their very passions and emotions.⁹ However, mimetic art also implies a moment of recognition of the illusory quality of the image, when the viewer's eye is directed from the illusionistic effect of the image to its material aspects, where the very mystery of mimesis takes place. Focusing on the parallel short lines Michelangelo carved in the marble, we extract ourselves from the illusory power exerted by the art of the master. The dissolution of the mimetic representation into the pictorial mark is a component of the same visual hermeneutic that creates the illusion. Linear perspective, the most powerful mimetic tool, magnifies and intensifies the noetic

⁷ All future references to the original and translation of *De Re Aedificatoria* are to the editions cited above.

⁸ In the vast literature on the structure and functioning of mimetic art, see the still fundamental Marin (1995, esp. 45-64). For a critical overview and a close analysis of the aspects of mimesis I refer to in this section of the essay, see Halliwell (2002).

⁹ Pliny recalls, for example, the wondrous skills of Silanion, who represented so well the irascible character of the sculptor Apollodoros, that he seemed to have created not a portrait of a man but the very image of wrath itself: "Silanion Apollodorum fudit, fictorem et ipsum, sed inter cunctos diligentissimum artis et iniquom sui iudicem, crebro perfecta signa frangentem, dum satiari cupiditate artis non quit, ideoque insanum cognominatum. Hoc in eo expressit, nec hominem ex aere fecit, sed iracundiam" (*Naturalis Historia*, 34: 81-82; Seilanion cast a portrait of Apollodoro, who was also a statuary, and among the most painstaking, a severe critic of his own work, who often broke up a finished statue, being unable to reach the ideal he aimed at; from this he was called 'the madman.' This characteristic Seilanion rendered, and made his bronze not a portrait of an individual, but a figure of vexation itself [1968, 68-69]). In this as well as in several other descriptions, Pliny contrasted the wonders of mimetic art as cultivated by the Greeks and the ancient Romans with the primitive taste of his contemporaries, exclusively attracted by the inherent (i.e., non-superficial) material value of an artifact or by the mere importance of the subject matter treated.

jump between illusion and awareness. It creates an extraordinarily convincing illusion of depth. Yet, as in a magic show, it also calls attention to the illusory nature of the representation, to the absence of depth.¹⁰

Alberti emphasizes the illusory power of mimetic art when he describes the miraculous virtues of paintings, capable, like real bodies in nature, of moving the viewer's emotions. Drawing on Pliny, and indirectly through him on Aristotle's *Poetics*, Alberti argues for a natural correspondence between emotional states, bodily movements, and facial expressions.¹¹ He also recalls the mesmerizing effect the inclusion of mimetic portraits brings to *historiae*. Even when combined with idealized heads executed following abstract rules (also included in the *De Pictura*) a resemblance to someone known, Alberti claims, will immediately attract the viewer's gaze with an extraordinary force:¹²

Qual cosa [the imitation of nature] quanto sia al pittore a ricercarla si può intendere, ove poi che in una storia sarà uno viso di qualche conosciuto e degno uomo, bene che ivi sieno alter figure di arte molto più che queste perfette e grate, pure quel viso conosciuto a sè imprima trarrà tutti gli occhi di chi la storia raguardi: tanto si vede in sè tiene forza ciò che sia ritratto dalla natura. (1973, 98)

(We can see how desirable this is [the imitation of nature] in painting when the figure of some well-known person is present in a 'historia', for although others executed with greater skill may be conspicuous in the picture the face that is known draws the eyes of all spectators, so great is the power and attraction of something taken from nature.) (1991, 91)

For Alberti, mimetic art retains the archaic power of images to make things present: "Tiene in sè la pittura forza divina non solo quanto si dice dell'amicizia, quale fa gli uomini assenti essere presenti, ma più i morti dopo molti secoli essere quasi vivi" (1973, 44).¹³

Alberti, however, emphasizes even more the moment of "disillusionment." The reference to the myth of Narcissus implies that the art and experience of painting is in the

¹⁰ Studies on linear perspective rarely focus on the attention perspective calls to the bi-dimensional nature of its material support. This is true of Panofsky ([1927] 1991), who dealt primarily with the function of linear perspective in producing illusory depth (which Panofsky interpreted as "symbolic form") and for Hubert Damisch ([1987] 1994) according to whom the representational power of linear perspective overlaps with geometrical exactitude with the way linguistic structures build our subjectivity.

¹¹ "Vero, a chi sia irato" Alberti writes in an example that vividly recalls Pliny's account of the sculpture cast by Silanion, "perchè l'ira incita l'animo, però gonfia di stizza negli occhi e nel viso e incendensi di colore, e ogni suo membro, quanto il furore, tanto ardito si getta." (1973, 72 [1991, 77: In those who are angry, their passions aflame with ire, face and eyes become swollen and red, and the movements of all their limbs are violent and agitated according to the fury of their wrath]).

¹² For the Albertian *regulae* for painting a beautiful face, see Alberti (1973, 71).

¹³ "Painting possesses a truly divine power in that not only does it make the absent thing present—as they say of friendship—but it also represents the dead to the living many centuries later (1991, 60).

first place knowledge of the unsubstantial nature of images. As Gerhard Wolf has noted, the Albertian Narcissus is aware of the illusory nature of his reflection (1998; 1999). Guided by this awareness, the artist learns that painting mirrors the experience of vision, a narcissistic experience *à rebours*. Alberti is very clear on this point: if reality appears to the painter as a surface, his/her work must proceed the other way around, from the surface to fictive reality.¹⁴ This identification between art-making with a knowledge of the surface is a trope in art literature. In line with Alberti, Leonardo considered the mind of the painter a mirror: “Lo ingegno del pittore vol essere a similitudine dello specchio, il quale senpre si trasmuta nel colore di quella cosa ch’eli à per obietto, e di tante similitudini s’empie quante sono le cose che li sono contraposte” (1970, 1, 253).¹⁵ In the *Lives of the Artists*, Vasari describes the ability of the Florentine painter Piero di Cosimo to see fantastic battles and deep landscapes on walls spit on by sick people (Vasari 1966-87, 4, 62).¹⁶

Under special circumstances art-making can itself become the subject of the representation, generating the same wonder and admiration reserved to illusory images. This is the case in the famous competition between the Greek painters Apelles and Protogenes over tracing the thinnest line. As Pliny had written, the resulting empty-looking panel crossed by three colored lines was exhibited and regarded as a masterpiece for centuries.¹⁷ Alberti refers to Protegenes’ and Apelles’ competition in the *De Pictura* to remind painters of the importance of “the recording of outlines” (that is, *circumscription*, the first of the three steps in the production of a painting) as well as to call attention to the shifting boundary between awareness and illusion. A line, Alberti writes, can be easily perceived as a crack, as a representation and not as a pictorial sign, the difference being thin as Apelles’ line.¹⁸

¹⁴ The painter, Alberti writes, “Ancora con diligenza sèguiti quanto raccontammo della composizione delle superficie, de’ membri e de’ corpi” (1973, 80 [1991, 81: (The painter should) diligently follow all we have said about the composition of surfaces, members and bodies]). See also Alberti’s portrait of the ideal painter at end of the first chapter: “Solo colui sarà ottimo artefice, el quale arà imparato conoscere gli orli delle superficie e ogni sua qualità” (1973, 42 [1991, 59: He alone will be an excellent painter who has learned thoroughly to understand the outlines and all the properties of surfaces [59]). This principle is also repeated in Alberti (1991, 60). Compare it also with the passage at the beginning of the third book, where Alberti refers to the work of the painter as: “descrivere con linee e tignere con colori in qual sia datoli tavola o parete simili vedute superficie di qualunque corpo” (1973, 90 [1991, 87: To draw with lines and paint in colours on a surface any given bodies]).

¹⁵ “The mind of the painter must resemble a mirror, which always takes the colour of the object it reflects and is completely occupied by the images of as many objects as are in front of it” (translations from Da Vinci are from the same edition as the original).

¹⁶ By reporting the anecdote, Vasari also expressed his disbelief in artistic creativity as an extemporaneous form of individual inspiration. Throughout the *Lives*, Vasari developed the contradictions and aporiae inherent in Alberti’s theory of painting as a clearly defined polarity between mimesis and higher forms of imitation.

¹⁷ For the interpretive problems that Apelles’ lines and the aniconic painting of Protogenes posed for art criticism, see the debate in Dati (1821, 235-40).

¹⁸ “Io così dico in questa circoscrizione molto doversi osservare ch’ella sia di linee sottilissime fatta, quasi tali che fuggano essere vedute, in quali soleva sè Apelles pittore essercitare e contendere con Protogene; però che la circoscrizione è non altro che disegno dell’orlo, quale ove sia fatto con linea troppo apparente, non dimostrerà ivi essere margine di superficie ma fessura” (1973, 54 [1991, 65: I believe one should take care that circumscription is done with the finest possible, almost invisible lines, like those they say the painter Apelles used to practice and vie with Protogenes at drawing. Circumscription is simply the

It is crucial to stress at this point the imperfect functioning of mimetic art. In principle mimetic art cannot be perfect, for that would imply the presence of what is represented and the absence of art. When Giovanni Pietro Bellori criticized Caravaggio for trying to surpass art without art, he was picking up on the idea that a perfect literal imitation of the natural world implies the absence of art. Protogenes' and Apelles' lines, on the other hand, are art par excellence. As Panofsky reminded us long ago, linear perspective does not reproduce, as Alberti claims, the way we see the world. It posits one immobile eye, not two continuously moving eyes. Moreover, we perceive images as curved, not flat surfaces. Consequently, lines are never straight to sight, as linear perspective suggests. According to Panofsky, these and other discrepancies highlight the artificial nature of perspectival space to which he attributes a symbolic value.¹⁹ The same gap, however calls attention to the functioning of perspective as a representational technique and to the work of the artist. Ultimately it leads to the discovery of the objective surface of painting, panel or wall.

In sum, if a perfect illusion implies the presence of the representation and the absence of the painting, its imperfection, inherent in mimetic art, reverses the quality of this relationship: it reveals the absence of the representation and the presence of the work of art. When Alberti refers to painting as a frame (as an open window) he is considering painting as a representation, a consideration that implies the virtual invisibility (the transparency, as he says) of the panel and of the artist.²⁰ When he refers to paintings as the intersection of the visual pyramid on a panel, he is unmasking the mimetic image, making the artist the protagonist of the discourse. The second book, dedicated to art-making, is similarly split. Alberti first praises painting for the illusory images it creates; in a second moment he instructs painters on how to create such images on the plane.²¹

recording of the outlines, and if it is done with a very visible line, they will look in the painting, not like the margins of surfaces, but like cracks]).

¹⁹ This imperfect functioning of linear perspective produces what James Elkins (1994) called as the "poetics of perspective," or the disengagement of linear perspective from the purposed aim of offering a literal representation of the world. Damisch ([1987] 1994) agreed that perspective does not reflect the way we see the world, yet he also believed that to conclude that perspective is a purely abstract construction is misleading. According to Damisch, perspective does engage with "reality" by building the external world in the same way language does.

²⁰ "Dove io debbo dipingere scrivo uno quadrangolo di retti angoli quanto grande io voglio, el quale reputo una finestra aperta per donde io miri quello che quivi sarà dipinto" (1973, 36. [1991, 54: On the surface on which I am going to paint, I draw a rectangle of whatever size I want, which I regard as an open window through which the subject to be painted is seen]).

²¹ The shift is in Alberti 1973, 52, where he defines the act of painting as the outlining and coloring of visible things, which appear to the painter as surfaces: "Dividesi la pittura in tre parti, qual divisione abbiamo presta dalla natura. E dove la pittura studia ripresentare cose vedute, notiamo in che modo le cose si veggano. Principio, vedendo qual cosa, diciamo questo esser cosa quale occupa uno luogo. Qui il pittore, descrivendo questo spazio, dirà questo suo guidare uno orlo con linea essere circonscrizione. Appresso rimirandolo conosciamo come più superficie del veduto corpo insieme convengano; e qui l'artefice, segnandole in suoi luoghi, dirà fare composizione. Ultimo, più distinto discerniamo colori e qualità delle superficie, quali ripresentandoli, ché ogni differenza nasce da' lumi, proprio possiamo chiamarlo recezione di lumi" (1973, 52 [64-6: We divide painting into three parts, and this division we learn from nature herself. As painting aims to represent things seen, let us note how in fact things are seen. In the first place, when we look at a thing, we see it as an object which occupies a space. The painter will draw around this space, and he will call this process of setting down the outline, appropriately circumscription. Then, as we look, we discern how the several surfaces of the object seen are fitted together; the artist when drawing these combinations of surfaces in their correct relationship, will properly call this composition. Finally, in

This ambivalence has a long history in artworks and art literature. Descriptions focused on mimetic representation, for example, define art as virtually absent. As Svetlana Alpers shows in her examination of Leonardo's notes, there is no difference between the description of a storm depicted by the artist and the description of the actual event, as if it were taking place in front of the artist's eyes (1960, 200). Descriptions focused on the formal aspects of mimetic works render instead the representation invisible. In Vasari's *Lives of the Artists*, for example, the close description of the lines and contours of Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* dramatically departs from the section of the same description that celebrates the extraordinary naturalism of the fresco (1966-87, 6, 74). Michelangelo is able to trace lines which, like those of Protogenes and Apelles, can be interpreted as signatures, visible signs of a unity of intention. These two modalities of describing mimetic art refer to discrete ways of writing its history. Roughly speaking, art historians who focus on the illusory image represent the historicist side of the discipline in all its multifaceted components. Those who focus on the unmasking of the mimetic image align with the connoisseurs. Of course, art historians look at both aspects of mimetic art, but the distinction between these two ways of looking, which mimics the functioning of mimetic art, and the emphasis on one over the other, has ideologically colored the history of the discipline. This is something we must take into account when reading Panofsky's interpretation of linear perspective or Rudolf Wittkower's analysis of Alberti's architectural theory.²² Famously, Wittkower argued that Alberti, in the seventh chapter of his architectural treatise, connected his endorsement of the circular plan for churches to the historical and spiritual significance the circular form held in Christian culture. Certainly Alberti took into consideration symbols and meanings. However, we may consider these semantic aspects of Albertian theory as inherent to his phenomenological approach to art and as leading to the ethical problem to which a conception of art as a knowledge of surfaces inevitably gives rise.

3.

Alberti's theory of painting clashed with a traditional critique of the arts which dates back at least to Plato. At the risk of oversimplifying, it is worth recalling that, within a conceptual framework that divides the world into ideas and matter and elevated ideal values over their material manifestations, imitations of the visible world can only produce false images. In keeping with this tradition, Marsilio Ficino, Alberti's contemporary, writes in his *El libro dell'Amore*, the earliest translation into the vernacular of his commentary on Plato's *Symposium*:

Socrate mio, se la natura t'avessi dati gli occhi più acuti che al lupo cerviere, in modo che e corpi che in te si scontrano non solamente di fuori, ma etiando di dentro vedessi, quel corpo del tuo Alcibiade, el quale di

looking we observe more clearly the colours of surfaces; the representation in painting of this aspect, since it receives all its variations from light, will aptly be termed the reception of light]).

²² Wittkower (1949). On the intellectual context of the book, see Payne (1994).

fuori apparisce bellissimo, certamente bruttissimo ti parrebbe. Amico mio, quanto è egli però quello che tu ami? Ella è una superficie di fuori, anzi è un poco di colore quello che ti rapisce, anzi è una certa levissima reflexione di lumi e d'ombre. (1977, 170)²³

(If nature had given you the eyes of a lynx, my Socrates, so that you could penetrate with your vision whatever confronted you, that outwardly handsome body of your Alcibiades would seem very ugly to you. How valuable is that which you love, my friend? It is only a surface, or rather a color, that captivates you, or rather is it only a certain reflection of lights, and an insubstantial shadow.) (1944, 142).

Alberti does not directly engage Plato's ideas on mimesis, but his phenomenological approach to painting is part of a wide-spread, competing cultural tradition that did value knowledge of the visible world. In opposition to Plato, Aristotle had claimed in the *Poetics* that men benefit from the imitation of nature. In tragedy, for example, the imitation of human actions produces a salutary cathartic effect on viewers. Aristotle, Quintilian, and even Neo-platonic thinkers such as Longinus, Plotinus, and Ficino himself offered positive reconsiderations of mimesis in light of the edifying purpose it might serve. Mimesis is justified, for example, when its aim is to represent religious values. Other thinkers replaced the object of mimesis with an idea of nature filtered by and subordinated to abstract principles (such as symmetry, proportion, and order). The mimetic image, as the result of a self-redeeming imitative process, was no longer understood as the copy of a copy, a twofold falsity, as Plato put it, but as an improvement on what is imperfectly given in nature.

This idea of mimesis is exemplified by the famous anecdote concerning the Greek painter Zeuxis, as told by Cicero in his *De Inventione* (II, I, 1-3) and, with some variations, by Pliny in his *Naturalis Historia* (35. 64). The anecdote relates that citizens of Croton (Agrigento according to Pliny) gave the painter Zeuxis a commission to decorate the temple of Juno (Hera Lacinia in Pliny). To portray Helen of Troy, the highest example of female beauty, Zeuxis selected the best attributes of the five most beautiful virgins of the city who served as models. This interpretation of mimesis as an intellectual practice whose aim is to fulfill an ideal model of a given quality by selecting and combining what is visible in nature, also made it possible to conceive works as exemplary imitations, themselves worth of imitation. Cicero concludes the anecdote by suggesting the imitation of literary authors.

It is important to highlight, however, that no positive re-evaluation of mimesis had the capacity of redeeming the visible world. Zeuxis' statement, reported in Aristotle's

²³ For the distance Alberti kept from Ficinian neo-platonism, see Garin (1972). However, Alberti's friendship and intellectual exchange with the neo-platonist Cristoforo Landino suggests a certain ambivalence. Note, for example, that Alberti greatly influenced Landino's writing on the figurative arts (Baxandall 1974), and that he dedicated to the philosopher *La mosca*, the comic proposal of an anti-Platonic philosophy of knowledge based on the direct observation of the visible world. In turn, Landino cast Alberti as a neo-platonist in the *Disputationes Camaldulenses* (1472).

Poetics, from whence it passed into the tradition, that “the ideal type must surpass the realty” (25: 1461b, 13) maintains a negative connotation of the visible. Mimetic terms such as fiction, *finzione*, *contraffare* (to counterfeit), *ritrarre* (to portray), widely used in art writing, especially after Alberti, imply the idea that what we look at is not real, authentic or original, ultimately not present. True, the verb *contraffare* is commonly used in early modern art writing to indicate mimetic representations based on the literal imitation of nature, such as portraits, and to emphatically celebrate the extraordinary naturalism of the image (Nagel and Wood, 2010, 283-84 and 293). However, the term always carries a latent negative connotation.²⁴ *Contraffare* inevitably indicated the absence of the original. The same dichotomy is at work in the concept of forgery, which emerged contemporaneously with the affirmation of mimetic art. (Significantly both Alberti and Michelangelo began their careers as forgers).²⁵ Art forgery, in fact, presupposes both a notion of truth, authenticity, and originality located on the surface of art works, and the possibility of its negation: that what we look at is neither true, authentic, nor original.²⁶

Alberti’s definition of painting is informed by this fundamental dichotomy. In order to come to terms with the platonic discrediting of the naturalistic image, in *De Pictura* he used various strategies, not always coherent with one another, to generate an artistic theory that is also ethically sound. In the opening of the second book, for example, in line with neo-platonic thinkers, he claims that painting can be instrumental for the expression of religious values. “E che la pittura tenga espressi gl’Iddii quali siano adorati dalle genti,” Alberti writes, “questo fu certo sempre grandissimo dono ai mortali, però che la pittura molto così giova a quella pietà per quale siamo congiunti alli Iddi, insieme al tenere gli animi nostri pieni di religione” (40).²⁷ To ground this claim, as we have seen, Alberti evokes the archaic power of images to make absent things present. In the third book, he also suggests indirectly that what the mimetic image may be lacking in ethical terms could be compensated by the goodness of its maker. Alberti concludes his discussion of mimetic art accordingly with a moral profile of the artist as a “Uomo buono e dotto in buone lettere” (1973, 90 [1991, 87: a good man versed in the liberal arts]). Alberti insists that “Conviensi all’artefice molto porgersi costumato, massime da umanità e facilità” (1973, 90 [1991, 87: (The painter should be) attentive to his morals, especially to good manners and amiability]).²⁸

Alberti also partially redeemed painting by redefining its object in line with Cicero. Painting should not reproduce the visible world but catch the ideal values hidden behind it. For this reason, he condemns Demetrius, the Greek painter who in a long tradition of art writing from Pliny to Bellori in the seventeenth century and beyond, stands as the personification of eikastic mimesis, the illusory imitation of reality: “A Demetrio antiquo

²⁴ Peter Parshall (1993) highlighted this fundamental aspect of the term.

²⁵ Alberti’s *Philodoxeos Fabula* (1424) and Michelangelo’s famous *Sleeping Cupid* (1496c) were both at one time believed to be classical works.

²⁶ On forgery, see Grafton (1990). Nagel and Wood (2010, esp. 275-99) stress that art forgery is only possible under a predominantly mimetic conception of art (or in their terms, art as a “performative model”).

²⁷ “Painting has represented the gods they [ancients] worship...for painting has contributed considerably to the piety which binds us to the gods, and to filling our minds with sound religious beliefs” (60).

²⁸ Note the contrast, which replicates the ambivalence of the treatise, between Alberti’s intention of constructing a deontology for the artist and the reference of these passages to its practical, even pecuniary, advantages (educated and amiable artists easily gain the favor of patrons).

pittore, mancò ad acquistare l'ultima lode che fu curioso di fare cose assimigliate al naturale molto più che vaghe" (96).²⁹ He praises instead Zeuxis, recalling the anecdote of the five maidens of Croton, adapted from Cicero and Pliny's texts (1973, 91). Painting, Alberti claims, should be guided by abstract principles such as harmony, symmetry, and so on. As clarified by Panofsky in his seminal essay *Idea*, this idealization of the means and aims of mimesis would become standard in sixteenth century art theory and praxis ([1924] 1968).

Yet Alberti also highlights the problems implicit in an excessive abstraction of the natural model:

Ma per non perdere studio e fatica si vuole fuggire quella consuetudine d'alcuni sciocchi, i quali presuntuosi di suo ingegno, senza avere essempro alcuno dalla natura quale con occhi e mente seguano, studiano da sè a sè acquistare lode di dipignere (1973, 96)

(Yet, in order that our effort shall not be vain and futile, we must avoid the habit of those who strive for distinction in painting by the light of their own intelligence without having before their eyes or in their mind any form of beauty taken from nature to follow.) (1991, 90)

Interestingly, Alberti interprets the anecdote of Zeuxis not as emblematic of the superiority of the ideal over the natural world, as in Cicero (Alberti's main source), but as a warning to the painter not to depart entirely from reality (an interpretation closer to Pliny) (ibid.). Zeuxis, Alberti writes, "Non fidandosi pazzamente, quanto oggi ciascun pittore, del suo ingegno...ellesse cinque fanciulle le più belle, per torre da queste qualunque bellezza lodata in una femmina" (96, 98).³⁰ In other instances, Alberti advises artists not to pursue an invisible idea of beauty, but simply to avoid what is ugly. He grounds this principle by listing exemplary cases from antiquity: "Dipignevano gli antiqui l'immagine d'Antigono solo da quella parte del viso ove non era mancamento dell'occhio" (70).³¹ "E dice Plutarco," Alberti also recalls, "gli antiqui pittori, dipignendo i re, se in loro era qualche vizio, non volerlo però essere non notato, ma quanto potevano, servando la similitudine, lo emendavano" (ibid.).³² The representation of sexual organs,

²⁹ "The early painter Demetrius failed to obtain the highest praise because he was more devoted to representing the likeness of things than beauty" (Alberti 1991, 90). Bellori famously criticized Caravaggio for being a modern Demetrius.

³⁰ "[Zeuxis] did not set about his work trusting rashly in his own talent like all painters do now...he chose from all the youth of the city five outstandingly beautiful girls, so that he might represent in his painting whatever feature of feminine beauty was most praiseworthy in each of them" (1991, 91).

³¹ "The ancient painters painted the portrait of Antigonus only from the side of his face away from his bad eye" (1991, 76, with minor variations). Note that Alberti identifies the painter with Apelles in the Latin version of the treatise (1973, 71).

³² "Plutarch tells how the ancient painters, when painting kings who had some physical defect, did not wish this to appear to have been overlooked, but they corrected it as far as possible while still maintaining the likeness" (76).

shameful and ungracious, should also be avoided in painting: “Le parti brutte a vedere del corpo, e l’altre simili quali pongono poca grazia, si cuoprano col panno, con qualche fronde o con la mano” (ibid.).³³ By the same logic, painters should avoid concealing beautiful parts of bodies: “I movimenti delle gambe e delle braccia sono molto liberi, ma non vorrei io coprissero alcuna degna e onesta parte del corpo” (76).³⁴ At the end of the second book Alberti boldly concludes that painting should be based on the imitation of natural models: “Così adunque conviene sieno ai pittori notissimi tutti i movimenti del corpo, quali bene impareranno dalla natura” (72).³⁵

Clearly, more than trying to harmonize the contradictions present in the treatise, we should acknowledge that *De Pictura* is informed by a fundamental tension between a phenomenological understanding of painting and the ethical question this formulation inevitably posed. This tension, constitutive of humanistic tradition, and at the core of the major contemporary cultural debates in which Alberti participated (on pleasure, love, the active life, allegory *in verbis*, and so on), would inform subsequent artistic discourse (not necessarily via Alberti of course). The criticism by others of Michelangelo’s work, the self-criticism of the master driven by creative and iconoclastic impulses in his middle and late career, and the debate about idealism and naturalism ignited by Caravaggio’s art are probably the most famous examples of how the attention mimetic art called to the material and visible aspects of artifacts confronted authors, critics, and viewers with the moral dilemma Plato established.³⁶ Once again, it is worth underlining the heuristic primacy of the surface. As Hans Belting has noted, images became the subject of critical controversy only after it became possible to experience them as a works of art, when their capacity to make present the subject depicted significantly decreased and their visible and material qualities received increasing attention and admiration (Belting [1990] 1994). The same principle applies to the establishment of rigid ethical standards for the figurative arts by theologians in the age of the Council of Trent. Even the process of secularization of the figurative arts that characterizes the Reformation, with the displacement of a religious aura by legitimate appreciation of the artistic images as material artifacts, can be understood as a result of a process of moralization.

Alberti evoked the myth of Narcissus to proclaim painting’s exclusive interest in the visible, but the myth inevitably also brought into the pages of the *De Pictura* the long-standing interpretation of the myth—from Plotinus to Robert de Blois, Dante, and Boccaccio—as a moral lesson on the treacherous nature of the surface. Plotinus, more forcefully than other commentators, saw in the myth an absolute affirmation of depth as the only dimension of the “real.” He freely transformed the Ovidian pond into a deep

³³ “The obscene parts of the body and all those that are not very pleasing to look at, should be covered with clothing or leaves or the hand” (1991, 76).

³⁴ “The movements of the legs and arms are freer, provided they do not interfere with the other respectable parts of the body” (1991, 79).

³⁵ “The painter, therefore, must know all about the movements of the body, which I believe he must take from Nature with great skill” (1991, 77). Alberti insisted on this point in the third book: “Ma chi da essa natura s’userà prendere qualunque facci cosa, costui renderà sua mano sì essercitata che sempre qualunque cosa farà parrà tratta dal naturale.” (1973, 98 [1991, 91: But the painter who has accustomed himself to taking everything from nature, will so train his hand that anything he attempts will echo nature).

³⁶ Nagel (2010) offers an articulated account of this dialectic.

running river: Narcissus, trying to embrace his beautiful image, fluctuating on the surface of the water, immersed himself in the deep current and disappeared.³⁷

In *De Pictura*, Alberti reversed the relationship between depth and surface when he claimed to have unearthed painting or brought it down to earth from Heaven: “Se mai da altri fu scritta, abbiamo cavata quest’arte di sotterra o sei mai fu scritta, l’abbiamo tratta di cielo” (86).³⁸ Ultimately, however, there is no attempt in the treatise to subvert the ethical order. The last words of the treatise are instead dedicated to an ostensibly insignificant act of vanity. Alberti expresses the desire to have his portrait included in the works of the artists who would appreciate it. “Solo questo domando in premio delle mie fatiche, che nelle sue [the artists who read him] istorie dipingano il viso mio, acciò dimostrino sé essere grati e me essere stato studioso dell’arte” (106).³⁹ We have further proof of Alberti’s passion for his own image in his medal portraits: the oval medal currently at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris manufactured by an anonymous medalist before or soon after the completion of the treatise, and the medal cast by Matteo de’ Pasti a decade later. Ghiberti’s self-portrait on the *Gates of Paradise* of the Florentine Baptistery may have also played a significant role in inspiring Alberti’s wish.

How readers unfamiliar with Alberti could produce his portrait without knowing his likeness remains problematic. Perhaps this was one of the purposes of Alberti’s medals. Clearly the passage reinforces the expectation, implicit in the dedicatory letter to Brunelleschi, of an immediate if limited (as recently demonstrated) circulation of the treatise among contemporary artists whom Alberti knew (Wright 2010). Moreover, how such a portrait would testify to Alberti’s study of the figurative arts can only be explained by recalling that the inclusion of portraits of artists and their friends was a common contemporary practice. Alberti clearly wanted to be part of the Florentine artistic community. As Anthony Grafton observes, the creation of common interests, which also constitute disciplines and social groups, is the major unifying element of Alberti’s multifaceted work (Grafton 2000).

Yet, the desire to generate through *De Pictura* a series of self-portraits is the last of several recursive returns to the myth of Narcissus, to that moment of awareness that is also a moment of self-reflection and recognition, a moment in which, according to the contemporary dictum “ogne pittore dipigne sé” (Baskins 1993; Wolf 1998, 1999; Mazzotta 2003). Matteo de’ Pasti’s medal shows Alberti’s profile on the recto and a “winged eye,” a symbol of vision and the visible that the humanist designed as his personal device, on the verso. The “winged eye,” accompanied by the motto *quid tum*, a Virgilian precedent for the English expression “so what?” subtly refers, with hazardous ingenuity, to the ethical question that painting as a self-reflection brings to light.⁴⁰ Thus, we are left in *De Pictura* with a notion of painting that comprehends but does not solve

³⁷ *Enneads* I, vi, 8 (cited in Panofsky [1924] 1968, 128).

³⁸ “If it was once written about by others, we have rediscovered this art of painting and restored it to light from the dead, or whether, if it was never treated before, we have brought it down from the heavens” (1991, 84-85).

³⁹ “If it [the *De Pictura*] is such as to be of some use and convenience to painters, I would especially ask them [the artist’s readers] as a reward for my labours to paint my portrait in their *historiae*, and thereby proclaim to posterity that I was a student of this art and that they are mindful of and grateful for this favour” (1991, 95).

⁴⁰ On Alberti’s emblem, see Watkins (1960).

the moral dilemma it raises: it suggests instead the suspension, even if only momentarily, of our moral judgment, as a provisory act of vision.

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