

The painter's doubts: from Balzac to Ramachandran

Courchia Jean Paul, MD

*Saint Joseph's Hospital, Dpt of Ophthalmology. Marseille. France
e-mail : courchia@numericable.fr*

Guigui Sarah

*Medical School for International Health in collaboration with Colombia
University Medical Center.*

Courchia Benjamin

*Medical School for International Health in collaboration with Colombia
University Medical Center.*

There is a little book written by Balzac, in 1831, entitled "The unknown masterpiece" (1). Honoré de Balzac is a French writer, novelist, playwright, literary critic, art critic, essayist, journalist and even a printer. Balzac's oeuvre is one of the largest in French literature with 91 published novels and short stories. He organized his work within a larger ensemble: "The Human Comedy". This book is a short book, with a contradictory title, with three main characters: Porbus, Nicolas Poussin and Frenhofer. They ask a single question about art: How to give art, a lifelike movement? The scene takes place in 1612 in France; Porbus a famous painter is in his studio. The young Nicolas Poussin, a young aspiring novice artist, comes to visit Porbus studio. On his way up to the studio he meets Frenhofer, Porbus' master. He has been for 10 years in the process of creating a work of art that he does not want to expose until perfected. Poussin offered his mistress, Gillette, to Frenhofer as a model in order to complete the work. Gillette reluctantly consents. When the work of art is done, Poussin and Porbus came to see the masterpiece, but they did not see the "beauty" that Frenhofer talked about. They only see colors upon colors... Porbus finds out the next day that Frenhofer has died after burning all of his artworks. Frenhofer represent in Balzac's book, "The God" of the pictorial failure. There is another painter known as a fail painter, Paul Cézanne. In the book "Conversation with Cézanne", we see that Cézanne identified himself as Frenhofer. Picasso will do the same. Zola will, like Balzac write a book about painting: "The Masterpiece", he will describe a failed painter. Cézanne recognized himself in this book and will be angry with Zola. This will be the end of their friendship. But Zola has seen something of a programmed failure, failed to revitalize what is painted. What is the meaning of art? Art is trying not to reduce painting to a fruitless attempt, to imitate things, to copy, but rather to make them the vector of expression (2). "Arts' mission is not to copy nature but rather to express it". This quote successfully summarizes Balzac's essay. "The aim of art is not to copy nature, but to express it. You are not a servile copyist, but a poet!" cried the old man sharply, cutting Porbus short with an imperious gesture. "Otherwise a sculptor might make a plaster cast of a living woman and save himself all further trouble. Well, try to make a cast of your mistress's hand, and set up the thing before you. You will see a monstrosity, a dead mass, bearing no resemblance to the living hand; you would be compelled to have recourse to the chisel of a sculptor who, without making an exact copy, would represent for you its

movement and its life". An as the painter has a doubt, the writer has the same doubt, this is why Balzac is sensitive to the painter's problem. Balzac will not describe a character by using words, but he will try to make it "feel" to us. It is the first advice given to a young writer: "show me don't tell me". It is the Frenhofer ambition, which will, costs him his life ... Porbus is only able to copy. Frenhofer will criticize the work of Porbus. On one side the picture is a success: "...when a figure is correctly drawn, and everything in its place according to the rules of anatomy, there is nothing more to be done", "...fill in the outlines with due care that one side of the face shall be darker than the other", "At a first glance she is admirable", "The perspective is perfectly correct, the strength of the coloring is accurately diminished with the distance". On the other side the picture is a failure: "Your good woman is not badly done, but she is not alive", "that she is glued to the background, and that you could not walk round her", "An image with no power to move nor change her position", "I feel as if there were no air between that arm and the background", "I could never bring myself to believe that the warm breath of life comes and goes in that beautiful body", and "Your creation is incomplete". What Frenhofer ask to the painter is to "capture the invisible". And this is a very hard task. In the movie made from the novel, "La belle Noiseuse", Michel Piccoli, in the role of Frenhofer will says "...every time I finished my canvas, I think that I should still make an effort, try to go to the end of myself, take the risk! ...". There is a risk in trying to catch the invisible. For Balzac through Frenhofer there should be 3 main things: First, the dilution of the line under the impact of the color, this is the confrontation of the drawing and the line, and the color. It is the opposition between Ingres and Delacroix. The line appealed to the mind, to the intellect, the color appealed to our emotions. For Porbus: "...for me painting is the line ... something clean, finished" for Frenhofer "...but there are no lines in Nature, everything is solid. We draw by modeling, that is to say, that we disengage an object from its setting; the distribution of the light alone gives to a body the appearance by which we know it." In a previous study we showed that Cezanne had followed this rule to let the color imposes the form. Matisse will find, with paper cuts outs the solution to get free of the line. Second, Frenhofer will use a glossary of straightness accuracy, telling us that the technique is not sufficient: "You artists fancy that when a figure is correctly drawn, and everything in its place according to the rules of anatomy, there is nothing more to be done", and "The perspective is perfectly correct, the strength of the coloring is accurately diminished with the distance". The entire unknown masterpiece turns around something unspeakable, which cannot be said, expressed. The spark, the genius, must be soluble in the work. Third, The lines should be diluted, but not completely there must be a remaining of drawing. In this way, the artist will try to give movement with fixity. Cezanne will say "...treat nature by the cylinder, the sphere, the cone..." but maybe the painter should directly seize the human form and go directly to the essence?

Vilayanur S. Ramachandran is a well-known Neuroscientist, director of the Center for Brain and Cognition at the University of California, San Diego. He will see the aesthetic from a scientist's viewpoint. He defined nine laws of aesthetics (3): grouping, peak shift, contrast, isolation, perceptual problem solving, abhorrence of coincidences, orderliness, symmetry, and metaphors. With those laws he is trying to explain how artists generate aesthetic in the brain. One of the main functions of early vision is to discover and delineate objects in the visual field. By grouping, we will

have successive stages through our visual “what” pathway in the temporal cortex. Through our limbic system we will have an emotional feedback until we recognize the form in front of us. The Peak shift effect: art will always tend to be a sort of exaggeration of the reality. Nikolaas Tinbergen an ethologist, (Nobel Prize physiology, 1973), studied the field of supernormal stimuli. He showed that female herring gulls have a red spot underneath their beaks, which is a target for gull chicks to peck at when they want to be fed. In an experience even a red line on a stick will produce not only the same effect on the gull chicks, but even more. Ramachandran will say that the exaggeration linked to the principle of discrimination of the forms. And it is the same in caricature and art in general. Ramachandran will conclude that the point of art is not realism, the purpose of art is not copying reality, is exaggeration, hyperbole, distortion of realism to please the brain. Picasso and Matisse created distortion. They liberated us from realism. But you cannot just make distortion and call that art! It needs something else. Indian artists use the word RASA for the artistic capturing of the essence; RASA is the soul, the spirit of something. Ramachandran says that the artist must apprehend the very essence of something to evoke specific emotion in the viewer’s brain. Contrast, without contrast, there is no form. Isolating a single module leads to attention. Ramachandran took again the concept of David Hubel and Torsten Wiesel (Nobel price physiology, 1981). They showed that sketches are very effective because cells in your primary visual cortex, where the earliest stage of visual processing occurs, only care about lines. Perceptual problem solving is making a more attractive object, if it is less visible, causing pleasure in the recognition of the non-immediate.

In conclusion, it seems that aesthetic visual reaction to beauty seems a rich, multidimensional reaction. The aesthetic emotion has historical parameters and symbolic development and it will be our culture that will be able to do something with the “experience of beauty” that affects us. Balzac will say, “The role of art is not to imitate, but to express nature”, Ramachandran will say, “The purpose of art is not copying reality is exaggeration, hyperbole, distortion of reality to please the brain”. Balzac will conclude, “The work of art must be the essence of the masterpiece” Ramachandran will conclude, “Rasa is capturing the very essence of something to evoke specific emotion in the viewer’s brain”.

(1) Honoré de BALZAC Le Chef-d’œuvre inconnu.

(2) Le gai savoir. France culture. Raphael Enthoven.

(3) "The Tell-Tale Brain: A Neuroscientist's Quest for What Makes Us Human" Vilayanur S. Ramachandran.