

## ROMANIAN ART AND META-REFERENCE

Odette ARHIP,  
Ecological University, Bucharest

### *L'art roumain et méta-référence*

#### **Résumé**

*Ayant comme point de départ la tentative intelligente de plusieurs musées de présenter l'art roumain par l'intermédiaire des outils médias, notre contribution consiste dans une interprétation sémiotique visuelle de certaines des peintures les plus importantes de Nicolae Grigorescu. Outre l'importance, un autre critère significatif a été la capacité de communiquer à travers la peinture des données caractéristiques concernant l'identité roumaine. Nous commentons leur valeur symbolique, mais nous insistons aussi sur la relation entre l'identité nationale (à l'intérieur et à l'extérieur de la culture roumaine) et l'altérité (communauté européenne multiculturelle). Du point de vue du transport interculturel, nous avons trouvé une source utile, à savoir la proposition de Catherine Kerbrat Orecchioni de représenter l'activité de communication. En tenant compte de son concept de « compétence idéologique et culturelle », nous mettons en évidence l'articulation entre notre propre identité et les représentations de l'altérité en passant en revue et en observant la contiguïté avec d'autres œuvres (les peintures du peintre roumain/les peintures des peintres européens), l'intermédialité (les connotations et les associations bibliques, littéraires, historiques, mythologiques musicales), les interactions conscientes ou inconscientes avec d'autres cultures, courants, données idéologiques, etc. La signification chromatique est aussi bien analysée pour identifier les*

*principaux éléments qui contribuent à transférer l'œuvre d'art du domaine national vers celui mondial par l'intermédiaire de l'internet. Ce type d'approche permet aux personnes qui sont membres d'autres cultures de bénéficier des valeurs de notre culture grâce à une compréhension plus approfondie.*

**Mots clés** *identité culturelle, sémiotique visuelle, peinture, message, articulation*

**Rezumat** *Având ca punct de plecare încercarea inspirată amai multor muzee de a prezenta arta românească prin intermediul tehnologiei media, contribuția noastră constă într-o interpretare semiotică vizuală a unora dintre cele mai importante picturi ale lui Nicolae Grigorescu. Pe lângă importanță, un alt criteriu semnificativ a fost capacitatea de a comunica prin pictură date caracteristice privitoare la identitatea românească. Comentăm valoarea lor simbolică, dar punem accent, mai ales, pe relația dintre identitatea națională (în interiorul și în afara culturii românești) și Alteritate (comunitatea europeană multiculturală). Din perspectiva comunicării interculturale, am găsit o sursă foarte utilă, și anume inițiativa Catherinei Kerbrat Orecchioni de a reprezenta activitatea de comunicare. Luând în considerare conceptul ei de « competență ideologică și culturală », am evidențiat raportul dintre propria noastră identitate și reprezentările alterității, trecând în revistă și observând contiguitatea cu alte lucrări (lucrările pictorului român/lucrările pictorilor europeni), intermediaritatea (asocieri și conotații mitologice, biblice, istorice, literare, muzicale), interacțiuni conștiente sau inconștiente cu alte culturi, curente, baze ideologice etc. Semnificația cromatică este la fel de bine scanată pentru a identifica cele mai importante elemente care ajută pentru a transfera o operă de artă din domeniul național la nivel mondial, și aceasta prin intermediul internetului. Acest tip de abordare permite persoanelor care sunt membre ale altor culturi să beneficieze de valorile culturii noastre, tocmai datorită unei înțelegeri mai profunde.*

*Cuvinte cheie* identitate culturală, semiotică vizuală, pictură, mesaj, articulare

The metalanguage makes mention to “metareference”, a particular topical theme, which might be familiar, albeit this happened under the name of “metafiction”. It has been mostly explored within literary studies (postmodernist novels)<sup>1</sup>. The common meta-dimension of Cervantes’ novel *Don Quixote*, Shakespeare’s comedy *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*, Mozart’s sextet *Ein musikalischer Spaß* or Woody Allen’s film *The Purple Rose of Cairo* is quite familiar and it has proved to be fruitful for any meta-phenomena. In our contribution, we approach the subject of self-reflexivity in the field of painting with obvious connotations about national specificity as a trans-generic attempt to present a less known nation to Europe and the whole world. Meta-reference encompasses complex relationships that entitle a special discursive meaning “at a higher-level meta-comment on elements situated at a lower object-level”<sup>2</sup>.

Nicolae Grigorescu is one of the most important Romanian painters and he is largely acknowledged as the first impressionist in our national culture. After the official birth of this current in Paris, in 1874, and its admitted label due to Monet’s inspiration, it was brought in our country too by N. Grigorescu. Other respected colleagues have to be reminded: Th. Aman, I. Andreescu, N. Darascu, J. Al. Steriadi. Although this current cannot be understand out of The Hill Circle and the people animating the Parisian boulevards, it applies to a completely lyric apprehension sublimating the reality. Achieving symbolic value, this painting manner gets very close, almost next to poetry.

---

<sup>1</sup> Werner Wolf (edited by), “Theory and Case Study”, in *Metareference Across Media*, Rodopi, Amsterdam-New York, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 17.

The two Romanian countries, Moldova and Țara Românească, carry on the noble mission of artistically synchronize Romania with Europe. From this point of view, Gh. Asachi's contribution is more efficient as he succeeded to impose art as a discipline at Academia Mihăileana, which had been founded in 1835. As a concrete result, many artists from Țara Românească moved to Moldavia and Iasi became a capital of aesthetic refinement. For example, a fervent admirer of the European spiritual directions and a campaigner for our national goals (independence, unity), Ion Negulici, tried to transpose the ideals of the nation into artistic works, although they are below average. Under Gh. Asachi's impulse, a kind of Maecenas, many Romanian young men studied compelling abroad. A true national artistic background came in sight. Besides Gh. Asachi, Carol Popp de Szathmary and Anton Chladek stood over Romanian cultural life and they also discovered Nicolae Grigorescu, helping him to be in the public eye. Chladek embraced both young brothers, Gh. and N. Grigorescu, in his painting studio and their first art product was the adornment of Zamfira Abbey. The whole activity of Nicolae Grigorescu was closely overlooked by Anton Chladek.

As a representative painter of Romanian culture, N. Grigorescu is well-known abroad due to some studies committed to him (Al. Vlahuta<sup>3</sup>, Barbu Stefanescu Delavrancea, Virgil Cioflec), but especially through his powerful capacity of imaging the national specificity. He was successful in presenting distinctive Romanian traits for the European people who were so confuse and convinced that our national space is only a blend of foreign influences (Greek, Turkish, Slav or Hungarian). Regarding this aspect, Petru Comarnescu, one of our important art and literary critic had mentioned, commented upon Brancusi's work: "any

---

<sup>3</sup> Al. Vlahuta's contribution was translated into French and it was presented at the Official Salon in Paris, in 1911.

great artist gives back more than what he has received." Exploring Grigorescu's masterpieces, we may assume that all his Parisian episodes had the value of real spiritual impulses, but not mere influences. Because of his talent and deeply rooted commitment to his country, we prefer to suggest the term of "cultural confluence" instead of "synthesis"; the confluence leaves perfectly round and integer the composing elements, but the synthesis unifies them. Looking carefully to his paintings, one may notice the confluence of folkloric ideas or themes and modern shapes. This kind of artistic dialogue is well represented in Catherine Kerbrat Orecchioni's model for communication act. She brings into attention the qualitative aspect of the message instead of the quantitative one. The both parts of communication act have different linguistic, ideological, mental and cultural certainties and the universe of discourse takes action compelling upon the code or decode message. We consider this model close to what we need in presenting our national specificity, but we are aware as well of the fact that speaking about the "peasant Grigorescu" is more a metaphor than a reality. All the outstanding modern artists, starting, for example, with Paul Gauguin, have searched for the record of Arcadian, primary features of creation, and, secondly or as an after-effect, they reveal national inscapes. This is the proper place to recall Jung's thesis of collective subconscious or as Paul Klee has stated: "Nobody has the right to assume that a tree produces its leafage exactly according to its roots. Between the lower and the upper parts there is no perfect symmetric reflection." Still, the energy of these roots beats powerfully in any branch and the genetic code of the whole plant lies in the seed.

His artistic skills developed and took up the impressionist trend in Paris, a place where he was sent with a fellowship, in 1861, by Mihail Kogalniceanu in order to improve and to accomplish his potential. Kogalniceanu was impressed by his talent proved through the mural paintings from Agapia Abbey.

Most of Grigorescu's time was spent in Sebastian Cornu's studio and he presented his first paintings, created in French environment, at the Official Salon, in 1868. According to Sidney Geist's statement referring to Constantin Brâncuși, it might be considered that "Paris and its exotic arts" were not only a "maker influence", but mostly "catalytic influence"<sup>4</sup>. Having in mind the same observation, Andrei Pleșu added: Grigorescu became a "Romanian countryman" agreeably to Goethe's conception, namely he became himself<sup>5</sup>. His personal structure of meditative countryman was in perfect harmony with Barbizon School (especially, Millet, Corot, Courbet, Théodore Rousseau). He absorbed easily the impressionist technique and, by bringing it to Romania, he has become a "crossroad classic" like Vasile Alecsandri. Both of them changed the public aesthetic taste, declining to reconfirm old ways to obtain success. Both of them succeeded to present the national identity into an ideal, pure manner.

Although the impressionist current is deeply concerned with landscapes, Grigorescu was focused on presenting people perfectly matched to the nature. The nature becomes a landscape due to a spiritual masterpiece or quoting Hölderlin: a free man is only the one living in the centre of the landscape as a participant, not as a spectator. So, a man may discover his own liberty due to nature. Apart of all these aspects, nature in Grigorescu's paintings burst with optimism which is a product of his patriotism and of his desire to present Romanian context as an idyllic one. It is almost a truism the fact the universal character of a culture lived in the very middle of its native nature singles it out and it has an impact upon aesthetic options, giving birth to art works revealing national

---

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Geist, S., *Brâncuși – The Kiss*, Editura Meridiane, București, 1982.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Pleșu, A., *Ochiul și lucrurile*, Editura Meridiane, București, 1985, pp. 67-68.

specificity and the artist's values. Grigorescu stands for Romanian representative intellectual at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. If Europe is already familiar with this phenomenon, Romania experienced the political, social, moral, aesthetic liberty only starting with that moment.

Our contribution concentrates upon several specific paintings asserting Romanian characteristics. They can be admired at the Culture Palace in Iasi which ranks high as it holds 26 of Grigorescu's masterpieces. The first one is a portrait of a woman. Its title is "Rudăreasa". The onlooker has in front of him an outstanding, young, beautiful feminine figure with a very appealing sight. Each nation has such brushwork, full of mystery, but yet defining the essential features of the collectivity. We may call to record Vermeer's portraits or those related to Pissaro, Monet, Whistler, *etc.* But this is a very general assumption.

Let's get closer. The woman's face is represented ahead of us, straight, well balanced, but in a puzzling harmony. Her position emphasizes heroine's indefinable beauty. Even the meaning of the word "rudăreasa" is a sealed one for many people regardless if they are native born or from abroad. According to Lazar Saineanu's dictionary<sup>6</sup>, the word designates a person who operates with gold in order to manufacture different kinds of objects. The woman is very aware of her magnetism and her eyes, absorbed in sadness and thought, do look forward to the onlooker. They convey a fulgent, beamy energy which challenges the onlooker to discover her identity. It may be considered the Romanian equivalent of "Mona Lisa". The black eyes are in contrast with that special white color experienced by Grigorescu in his last period of life. But the observation of the painting is clearly dominated by the woman's lips. They bring to light a subtle, riddling smile, asking again to explore her identity and all the rest

---

<sup>6</sup> Saineanu, L., *Dicționar universal al limbii române*, vol. IV, 1896, p. 413.

she stands for. From a symbolic point of view, the mouth is always a mark for people's way to Hell or to Heaven. But figuring it out from the same point of view, the direct approach of a person has the benefit of an obvious religious connotation - the desire to contemplate divine essence. The onlooker may accompany this appealing woman in her loneliness, although full of hope and willing to experience a dreamy happiness.

It is the same magic message sent by the whole nation - a mild, calm, enduring and forgiving one, but worth to be known with its manifold values and virtues. This feminine character may be also mythological associated with Penelope, an imposing symbol of constancy and faith. The whole painting excels in harmony, confidence into a future compensating the hardness of the past. It is an exquisite metonymy of Romanian people, but not in a naïve, nationalistic manner as the one encountered in Constantin Rosenthal's representation - "The Revolutionary Romania". Same artistic feminine ideals of Grigorescu may be found in other paintings too: *Portrait of a Countrywoman*, *Thought-Side Young Woman*, *Portrait of a Young Woman with a White Wimple*, *Woman In Front of the Fireplace*, etc. In this particular painting, he wanted to mirror the soul of his nation with that black, empty background, nevertheless an expression of a long unknown history which renders uncomplaining patience. The many descending lines of her neck or of her shoulders connote sadness and resignation. The impossibility to observe her arms gives way to even a more free interpretation.

Other details of the painting are relevant too. The color of her clothes, lack of adornment despite her job, the light brightness and the grace of her face point out the same characteristics: purity, eagerness to be known and cherished, puzzling wish to reveal her. The beauty is inserted in her look and into the artist's mastership of impressionist foggy shapes. The chromatic expression is well controlled, without impure excitements and symbols of

sophistication. All these hold good for the nation as well. Regarding this aspect, Grigorescu's confession when coming back at home from Barbizon is relevant: "My country has a feast-light. Its air is fresh, its sky and its scenery makes me startle as in front of a divine command<sup>7</sup>." The painter wishes to express the national identity through his canvas in the same way as Eduard Manet does ("A Bar at Folies-Bergère"), or Claude Monet ("The Cathedral from Rouen", "Le Boulevard des Capucines") or William Turner (all his paintings reflecting London or British atmosphere).

Grigorescu's feminine representation epitomizes the Apollonian period of Romanian culture: harmony, order, work, discipline, asceticism, rationality. From this point of view, the painter has also promoted modernity. Nowadays, post modernity prefers disorder to order, ambiguity to certainty, shallow to profound, differences to similarities, individuality to universality, past to present<sup>8</sup>.

On the whole, the painting is so mellow and bright, so that it would resemble glaze or precious stones. The artist is more concerned by the soul of his character than its physic appearance. The latter has very few to say especially in a period in which the female portraits (nudes prevailing) are too many. The painter chose reasonably a discreet form of expression, a sober cast of colors, because he is willing to impose a noble artistic ideal to the society. This is mainly referring to a rebirth of good taste. He rejected the enforced classical portrait, full of realist details, almost naïve. He disliked also fashionable art, meant for reception rooms, conventional meeting, and so he declined the flatness and the runaway success. He devoted himself to the national specificity, to

---

<sup>7</sup> Vlahuta, Al., *Pictorul N. I. Grigorescu*, Editura Tineretului, București, 1969, pp. 97-98.

<sup>8</sup> Brown, St., "Postmodern Marketing?", *European Journal of Marketing*, vol. 27, nr. 4, pp. 50-65.

nature and love, but revealing the pure essence of what is true-born, uncoined. He fought to understand the various forms of existence and he marked them out in a suggestive way.

Everybody knows that another painting is put forward as an eloquent example for revealing the national characteristics – “Car cu boi”/“Cart with Oxen”. This theme may be met at Stefan Luchian, Ion Andreescu, Corneliu Baba, Ștefan Dimitrescu too. However, Nicolae Grigorescu seems to be the most sensible, responsive to Romanian environment and he is truly willing to present his own vision for this country, its people and its nature.

“Car cu boi” may generally connote universal mythological themes like those of Moses or Noe’s ark, but even these ones bring forward the human right to set out the identity. Romanian folklore marks out pregnant the topic of setting up a nation or, as in the case of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the national pursuit to establish a united, independent country. The frame of the painting reveals an emblematic ethnic convergent point. Grigorescu has correctly assumed that national prosperity is not possible in the artificial context of European culture, although it needs modern form of expression. The painting itself and the other several versions (“Car cu boi trecand un vad”/“Cart with Oxen Crossing a Ford of a River”, “Boul Ghiocel”, “Car cu boi pe inserat”/“Cart with Oxen at the Dusk”, “Care cu boi la Oratii”/“Carts with Oxen at Oratii”, etc.) present a peculiar Romanian geographic form – called “plai”- which is a kind of spell of both plain and hills, the very place where Romanian culture is created. The same subject is carried forth in the painting “Ciobanas pe plai”/“Shepherd on the Plain” – the word “plai” has no English equivalent. On this proper Romanian landscape, the climax of spiritual achievement is attained. So, the paintings “Car cu boi” and “Ciobănaș pe plai” may be assimilated to a magic intake or a symbolic fetish of our pastoral civilization. Always akin to nature and salient animals, Romanian people lives a serene, calm and reliable way, deeply

confident of rough scenery which is underlined on the canvas: modest, friendly dwells close to weald, men enjoying the sacred, spiritual elevation symbolized by a bluish sky gently bound to transcendence, fuzzy, glowing chromatic scale coherent to the responsive, emotional component of our conscience.

Almost the same aspects are present in another painting – “Peisaj cu case la Agapia”/“Landscape with Houses at Agapia Abbey”. The essential items of human nature and of germination are overlapped in a typical Romanian display. The painting depicts nature at the temporal crossroad of summer and autumn, a particular moment recalling genesis, cyclic cosmic evolution from death to rebirth or contrariwise. The landscape is the native, free extension of the inner life of Romanian people, completely disjoined of an avant-garde promotion matter. Grigorescu is the roving spiritual ambassador of Romanian civilization and plain manner of life. The expressive quality of the painting is as well consistent for a native onlooker. Similar aspect, but for different nations, was used by Paul Cézanne (“Orchard at Pontoise”), Claude Monet (“Landscape with Snow at Argenteuil”) and Paul Gauguin (“Houses at Vaugirard”).

Other of Grigorescu’s paintings “talk” in same way about the painter’s origin, about his country. All the endophoric elements<sup>9</sup> serve not only to connect colors and world (“reality”), but also to “connect” colors and an autopoetic or self-generating use. This is a case of “performative reference.”<sup>10</sup> Performative

---

<sup>9</sup> The endophoric elements designate elements from within the work of art.

<sup>10</sup> Werner, W. (2001), “Formen literarischer Selbstreferenz in der Erzählkunst – Versucht einer Typologie und ein Exkurs zu « *mise en cadre* » und « *mise en reflet/série* »”, *Erzählen und Erzähltheorie im 20. Jahrhundert: Festschrift für Wilhelm Füger*, Edition Jörg Helbig, Heidelberg, pp. 49-84.

reference creates the very thing it is talking about and it draws attention to its referential status – conclusively, what Grigorescu’s paintings create is an instance of meta-reference<sup>11</sup> and not a mimetic one. In a broad semiotic understanding, meta-reference stands for a non-accidental quality of signs and sign configuration that points out aspects of themselves or to other signs “within one and the same semiotic system of which they are a part”<sup>12</sup> rather than to reality outside the sign system.

## Bibliography

- Geist, S. (1982), *Brâncuși – The Kiss*, Editura Meridiane, București.
- Iser, W. (1993), *The Fictive and the Imaginary: Charting Literary Anthropology*, Johns Hopkins UP, Baltimore.
- Pleșu, A. (1985), *Ochiul și lucrurile*, Editura Meridiane, București.
- Saineanu, L. (1996), *Dicționar universal al limbii române*, Editura Mydo Center, Iași.
- Vlahuta, Al. (1969), *Pictorul N. I. Grigorescu*, Editura Tineretului, București.
- Werner, W. (2001), “Formen literarischer Selbsreferenz in der Erzählkunst – Versucht einer Typologie und ein Exkurs zu « *mise en cadre* » und « *mise en reflet/série* », *Erzählen und Erzähltheorie im 20. Jahrhundert: Festschrift für Wilhelm Füger*, Édition Jörg Helbig, Heidelberg, pp. 49-84.

---

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Iser, W., *The Fictive and the Imaginary: Charting Literary Anthropology*, Johns Hopkins UP, Baltimore, 1993.

<sup>12</sup> Werner, W. (2001), “Formen literarischer Selbsreferenz in der Erzählkunst – Versucht einer Typologie und ein Exkurs zu « *mise en cadre* » und « *mise en reflet/série* »”, *Erzählen und Erzähltheorie im 20. Jahrhundert: Festschrift für Wilhelm Füger*, Edition Jörg Helbig, Heidelberg, p. 19.