ICONICITY BETWEEN LITERATURE AND PAINTING

in Brazilian modernist portraits

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Abstract. This article deals with an intermedial and intersemiotic phenomenon characteristic of Brazilian modernism: the pictorial portrait of writers by painters, their contemporaries. Its objective is to argue th at Brazilian modernist pictorial portraits have gone from a mimetic representation (practiced in previous artistic periods) of the portrayed to a relationship in which the portrait represents the interrelationship between modernist writers and painters. In this case, the portrait, as an icon, determines its object of representation. This article is a part of a larger research project that analyses the intermedial relations between literature and painting in Brazilian modernism.

Keywords: iconicity, intermediality, portraits, Brazilian modernism

Ikoonilisus kirjanduse ja maali vahel Brasiilia modernistide portreedes

Abstrakt. Artikkel tegeleb Brasiilia modernismis iseloomulike intermeedialiste ja intersemiootiliste nähtusega – kirjanike portreedega, mille on teinud nende kaasaegsed kunstnikud. Artikli eesmärk on väita, et Brasiilia modernistide portreed on muutunud mimeetilisest representatsioonist (mida harrastati eeneval kunstiperioodil) suhteks, mis representeerib modernistliku kunstniku ja kirjaniku suhestumist. Antud juhul on portree ikoon, mis määrab oma representatsiooni objekti. Artikkelon osa laiemast uurimistööst, mis analüüsib intermediaalseid suhteid kirjanduse ja maalikunsti vahel Brasiilia modernismis.

Märksõnad: ikoonilisus, intermediaalsus, portreed, Brasiilia modernism



1. Introduction

This article discusses, in an introductory way, the iconic relationship between literature and painting in Brazilian modernist portraits. Brazilian Modernism was an artistic movement of extreme importance to the country's culture, but its origin remains undefined. About this, Simioni (2013) states that "the most widespread view considers that the spark of the modernist movement took place in 1922 in São Paulo" in the Week of Modern Art (Simioni 2013: 2). It was influenced by European artistic movements, but in Brazil several national characteristics were incorporated. The movement's aesthetic design is characterised by the replacement of a traditional language with a new modern language, which breaks with the formal rules of representation of traditional academic art (art system that remained in Brazil from the beginning of the 19th century to the beginning of the 20th century).

We observe, in the period of Brazilian Modernism, a great incidence of portraits of writers. In a preliminary investigation of forty-six writers, we find portraits of twenty-three of them, some with more than one work by modernist painters. Although quantitatively relevant, this phenomenon is still little explored in semiotic terms. In these portraits, it is possible to observe a relationship between literature and painting in the construction of a semiotic object, considering that, in this period, partnerships and exchanges between different arts intensified, since "what characterizes modern movements are programs and manifestos shared by artists from various fields" (Clüver 2001: 350).

The modernist movement instituted itself as an intermedial cultural phenomenon. Aesthetic and/or artistic communication is built by a complex network of media relations. Through the pictorial portrait of modernist writers, we can delve into the complexity of the intersection between painting and literature. This approach is not intended to discuss in-depth foundations of semiotics. We use the notion of iconicity parsimoniously, to overcome mimetic descriptions of artistic representation in Brazilian modernist portraits. Painters of this movement, when representing a writer, select and display aspects of his own work, mixed with the work of the artist portrayed. Together they create the object of the portrait, because the act of painting and writing demands a set of collective strategies in the choice of strokes, colours, themes, rhymes and metric patterns. Writers and painters are influenced by the guiding principles of the modernist artistic movement, so we argue that the portrait is not just the mimesis/resemblance of an existing object (the portrayed artist), but a semiotic object constructed from literary and pictorial works.

In the next section, we introduce the basic concepts of iconicity and portrait painting. Next, we relate these concepts to the collaboration established between painting and literature in the portraits of Brazilian Modernism. In the final subsection, we exemplify it with the analysis of the *Retrato de Mário de Andrade*, 1922, by Anita Malfatti.



2. Iconicity and Portrait

The basic concept of iconicity, in Peirce's semiotics, is presented in his second trichotomy of sign types, the well-known distinction between icons, indices, and symbols. This trichotomy deals with the relationship between the sign and its object, which can take three different forms. When we say that a sign is an icon of its object, we are saying that the sign shares certain properties or qualities that the object possesses and, thus, we can affirm that it is a quality of its object (CP 2.276). A sign, according to Peirce (CP 2.228)², can be described as:

[...] that, in a certain way or aspect, represents something to someone. It is addressed to someone, that is, it creates in that person's mind an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. To the sign thus created I call the interpretant of the first sign. The sign represents something, its object [...] (CP 2.228).

The sign "represents something for the idea that causes or changes it. In other words, it is the vehicle that communicates something from the outside to the mind. The 'represented' is its object; the statement, the meaning, the idea that it provokes, its interpretant" (CP. 1.339). The relationship between sign and object was the first aspect observed by Peirce to classify signs. This system, the first proposed by Peirce, consists of three classes: icon, index and symbol (EP 1:225).

According to Peirce (CP 2.228), the connection of the iconic sign to the object occurs under some aspect or quality, in which the sign is linked to the object not by virtue of all aspects of the object. As Merrel (2003: 168) sums it up: "a sign that is similar to its object is an icon (for example, a portrait)". When we say that a sign is an icon of its object, we are saying that this sign shares certain properties or qualities that this object possesses and, thus, we can affirm that it is a quality of its object (CP 2.276). Introducing the concepts of sign, object and icon, we move on to the approach of iconicity, which can be defined as "the degree in which an icon is similar to its object" (Nöth 2013: 22).

In our approach, we can raise some questions: What is the role of iconicity in the joint action of different media (literature and painting)? This article is based on the assumption that iconicity is a relationship between sign and object in which the sign determines the object. The operational definition of the icon is discussed by Frederik Stjernfelt (2011), in his article: "On operational and optimal iconicity in Peirce's diagrammatology" in which the author states that the icon is defined as a

² Peirce's works will be referenced, following academic tradition, as follows:

⁻ CP, followed by volume number, and paragraph number: Hartshorne, Charles; Weiss, Paul & Burks, Arthur W. (eds.). (1931-1958). *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce* (8 volumes). Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

⁻ EP 1, followed by page number: Houser, Nathan & Kloesel, Christian J. W. (eds.) 1992. *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings. Vol. 1 (1867-1893).* Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.



type of sign that is able to reveal new information about its object. For Hookway (2000: 102), "The key to iconicity is not the perceived similarity between the sign and what it means, but rather the possibility of making new discoveries about the object of a sign through the observation of characteristics of the sign itself". As Stjernfelt (2007) adds: similarity is not enough to define an icon. According to the author, Peirce agrees with the need for a determination of the icon beyond mere similarity (Stjernfelt 2007: 50).

Stjernfelt explains the relation of the icon to the concept of similarity:

The icon has an epistemologically crucial property: the operational specification of the concept of similarity. The icon is not only the only type of sign that presents directly some of the qualities of its object; is also the only sign by whose contemplation one can learn more than the directions for the construction of the sign [...] (Stjernfelt 2007: 398).

It is necessary to consider that the icon is a sign that has a certain autonomy to determine its object, as it determines what we can know about an object. The artistic properties shared between painter and modernist writer define the portrait, creating a notion of joint similarity between their work, an interchange between two semiotic languages (painting and literature).

In view of the conceptualisation of intersemiotic translation presented by Queiroz and Aguiar (2010: 2), in which "a translation is a type of relationship (semiotic and iconic) between multi-structured processes", we can state that the phenomenon investigated here is characterised as intersemiotic translation. This term was initially described by Jakobson (1959) as the transmutation of signs from a verbal semiotic system to another system, of a different nature, non-verbal. According to Queiroz and Atã (2018), "the notion of intersemiotic translation (IT) is necessarily linked to the notion of semiosis (action of the sign), by C.S. Peirce, and is based on its logical and epistemological principles" (Queiroz and Atã 2018: 208). In modernism, the intersemiotic translation between literature and painting occurs with great frequency.

What interests us in this article is to explore iconicity in portraits. Pictures are typically iconic signs (Nöth 2013: 2). Through the modernist pictorial portrait, an idea of the represented writer is formed. It is as if something could be replaced by another that resembles it. But the notion of similarity is not as simple as it seems at first. The similarity in the scope of the iconic signs is not a similarity between the sign and the object, but between the sign and some characteristics of the phenomenon (of the object) that were captured and began to compose the perceptual structure, such as aspects, physiognomic traits, face, type of clothing, hair, and objects that are characteristic of the person, such as the writer Mário de Andrade and his round glasses (see fig. 1).



Iconic signs require social knowledge to be understood, and as such are not 'pure' icons. Pure icons "are completely replaced by their objects as they can hardly be distinguished from them. [...] The distinction of the real and the copy disappears and is the moment of pure dream, – not any particular existence, and yet not general" (CP 3.362).

Savan states that, for Peirce, "the object is the empirical environment to which we have collateral knowledge, regardless of the action of the sign. It is the context, the circumstances, the situation that is shared by the sign and the interpreter" (Savan, 1977: 190). Peirce clarifies that "to know the object, what is needed is the prior experience of this Individual object" (CP 8.181).

As Collateral Observation I do not mean intimacy (familiarity) with the sign system. What is thus inferred is not collateral, on the contrary, constitutes the prerequisite to get any meaning idea of the sign. By Collateral Observation I want to refer to the previous intimacy with what the sign denotes (CP-8.179).

The collateral experience concerns what is outside the sign, what is outside the interpretant, but which can help in its interpretation, and, consequently, in the action of the interpretant's sign and object. This is because, despite being an effect produced by the sign, what in fact the interpretant seeks to affect is the object (Santaella: 1995).

In our approach, the sign is the portrait, and the object is a relationship between painting and literature. These concepts are fundamental to understand how the painted portraits of writers are complex signs that determine the object of the portrait.

Throughout its history in western art, the portrait had to deal with the concept of similarity, since its goal was to mimic the depicted model, following strict production rules (West: 2004). However, this definition subtracts from the portrait its most notable complexities. We must consider that several issues affect and influence the portrait, which is a complex semiotic process, heavily dependent on context.

For many theorists, the function of portraiture is to mimic individuals, often representing their social status, hierarchical position, ethnic profile, religious and political position, among others. According to Graham (2006: 89), *mimesis* (from which we get the word "mimic") is the Greek term, variously translated as resemblance, copy and representation, which art philosophers often employ. Graham (2006) adds that, in pictorial portraiture, we are inclined to think of representation as a copy, to some extent, because the dominant convention in painting has been to portray by way of strict resemblance. According to Peirce:

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³ It is known that the notion of iconicity should not be seen as pure iconicity, this subject was addressed, for example, by Umberto Eco (1998).



We say the portrait of someone we haven't seen is convincing. To the extent that, just based on what I see in him, I am led to form an idea of the person he represents, the portrait is an icon. But, in fact, it is not a pure icon, because I am greatly influenced by the fact that it is an effect, through the artist, accused by the aspect of the original, and is thus in a genuine obsistent relationship with that original. Moreover, I know that portraits have only the slightest resemblance to the original, except in certain conventional aspects and according to a conventional scale of values etc. (CP 2.292)

We can associate this discussion, related to the problems of considering portrait as mimesis, with a more general discussion about the semiotic problems of the very notion of similarity that is related to mimesis. According to Queiroz (2010: 325), "There are many dangers related to the notion of similarity, especially its trivilialisation as identity and its psychologisation as referring to impressions of similarity [...]" (ibid). In modernism, the pictorial portraits of writers do not represent "only" the physiognomic resemblance, but complex representational or semiotic processes, in which several aspects shared between literature and painting are observed. Similarity is not a necessary condition for significance in portraits. This role of iconicity, not based solely on similarity, finds support in the idea of iconicity as dealt with by Peirce's semiotics. Considering that iconicity can be understood as relative dependence of the sign to determine its object (Queiroz: 2012), in the pictorial portraits of modernist writers, the sign (inter-relation literature and painting) determines the object of the portrait. In the next section, we will present a table (Fig.1) with some of these pictures to illustrate the argument.

3. Iconicity between painting and literature in portraits of Brazilian Modernism

The distinction between poetry and painting is based on their material features and languages (verbal and non-verbal). In this section, we will investigate the iconic relationship in the intersections and interactions between these two arts (media).

How can we show the relationship between literature and painting? What does this mean in Brazilian Modernism? Brazilian modernist portraits are examples of how literature and painting determine an object. To illustrate, I present the work *Retrato de Mário de Andrade,* 1922, by Anita Malfatti, next to a photography (common representation technique, for being the most practiced to represent the model faithfully), to demonstrate how modernist portraits select some aspects to be represented in portraits, and how verisimilitude is not the most relevant aspect.

In modernist pictorial portraits, even if a connection through similarity is not direct, as in photography, we are dealing with a highly iconic phenomenon. "The more nebulous or ambiguous for a sign-to-object relationship, the more the sign reports to it via allusions, suggestions, the more prominent its iconic aspect" (Souza and Drigo 2012: 91).



PORTRAIT OF THE WRITER Retrato de Mário de Andrade, by Anita Malfatti, 1922. Photograph of Mário de Andrade, 1930. Source: Instituto IEB USP. Photograph of Mário de Andrade, 1930. Source: Instituto IEB USP.

Fig. 1: Pictorial portrait of Mário de Andrade and his photograph.

The icon represents its object by virtue of a characteristic of itself (of the icon). In Brazilian Modernism we can consider that the "similarity" represented in the portrait is constructed and negotiated between the literary and pictorial characteristics of the writers and painters portrayed in the work.

What are these characteristics negotiated and revealed through the relationship between painter and poet in Brazilian Modernism? Literary modernism is characterised, according to Braga (2006), by the problem of the formation of structures, in the use of language, the unification of form, in the social meaning of the artist himself, in the largely symbolist aesthetics, and in the avant-garde conception of the artists (Braga 2006: 14-18). Other authors discuss methods and/or concepts related to the modernist movement (Aranha 1925, Lafetá 2000 [1930], Oliveira 2001, Simioni 2013). According to Maia (2006), the main characteristics of modernist poetry are: (i) experimentation with colloquial language in literature; (ii) exploration of everyday themes; (iii) valorisation of nationalist themes; (iv) study of national identity (Maia 2006: 108-110).

In this model of collective aesthetic organisation, experimentation with language destroyed the barriers of traditional language, adding to it the liberating and enlarging force of folklore and popular literature, as advocated by Lafetá (2004: 57).

Already in the field of painting, modernism, even if influenced by international "isms", managed to revolutionise the aesthetic standards of the plastic arts. The art critic Meyer Schapiro (1996) points out three characteristics of modern painting: arbitrariness in the use of forms, absence of figurative images, and freedom in the use



of colours and technique (Schapiro 1996). The use of various materials allowed exploration of new effects (volumes, textures, planes).

In the *Retrato de Mario de Andrade*, we were able to observe these characteristics. In the work of Anita Malfatti, there is no concern for verisimilitude. Sharp strokes are used, with strong colours, stains and lines, mainly to disconnect us from the similarity relation with the represented object.

Savan (1977) emphasises the question of the context of the sign, to understand some information about the object that the sign alone cannot represent, it is important to observe the context in which the sign is inserted. In the example to be analysed, it is necessary to investigate what is the relationship between the aesthetic project of the writer Mário de Andrade and the work of the painter Anita Malfatti.

3.1. Analysis of the relationship between painting and literature through the *Retrato de mário de andrade*, 1922, by Anita Malfatti

Language and images are complementary in their semiotic potentials; both are necessary in efficient media communication (Nöth 2004). To discuss the relationship between literature and painting through the media (pictorial portrait), it is important to track the aesthetic path of Anita Malfatti and Mário de Andrade. The initial point of convergence between Mário de Andrade and Anita Malfatti was in 1917, when the writer visited the painter's exhibition. The *Anita Malfatti Modern Painting Exhibition*, held in São Paulo between December 12, 1917 and January 11, 1918, is considered a milestone in the history of modern art in Brazil and the spark for the artists who devised the 1922 Modern Art Week (Romão 2013: 22).

Anita Mafaltti and Mário de Andrade were especially interested in expressionism (a cultural vanguard that emerged in Germany in the early 20th century). According to Simioni (2013: 2), Malfatti, after her studies in Germany and the United States, exhibited works that impacted the artistic environment of the period, especially expressionist paintings, which featured an unusual thematisation of human figures and a free chromaticism. Since then, Andrade and Malfatti began to meet and discuss poetry and art, later forming the Group of Five, which also included Tarsila do Amaral and the writers Oswald de Andrade and Menotti del Picchia (Batista 2012: 137). The group contributed important works regarding linguistic experimentation, collective creation and the inventive and figurative theme of national elements (Silva 2018: 88).

Mário de Andrade's relationship with expressionism, according to Avancini (1998), began from this contact with Malfatti's exhibition. This contact with the pictorial production of Anita Malfatti brought new directions to the studies of Mário de Andrade, which resulted in the renewal of his work. In 1921, he published an article in defence of Anita Malfatti, for recognising the influence that the artist and



expressionism exerted in her literary production. At the end of the same year, Malfatti made the first portrait of the writer (Romão 2013: 26).

Maurício Silva (2018) discusses Mário de Andrade's reaction to seeing the portrait: "He saw on this screen the expressionist character of Malfatti's painting". This is a feature of icons, so replaceable by their objects that they are hardly distinguishable from them. Mário de Andrade, in the misshapen strokes of Anita Malfatti, was attracted by the main characteristic that unites the aesthetic designs of both: expressionism. At that time, the writer's concern was not with the picture reliably representing his verisimilitude. We can recognise, in this situation, a property of the icon described by Peirce:

[...] when contemplating a painting, there is a moment when we lose the awareness that it is not thing, the distinction between the real and the copy disappears, it is, for that moment, a pure dream - no particular existence, and not yet general. At this moment, what we are contemplating is an icon. (CP 3.362)

As a form of retribution, and inspired by his portrait, Andrade wrote, in 1922, the text *No Atelier*, which describes the entire process of creating the painting. In this text, the poet narrates the way in which Malfatti mixed the colours. According to Andrade (1989), Malfatti "created intoxicating, immaterial tones in a potent frenzy of creation". Mário de Andrade continues in the text:

Their colors were symbolic factories, they were synonymous! Behind my long face, divinized by the artist's trait, a Harlequin background, which was my soul. Shades of gray that were my sadness for no reason... golden tones that were my millionaire joy... Tones of fire that were my enthusiastic urges...[...]. Completed the shades of gray of my soul. And smiled giving them here a blue of deluded, beyond the earthy color of restlessness... (Andrade 1989: 48).⁴

According to Tércio (2019), Mário de Andrade is represented in the portrait with the countenance of a pierrot, with his mouth half open⁵, as if perplexed with the world he tried to understand and interpret. Tércio adds that, in 1917, the writer planned to dress up as pierrot for the carnival. Andrade designed a fantasy with green satin, as he wanted to make his own version of this popular figure of Italian 16th century theatre. (Tercio 2019: 114)

We can relate the fact that Mário de Andrade was represented by Anita Malfatti as pierrot with the operational definition of icon - the sign that is able to reveal more information about its object. According to Stjernfelt:

⁴ Excerpt from the text "No atelier de Mário de Andrade", published in the book *Cartas a Anita Malfatti* (1989), organised by Marta Rossetti Batista.

⁵ Pierrot is a character of the theatrical style known as *Commedia dell'Arte* that depicting satire and social criticism. The style emerged as an alternative to the literary-inspired *Commedia Erudita*, which featured actors speaking Latin, at that time a language already inaccessible to most people. Thus, this story was an authentic popular entertainment, with a social character, influenced by carnival games. It was a spectacle staged in open spaces such as streets and squares, a point that brought him closer to the masses (Guareschi 2013: 47).



[...] it does not matter if the sign and the object for a first (or second) look seem or are experienced as similar; the decisive test for iconicity is whether it is possible to manipulate or develop the sign so that new information about its object appears. Icons are therefore signs with implicit information that can be made explicit. (Stjernfelt 2007: 398)

In the portrait, the information revealed are the characteristics synthesised by the figure of pierrot. In the work of Mário de Andrade, we find this figure of the pierrot, representative of the carnival, who has in common the boldness of invention, as opposed to mimesis (Bakhtin 1987: 30). The closest relationship of poets and painters with comedy and carnival occurs through the figure of pierrot.

Mário de Andrade presents, in *Pauliceia Desvairada* (1922), a characteristic of pierrot, the social appeal. In the work, the character is a fundamental element that represents a mask of the poetic voice that roams the streets of São Paulo and, thus, transmits its vision of reality. In the mode of representation of reality present in Mário de Andrade's aesthetic project, there is a commitment to the social character of literature. The writer was looking for a different way to represent the big city.

According to Volker Jaeckel (2009), such an attempt is a link with the expressionist poetry of Germany. According to Jaeckel (2009), we find in the works the impact of the urban on the imaginary and the new forms of collective sensitivity (Jaeckel 2009: 5). In this sense, "The environmental perception does not operate as totality", that is, the set of signs are interwoven: traces, colour, form, sounds, textures, size, smells, among others, requiring the subject to decipher the multiple texts that the space contains (Ferrara 1988: 24).

Anita portrays Mário as pierrot for being committed to the modernisation of the arts, with the escape from mimesis, with the themes of Brazilian identity (such as carnival), and for having abandoned in part the academic rules of representation. Mário de Andrade says:

[...] the first fighting spirit, the first collective consciousness, the first need for regimentation was awakened or not by what was going on in the city, with the exhibition of Anita Malfatti. It was she, it was her paintings that gave us a first consciousness of revolt and collectivity in struggle for the modernization of the Brazilian arts. At least to me. (Brito 1971: 71)

We can highlight another work that features the pierrot: *Carioca Carnival*, which was written after his participation in the carnival of Rio de Janeiro, in 1923. An extensive and complex poem, where pierrot appears reinforcing the carnavalised modernist discourse (Stam 2007: 614). The following is an excerpt: "Chaplins, sailors, gigoletes, harlequins and female pierrotts in "shorts narrower than legs" are present everywhere" (Pucheu 2009: 163).

In a period close to the portrait, in 1923, Mário de Andrade corresponds with Manuel Bandeira: "My Manuel...Carnival!... [...] a curious adventure [...]" (Andrade; Bandeira, [1923] 2000, p. 85). Manuel Bandeira addresses this character of Italian theatrical comedy in several works. In *Poema de Uma Quarta-feira de Cinzas* – a sad pierrot appears, who from the Italian Commedia dell'arte represents abandoned



lovers. Chequer (2015, p. 53) discusses the presence of pierrot in modernist literary works:

[...] is produced in the language [of these] new poetics a real process of carnival-making, with the subversion of genres, with colloquial forms of language in coexistence with the traditional poetic, at the same time as introducing the manifestation of everyday art in art. (Chequer 2015: 53)

In the portrait process, Anita Malfatti invents a Mário de Andrade, and this invented writer is similar to pierrot. The emphasis of this article is on this determination of the object by the sign, rather than the imitation of an object by sign. The sign (portrait) determines the object (relation literature and painting – represented in the figure of pierrot). In the representation of Mário de Andrade, it is possible to observe a "mixture", formed by the various questions that marked poetry and painting throughout this period. The allegory character of Modernism (the pierrot), of European origin, was incorporated into the Brazilian carnival. Carnival is a great expression of nationality – a popular festival more marked and represented, both in painting and in literature.

4. Conclusions

Portraits of writers by Brazilian modernist painters are an important tool for investigating the iconic relationship between literature and painting. In Brazilian Modernism, unlike other periods, the portrait is not associated with mimetic representation, but is based on a relationship of iconicity, in which the similarity is determined and negotiated in the process of creating the work relying on the interaction of the pictorial and literary repertoire of the artists. The painter, when performing his or her work, suffers strong influence both from his own repertoire and from the literary work of the writer, and these aspects act in the construction of what is represented in the portrait.

In this article: (i) we point out the relations between poetry and painting in Brazilian literary and pictorial modernisms; (ii) we explore the concept of iconicity in these portraits; (iii) we present preliminary concepts, which are part of a larger investigation: the analysis of the intermedial relations (literature and painting) in Brazilian Modernist portraits.

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