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Hermeneutical Tendencies in Lessing's Interpretations of Visual Art in *Laocoon*

Abstract

In this paper, I examine the extent to which the theoretical procedures for interpreting works of visual art, which Gotthold Ephraim Lessing describes in his famous book Laocoon: An Essay Upon the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, are comparable to various methods of interpretation from the tradition of hermeneutics. To achieve this, I analyse how Robert S. Leventhal and Frederick Burwick approached Lessing's interpretation techniques and try to expand their views and apply them to Lessing's thoughts in* Laocoon*. I will focus on the idea that Lessing's procedures for interpreting works of visual art depend, to a certain extend, on his methods for analysing literature. Even though these authors did not link Lessing's thoughts to the hermeneutical theory of Friedrich Schleiermacher, I will also explore whether there are certain similarities in their views on the main constituents of the process of interpretation.*

Keywords

Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocoon*, hermeneutics, visual art, aesthetics

Introduction

For different reasons, Robert S. Leventhal and Frederick Burwick have both associated the interpretational methods of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing with the tradition of hermeneutics. In his book *The Disciplines of Interpretation: Lessing, Herder, Schlegel and Hermeneutics in Germany 1750–1800*, Leventhal analysed various instances of Lessing's work, both his theoretical and literary writings, in which there are certain similarities between the interpretative methods of the German critic and the tradition of the hermeneutics of the Romantic era. On the other hand, Burwick in his paper "Lessing's *Laokoon* and the Rise of Visual Hermeneutics" closely examines precursors and followers of Lessing's thoughts in *Laocoon* while mainly referring to the interpretative techniques Lessing uses when approaching visual art. In this paper, I will analyse how their views on the hermeneutical tendencies of Lessing's thought can be applied to his techniques of interpreting visual art in his most famous book *Laocoon: An Essay Upon the Limits of Painting and Poetry*.

I have chosen to closely examine Lessing's thoughts on the interpretation of visual art (as well as the German critic's own interpretations of certain examples), but not his interpretative methods employed in *Laocoon* in general, for a couple of reasons. First, the claim that there are hermeneutic tendencies in Lessing's theory is the common feature of the two aforementioned interpretations of Lessing's thought, although their approaches are very different. Second, as I will try to show in the following sections of this paper, it is exactly the imbalance between poetry and the visual arts – the imbalance in

their representational possibilities, but also in the techniques by which they're interpreted – that is directly linked to the hermeneutic tendencies. This is explicitly stated in Leventhal's interpretation of Lessing's theory, but not elaborated on in his book.[1] I will suggest that Burwick's interpretation is also dependent on this aspect of Lessing's thought. Third, despite the fact that the famous book was named after a visual work of art, Lessing's interpretations of works of art of this kind are rather rare in this book, while there are numerous interpretations of specific literary works of classical antiquity in each section of the book. However, I will argue that Lessing's interpretations of visual artworks are closely connected to his aesthetics, as his methods for interpreting visual art are directly derived from his analyses of the aesthetic experience of visual artworks. Above all, the task of examining both the techniques utilised in the interpretation of poetry and those employed when approaching visual art would require much more than one paper to adequately elaborate.

The claim that Lessing does not treat poetry and visual arts equally in *Laocoon* is certainly not new – it is frequently stressed ever since Ernst Gombrich suggested that "it is not so much a book about as against the visual arts".[2] Various scholars have interpreted the reasons behind this unequal treatment, and different theoretical and broader cultural reasons were explored, especially after William J. T. Mitchell (following Gombrich) claimed that Lessing's differentiation between words and images, poetry and fine art are not just theoretically, but also culturally motivated.[3] While the differences between the artistic media of visual art and literature are most often indicated as reasons for this imbalance, building on the fact that Lessing claimed that literature has greater representational possibilities, contemporary readings of *Laocoon* are not limited to this interpretation. Some of the most recent takes on this matter include Michael Squire's suggestion that

> "… Lessing's distrust of matter, no less than his turn to the *freies Spiel* of the subjective imagination, is conditioned by a particular theological outlook: it is not just a Judeo-Christian credo, but specifically the thinking of the German Reformation that determines Laocoon's conceptual and hierarchical framework."[4]

This paper can be also read as an alternative take on Lessing's claims on the superiority of the poetic arts. Rather than on a specific outset of cultural parameters that influenced Lessing's approach in *Laocoon*, I focused on the possibility that some of the interpretative tendencies historically articulated during the forthcoming rise of the Romantic hermeneutics were already present in this book. This most directly applies to Lessing's reliance on the interpretations of poetry in the critical discussion on visual art.

Besides Leventhal and Burwick, other theoreticians have also pointed out the hermeneutical tendencies in Lessing's work, but less explicitly. In the most thorough study of Lessing's work and life, Hugh Barr Nisbet even cites the words of the German critic on biblical hermeneutics in which Lessing expresses doubt that there is something like a "single, 'true' meaning".[5] Indicating this kind of theoretical relativism derived from Lessing's "temperamental distrust of authority" in other sections of his book, Nisbet emphasised that the German critic was not a systematic thinker, and so his thought was never bound to any school of thinking or philosophy.[6] This characteristic of Lessing's thought makes the task of exploring the theoretical tendencies of his work even harder, because the interpreter of his views can find several orientations in his theory – for example, the historical sense comparable to hermeneutical methods of interpretation, as well as an ahistorical approach, sometimes even

similar to the transcendental philosophy of Immanuel Kant.[7] Nevertheless, following Nisbet's remark that Lessing had been to a certain extent interested in the problems of pre-Schleiermacher biblical hermeneutics, there are reasons to believe that the author of *Laocoon* had also had some indirect influence on the "father of hermeneutics". Since Johann Gottfried Herder[8] and Georg Anton Friedrich Ast[9] were both inspired by Lessing's views, and both thinkers directly influenced Schleiermacher's thoughts,[10] it should be examined if, at least to a certain degree, Lessing's theoretical tendencies in *Laocoon* paved the way for Schleiermacher's insights about the universal hermeneutics.

However, recent studies on *Laocoon* do not explore this possibility of connecting Lessing's thought with the tradition of hermeneutics. In *Rethinking Lessing's* Laocoon*: Antiquity, Enlightenment, and the 'Limits' of Painting and Poetry*, which is the most diverse interdisciplinary take on *Laocoon* to this date, it seems that no attempt has been made in this direction. Although the editors did mention that Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's essay is "tackling issues about hermeneutics, materiality, and the reception of the past", it actually discussed how the famous book provoked these issues as a subject of theoretical analysis, and not whether it suggested some hermeneutical procedures.[11] Therefore, I want to further broaden the scope of the contemporary readings

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Cf. Robert S. Leventhal, *The Disciplines of Interpretation. Lessing, Herder, Schlegel and Hermeneutics in Germany 1750–1800*, De Gruyter, Berlin 1994, pp. 95–97.

2
Ernst Gombrich, "Lessing: Lecture on a Master Mind", in: William David Ross (ed.), *Proceedings of the British Academy*, vol. 43, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1957, pp. 133–156, here p. 140. See also: David E. Wellbery, "*Laocoon* Today. On the Conceptual Infrastructure of Lessing's Treatise", in: Avi Lifschitz, Michael Squire (eds.), *Rethinking Lessing's* Laocoon*: Antiquity, Enlightenment, and the 'Limits' of Painting and Poetry*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2016, pp. 59–85, here p. 73.

3
Cf. William J. T. Mitchell, "The Politics of Genre. Space and Time in Lessing's *Laocoon*", *Representations* (1984) 6, pp. 98–115, here p. 105, doi: https://doi.org/10.2307/2928540. See also: William J. T. Mitchell, "Foreword: Why Lessing's *Laocoon* Still Matters", in: Avi Lifschitz, Michael Squire (eds.), *Rethinking Lessing's* Laocoon*. Antiquity, Enlightenment, and the 'Limits' of Painting and Poetry*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2016, pp. xxiii–xxxiii, here pp. xxvi–xxvii, xxxi.

4
Michael Squire, "Laocoon among the Gods, or: On the Theological Limits of Lessing's *Grenzen*", in: A. Lifschitz, M. Squire (eds.), *Rethinking Lessing's* Laocoon, pp. 87–131, here pp. 114–115.

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Hugh Barr Nisbet, *Gotthold Ephraim Lessing. His Life, Works, and Thought*, Oxford University Press, Oxford – New York 2013, pp. 144, 513.

6
Cf. ibid., pp. 133, 140.

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I will further expand this matter in the section dedicated to the difficulties of interpreting Lessing's theoretical tendencies.

8
Cf. H. B. Nisbet, *Gotthold Ephraim Lessing*, pp. 144, 513.

9
Cf. "Ast, Georg Anton Friedrich", in: Hugh Chisholm (ed.), *Encyclopædia Britannica*, vol. 2, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1911, p. 790.

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Cf. Michael Forster, "Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher", in: Edward N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Available at: https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/schleiermacher/ (accessed on 31 May 2022).

11
Cf. Avi Lifschitz, Michael Squire, "Introduction. Rethinking Lessing's *Laocoon* from across the Humanities", in: A. Lifschitz, M. Squire (eds.), *Rethinking Lessing's* Laocoon, pp. 1–57, here p. 57.

of *Laocoon* by building on Leventhal's and Burwick's suggestions on the hermeneutic potentials of Lessing's theory, as well as supplement them with a couple of remarks on the similarities between Lessing's thoughts on art and Schleiermacher's pioneering ideas on the hermeneutical methods of interpreting texts.

On the other hand, one contemporary author does refer to Lessing's *Laocoon* in his theoretical reflection on hermeneutics, but he is doing this while talking about a tradition that differs drastically from Schleiermacher's contribution to the discussion on the interpretation. In his book *Between Word and Image. Heidegger, Klee, and Gadamer on Gesture and Genesis*, Dennis J. Schmidt mentions Lessing in the context of philosophical hermeneutics in the 20th century when he emphasises that the German critic was one of the first thinkers to point out the problem of the possibility of adequate translation of images with words.[12] Following Gadamer's footsteps, the author of the book on the relationship between image and word will ask how the work of painting reveals the truth about reality (so we should not consider it inferior to the cultural products based on the usage of words, such as literature or philosophy). When it comes to *Laocoon*, Schmidt also stresses that the German critic believed in the superiority of words in comparison to the image, and thus he did not achieve "to take the image to heart on its own terms as it appears prior to any translation into speech and to treat this appearance as possessing an intelligibility of its own".[13] However, it seems to me that Lessing's approach in *Laocoon* is even more profoundly different from the exploration of Gadamerian truthfulness of art, having in mind that he claimed that the "object of science is truth", while the "object of art, on the contrary, is pleasure".[14] Following Lessing's attitude towards visual art, I want to explore the hermeneutical tendencies in *Laocoon*, without neglecting this claim, but assuming that successful interpretation of a fine art piece contributes to the aesthetic experience of a spectator, and their aesthetic "pleasure" as well.

Having in mind that Leventhal and Burwick have emphasised more directly those Lessing's theoretical tendencies reminiscent of the tradition of the "universal" hermeneutics formulated in the Romantic era, I have focused mainly on their interpretations of Lessing's theory. Following the degree to which Leventhal analyses the views of the German critic, the biggest part of this paper is concerned with his remarks.

Leventhal and Burwick on Hermeneutical Tendencies in Lessing's Theoretical Works

Leventhal on the Connection between Lessing's Theory and Hermeneutics

Before examining how Leventhal's thoughts on the hermeneutical tendencies in Lessing's theory can be applied to the interpretation of *Laocoon*, I will analyse the reasons why Leventhal introduced Lessing as a hermeneutical theorist. Leventhal listed four reasons why he thinks this is the case. While I will explore each of them individually in this section of the paper, I will first introduce his more general statements about the nature of Lessing's theoretical approach to the problems of interpretation.

In the introductory section of his book, Leventhal emphasises that the German thinker does not believe in Kantian "ahistorical ground for understanding" and interpreting text and works of art.[15] He connects Lessing with the

philosophers such as Herder (who was indeed inspired by Lessing, as previously mentioned) in raising the doubt that there is a universal language or a neutral stance that will provide us with the apparatus of understanding different cultures and translate adequately the written material of these cultures.[16] In addition to this, following David E. Wellbery, Leventhal examines the way Lessing applied these new theoretical beliefs when he himself approached the works of art and literature. It is this interpretational stance Leventhal claims to be hermeneutical in the theoretical conception of the German critic, despite the fact Lessing has written his main theoretical works before "the father of hermeneutics" Schleiermacher introduced it as the universal method of interpreting textual content. Although Leventhal does analyse certain methodological remarks of the German critic, Lessing's interpretations of the examples of visual art and literature are more important to him than Lessing's explicit methodological statements on this matter, and I will follow him in this while examining how the German critic analyses artworks in *Laocoon*. A similar attitude is present in some more recent takes on *Laocoon*. Avi Lifschitz and Michael Squire state that

> "… [f]or modern classicist readers, it can be all too tempting to approach *Laocoon*'s detailed comments on various aspects of Graeco-Roman art and literature as historicist footnotes, seemingly removed from the essay's larger critical remit. For Lessing, however, such details of historical interpretation frequently play a critical aesthetic role."[17]

Above all, Leventhal stresses that interpreting the hermeneutics itself as a fixed period in the history of ideas that occurs in a period "from Schleiermacher to Gadamer" with a prescribed set of parameters it must contain is exactly the interpretative procedure this theoretical discipline does not want to promote.[18] While he examines several occasions of Lessing's use of hermeneutical strategies, I am primarily interested in his commentaries on Lessing's interpretative methods in *Wie die Alten den Tod gebildet haben. Eine Untersuchung*, the essay concerned with the representation of death in the art and literature of Ancient Greece.[19] It is Leventhal's analysis of this theoretical work that leads him to list four reasons why he argues that Lessing's thoughts can be seen as a clear example of hermeneutical thinking.[20]

The first reason why Leventhal thinks Lessing's interpretative methods are similar to the tradition of hermeneutics is derived from the fact that Lessing stressed the importance of the figurative meaning of an art piece or a written work: the literal meaning has no primacy.[21] Expanding on this idea beyond

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Cf. Dennis J. Schmidt, *Between Word and Image. Heidegger, Klee, and Gadamer on Gesture and Genesis*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 2013, p. 14.

13
Ibid., p. 17.

14
Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocoon. An Essay Upon the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, transl. Ellen Frothingham, Roberts Brothers, Boston 1887, p. 10

15
Cf. R. S. Leventhal, *The Disciplines of Interpretation*, p. 7.

16
Cf. ibid., p. 20.

17
A. Lifschitz, M Squire, "Introduction", p. 18.

18
Cf. R. S. Leventhal, *The Disciplines of Interpretation*, p. 17.

19
Cf. ibid., pp. 86–97.

20
Cf. ibid., p. 92.

21
Cf. ibid., pp. 90–92.

Leventhal's remark, it is worth noting that a similar thought can also be found in Schleiermacher's hermeneutics, which rejects a pursuit for the interpretation that is limited to the text itself and its grammatical meaning.[22] While the theories before Schleiermacher had emphasised the importance of linguistic analysis in determining the true meaning of the text,[23] Lessing's interpretation techniques were not limited to this interpretative approach. Instead of looking for a fixed meaning hidden beneath the words themselves, Lessing investigated how cultural and language specifications affect the interpreter's choice between literal and non-literal meaning.[24] The same method is used when it comes to interpreting paintings and the meaning of their representations. The interpreters should be informed of the cultural differences between the modern world and Classical Antiquity that led to the dissimilarities in the way artists are representing certain themes in paintings. They can achieve this goal by analysing the language itself and the language habits of a certain culture and epoch, as it will provide them with the link to the conventions, values and beliefs of the culture the artists belong to. This is one of the main Lessing's points in his essay on the representation of death in Classical Antiquity, as suggested by Leventhal.[25]

Secondly, Leventhal argues that Lessing advocated the interpretation method that deals with the hermeneutic circle of a kind, "in which language and representation reciprocally informed one another".[26] The language of the artists'culture dictates the "representational vocabulary" that they can employ in creating a painting.[27] Leventhal claims that Lessing's point in the essay on the representation of death in Classical Antiquity is that the way words relate one to another in a language forms the basis for the artists' choice of the representational content they will utilise in a painting or a sculpture. If there is some kind of connection between two words in a language – whatever the nature of this connection is – there is a chance the artist has represented the objects denoted by one word to symbolise what another word actually signifies. In a similar fashion, Leventhal interprets how Lessing establishes a relation between death as a theme of an art piece and the representation of sleep as a symbol of death: for him, "language itself chose the correct, appropriate image"[28] here. While not that important for the purposes of this paper, it is worth noting that his conclusion here is not only that this kind of interpretation involves a hermeneutic circle between a particular representation of sleep and a language system in which sleep and death are in a close connection, but also that for Lessing, the adequate interpretation of an art piece depends on the words themselves.[29]

Listing the third reason why Lessing's essay on the representation of death in Classical Antiquity can be interpreted as an example of hermeneutical thinking, Leventhal highlights Lessing's continual reflection upon the shortcomings of the interpretative methods of his predecessors and his pursuit of a better method of bridging the historical and cultural differences in the interpretation process.[30] Leventhal refers to Lessing's commentaries on these traditional methods to show that the German critic is not just employing the more advanced hermeneutical procedures, but he is also explicitly highlighting the problems of various interpretative techniques.[31] Following this, I will look for similar methodological remarks in Lessing's *Laocoon* and see if he utilised in them the ideas closely related to the tradition of hermeneutics.

Finally, in explicating the fourth reason why he thinks there are certain connections between Lessing's thoughts and hermeneutics, Leventhal points out the "explicit dialogics of discourse" in Lessing's theoretical work, in which "the conflict of interpretations" is the main vehicle for the interpretative process.[32] In his book, Leventhal promotes the conflict between various interpretations as the main indicator of hermeneutical tendencies in the works of the theoreticians he is concerned with.[33] His views on hermeneutics are explicitly inspired by Schlegel's understanding of the interpretative process,[34] by which the goal of the interpretation is not to "reconcile the interpreter with the text" (as in Schleiermacher's hermeneutics)[35] but to keep the "conflict" of different interpretations alive as the main driving force of the interpretation process.[36] Leventhal treats this characteristic of Lessing's theoretical standpoint as the most important for the purposes of his book dealing with the roots of hermeneutical thinking in the second half of the 18th century, so it is not surprising that he thinks that this aspect of Lessing's theory forms the "basis of progressive Enlightenment".[37]

Words as a "Hermeneutic Leverage" – an Important Point in Leventhal's Take on Lessing's Hermeneutical Tendencies

In this paper, I am especially interested in one specific aspect of Leventhal's understanding of Lessing's theoretical methods, the aspect that can be derived from previously examined hermeneutical characteristics of the interpretative mechanism employed by the German critic. It is Leventhal's belief that the interpretative techniques Lessing uses when dealing with visual art pieces depend largely on the analysis of the meaning of the words themselves, that he "flees from the immediacy of the representation itself to a word, symbol,

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Cf. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics and Criticism. And Other Writings*, transl. Andrew Bowie, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1998, pp. 230–231; Friedrich D. E. Schleiermacher, "*The Hermeneutics*. Outline of the 1819 Lectures", *New Literary History* 10 (1978) 1, pp. 1–16, here p. 6, doi: https://doi.org/10.2307/468302.

23
Cf. Bjørn Ramberg, Kristin Gjesdal, "Hermeneutics", in: E. N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Available at: https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2014/entries/hermeneutics/ (accessed on 31 May 2022).

24
Cf. R. S. Leventhal, *The Disciplines of Interpretation*, pp. 90–91.

25
Cf. ibid., pp. 89, 92, 100–101.

26
Ibid., p. 92.

27
Cf. ibid., p. 91.

28
Ibid.

29
Cf. ibid., p. 97.

30
Cf. ibid., pp. 88–89.

31
Cf. ibid., pp. 88–89, 92.

32
Cf. ibid., p. 92.

33
Cf. ibid., pp. 2, 10–11, 24–25.

34
Cf. ibid., pp. 10–11, 13–14, 25, 30.

35
Cf. ibid., p. 14; F. D. E. Schleiermacher, "*The Hermeneutics*", pp. 8, 14–15.

36
Cf. R. S. Leventhal, *The Disciplines of Interpretation*, pp. 13–14.

37
Ibid., p. 92.

or sign placed next to it through which it seeks some hermeneutic leverage".[38] This way, as Leventhal suggests, Lessing questions the "self-sufficiency", "immediacy" and "universality" of the image in the essay on the representation of death and emphasises the "dependency of a reading of the image on the written tradition of poetry".[39] Lessing's tendency to interpret images via the use of words and the multiple levels of historically and culturally laden meaning they possess leads the author of *Laocoon* to the exploiting of various interpretative techniques that resemble methods developed during the rise of hermeneutics in the 19th century. Although Leventhal does not compare Lessing's views with Schleiermacher's (having in mind his previously mentioned inclination to explore Lessing's hermeneutical tendencies on the basis of Schlegel's theory), this notion corresponds to the aspiration of the father of hermeneutics to search for a certain cultural connotation of the words themselves in the interpretation of a text.[40] Additionally, it can be matched with Schleiermacher's views that it is necessary to transcend the content that is to be interpreted by both searching for the cultural and historical values the author expressed in the written work and exploring the author's intentions in the "psychological" (or "technical") aspect of the interpretative procedure.[41]

This view on Lessing's thoughts on the dependency of the interpretation of the visual art on the analysis of words Leventhal articulated by taking into account how Lessing explained the absence of the representation of death in the essay that deals with this topic. As he emphasises, the most important aspect of Lessing's analysis of this subject is the fact that the German critic examines the meanings of the two Ancient Greek words: *κήρ* used to signify death as the "bodily process", as well as sudden, often painful death, and *θάνατος*, which signifies "a state" of being dead, but also death that is peaceful and "natural".[42] It is neither the very meaning of these words important for Leventhal's analysis of Lessing's interpretative methods, nor the conclusion the German critic derives from this kind of reasoning, but the fact that these Lessing's thoughts depend on the advantages of the words themselves. More precisely, he is involved in the interpretative process that includes the exploration of the extent to which the aesthetic content of the representations is dependent on the meaning of these words and the examination directed at how these words formulate the notions and beliefs of the artists of the Classical Antiquity. Lessing approaches the differences between the representation of death with the image of a skeleton in Baroque art and the representation of death with the image of sleep in Classical Antiquity through this "scripturalisation" of the image.[43] Without consulting the meanings of *κήρ* and *θάνατος*, the German critic would not be able to explore the reasons why the artists of Classical Antiquity avoided representing death in their artworks. Lacking this "hermeneutic leverage", he would not reach his conclusion that the depiction of death via the image of a skeleton is weaker than the representation of death via the image of sleep, as the former is directing the perceiver's attention only to the brutal death.[44]

Although Leventhal's thoughts on this matter are mainly based on Lessing's ideas formulated in the essay concerning the representation of death, they are not solely grounded on this work of the German thinker. In *Laocoon*, Lessing does mention, in one footnote, his conclusions on the Ancient Greek and Roman artists' habit of representing death with the image of sleep, but in this book, he does not benefit from the analysis of words themselves in his interpretations of visual art pieces.[45] Referring to the imbalance between the

representational possibilities of visual art and poetry in Lessing's *Laocoon*, Leventhal compares Lessing's thoughts in these two essays and concludes that distinctions between these two art forms are not as large as they seem in *Laocoon* if we take into account that Lessing formulates his interpretations of visual art on the "scripturalization" of the images.[46] However, he very rarely refers to Lessing's most known theoretical work, which raises the question of whether the interpretation of *Laocoon* in the spirit of these hermeneutical tendencies is even possible. It is my aim in this paper to propose an answer to this question, taking into account that Leventhal did not explore it in his study on Lessing. This kind of analysis could contribute to the contemporary attempts of rereading *Laocoon* in a new light, apart from its historical roles in advancing the Rationalist tendencies in 18th-century aesthetics, its "development of Neoclassicism" or its support of the beliefs of Enlightenment.[47] In the next chapter of this paper, I will concentrate on the possibility that there are hermeneutical tendencies in this book, after a brief consideration of Burwick's thoughts on the hermeneutical tendencies in Lessing's theory.

Burwick's Remarks on Lessing's "Visual Hermeneutics"

The hermeneutical tendencies in Lessing's *Laocoon* have been additionally examined in the paper "Lessing's *Laokoon* and the Rise of Visual Hermeneutics" by Frederick Burwick. Although the famous book is mentioned in the title of this paper, it is more concerned with Lessing's precursors (such as Jean-Baptiste Du Bos) that had expressed thoughts similar to the main conclusions of this book, as well as with the reception of Lessing's *Laocoon* by his contemporaries (such as Henry Fuseli) and the Romantic thinkers more or less involved with the tradition of hermeneutics. Still, among multiple considerations about the aspects various theoreticians praised or criticised in Lessing's famous book, Burwick explains on several occasions why he claims Lessing has contributed to the tradition of hermeneutics.

The most interesting point Burwick makes when it comes to the hermeneutical tendencies in *Laocoon* is his explanation of how Lessing included in his analyses of an art piece "not simply what was represented in the work but also

38
Ibid., p. 97.

39
Ibid.

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Cf. Friedrich Schleiermacher, "The Aphorisms of 1805 and 1809-10", in: Heinz Kimmerle (ed.), *Hermeneutics: The Handwritten Manuscripts*, Scholars Press, Missoula 1977, p. 50.

41
Cf. F. Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics and Criticism*, pp. 230–231.

42
Cf. R. S. Leventhal, *The Disciplines of Interpretation*, pp. 86, 98, 100.

43
Cf. ibid., p. 97.

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Cf. ibid., p. 101.

45
Cf. G. E. Lessing, *Laocoon*, pp. 224–225.

46
Cf. R. S. Leventhal, *The Disciplines of Interpretation*, pp. 95–97.

47
A. Lifschitz, M. Squire, "Introduction", pp. 2, 22. See also: Frederick Beiser, "Mendelssohn's Critique of Lessing's *Laocoon*", in: A. Lifschitz, M. Squire (eds.), *Rethinking Lessing's* Laocoon*: Antiquity, Enlightenment, and the 'Limits' of Painting and Poetry*, pp. 177–195, here pp. 177–179.

how the content was communicated".[48] Burwick argues that Lessing actually transcends the boundaries of art and poetry in his interpretative procedures, by investigating the "narrative sequence among the images", which provides a painting with the temporal dimension – and it is exactly the absence of this dimension that is traditionally seen as a drawback of the visual arts.[49] Above all, the perceiver itself is experiencing an art piece temporally, and Lessing's interpretations of visual art pieces in *Laocoon* are governed by this fact.[50] That being said, Lessing in *Laocoon* does not simply stay within investigating "semiotic coherence and the interrelationships among constituent images of a painting", but also examines a narrative flow that the visual art piece's representation presupposes; doing this, he utilises interpretative methods closely bound to the tradition of hermeneutics, concerned with the interpretation of literature.[51] In the following sections of this paper, I will investigate if this is the case in the examples Lessing analyses in *Laocoon*.

Lessing's Hermeneutical Methods in *Laocoon*

Leventhal's Thoughts Expanded and Applied to Laocoon

Having in mind that Leventhal emphasised the importance of Lessing's use of language and the meaning of the words to enhance his interpretative approach to visual art, but only mentioned that this approach is dependent on the poetry itself, I want to further expand this notion. I will argue that Lessing's interpretations of visual art pieces in *Laocoon* do not depend on his elaborations of the meaning of certain words that will provide us with the key to understanding the culture in which the artwork is produced, but on his own interpretations of comparable pieces of literature, i.e., the pieces in which the same or similar subject matter is represented. Building on the fact that almost every Lessing's interpretation of a visual art piece is accompanied by his analysis of a certain piece of literature, I will try to show in this section of the paper that Lessing utilises various interpretative techniques reminiscent of the methods formulated by Schleiermacher and the tradition of hermeneutics.

The significance of the poetic narration for the adequate experience of visual art has been stressed in the recent studies on *Laocoon*. Avi Lifschitz and Michael Squire pointed out that "[i]n Lessing's hands, the chief importance of the Laocoon group lay in its relationship with literary narratives of the same mythical story".[52] They do not, however, explore the consequences that this importance has when it comes to Lessing's attitude towards the interpretation of a visual art piece. Furthermore, in a table by which he describes Lessing's theory in *Laocoon*, Luca Giuliani mentions that "narrative images" are "dependent on linguistic narrative",[53] but this claim is not further expanded in his paper, and this dependency is not directly linked to the way poetic representations contribute to the understanding of the narrative aspects of a visual art piece. In applying Lessing's attitude towards visual art, he stresses "the fact that the narrative image does not itself tell its story but rather *needs* a story, which the beholder has to know",[54] but does not go on to explain how the spectator of the image interprets the "story" provided by the poetry, nor how this interpretation can affect the experience of the image. In pursuit of a more specific explanation of the merits of a literary narrative in the interpretation of a visual art piece, I want to suggest a closer reading of some of Lessing's own statements and examples in *Laocoon*.

In the first section of *Laocoon*, we are already approaching the interpretative methods similar to those Lessing introduced in his essay on the representations of death in Classical Antiquity. Just like in the case of his essay on representations of death, in this book he does not favour a literal, straightforward interpretation of a particular event illustrated in the epic poems, but promotes a more culturally-aware interpretation that requires a departure from the direct explanation of the described event. Instead of interpreting Priam's disallowance of crying he had put to Trojan soldiers as his fear of making them "too tender-hearted", Lessing proposes the interpretation by which Homer wanted to show that "only the civilized Greek can weep and yet be brave, while the uncivilised Trojan, to be brave, must stifle all humanity".[55] Here Lessing utilises the interpretative procedures reminiscent of Schleiermacher's views according to which it is necessary "to present, to the greatest possible extent, the world",[56] in which the text being interpreted was written. The same interpretative carefulness can be found in Lessing's interpretation of visual art pieces, starting with his interpretation of the sculpture of Laocoon and his sons. While J. J. Winkelmann follows a more straightforward interpretation of the representation of Laocoon's emotional state in stating that he is not screaming and crying but only sighing, Lessing suggests that the sculptor indeed depicted the Trojan priest as sighing, but only to invite the spectator to imagine him as screaming.[57] Thus, instead of focusing on what is immediately represented, the interpreter should use his imagination to discern the true meaning behind the depicted content. Exploring in the interpretative process what has not been explicitly stated, but only suggested in a certain work is also the aim of Schleiermacher's hermeneutics, expressed in his previously mentioned views on the figurative meaning and his thoughts on the goals of psychological aspects of interpretation.

To be able to achieve this, the interpreter should not only know that the artist of this statue lowered the expression of the emotions of the Trojan priest taking into account the artistic conventions of sculpting – this is the aspect of the interpretative process Lessing is repeatedly emphasising in *Laocoon*. More importantly, the interpreter should be informed about the complete narrative in which the attack of the snakes occurs and the meaning it has for the spectator *au fait* with the values of Classical Antiquity. The interpreters can fulfil this if they compare their interpretation of the visual art piece with their own understanding of the same subject matter represented in literature, and Lessing is doing

48
Frederick Burwick, "Lessing's *Laokoon* and the Rise of Visual Hermeneutics", *Poetics Today* 20 (1999) 2, pp. 219–272, here p. 223.

49
Cf. ibid.

50
Cf. ibid., p. 224; G. E. Lessing, *Laocoon*, pp. 18–19.

51
Cf. F. Burwick, "Lessing's *Laokoon* and the Rise of Visual Hermeneutics", p. 223.

52
A. Lifschitz, M. Squire, "Introduction", p. 13.

53
Luca Giuliani, "Lessing's *Laocoon* as Analytical Instrument. The Perspectives of a Classical Archaeologist", in: A. Lifschitz, M. Squire (eds.), *Rethinking Lessing's* Laocoon, pp. 133–155, here p. 140.

54
Ibid., p. 147.

55
G. E. Lessing, *Laocoon*, pp. 5–6.

56
F. Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics and Criticism*, p. 231.

57
Cf. G. E. Lessing, *Laocoon*, p. 17.

exactly that. Having in mind that Lessing is almost exclusively interested in visual art pieces that represent the subject matter derived from Ancient Greek mythology, his techniques of interpreting visual art pieces in *Laocoon* are inevitably bound to his interpretations of the literature of Classical Antiquity. Interestingly, this too can be compared to some of Schleiermacher's views. In one of his lectures, the father of hermeneutics talks about some challenging aspects of the interpretation process in which the author of a text creates some "objective allusions" the interpreter should be aware of. This kind of allusion is basically a "hidden citation, either of a literary passage or of a fact from a classical domain", while the "classical domain" mentioned here includes "the Bible, Homer, and a particular period of history".[58] If we ignore for a moment that Schleiermacher's hermeneutical theory is limited to the interpretation of the written works and compare these views with Lessing's interpretative procedures, we will notice that Schleiermacher actually claims something very similar to Lessing's views. The father of hermeneutics here expresses his belief that the acquaintance with the Homeric epics – including their narrative as well – is the "external" knowledge that an interpreter should have before approaching the interpretation of a particular text.

Lessing examines in the second section of *Laocoon* the aesthetic principles that visual artists of Classical Antiquity had in mind when creating an art piece. Although he does not define the beauty itself but presupposes a commonsensical notion of beauty, Lessing manifests a clear historical sense when he describes the ideas that governed the creation of an art piece in Ancient Greece. He argues that the insistence on beauty as the unavoidable criterion in picking the adequate subject matter of the visual arts was not simply derived from the dominant philosophical thoughts of the time, but from the complex cultural interactions. To prove this, he illustrates how the convention of representing beautiful entities in Antiquity was formulated through the trial-and-error of the Ancient Greek artists and the negative aesthetic evaluation that representations of the non-beautiful objects received from the public.[59] That representing beauty is not the universal, ahistorical task of the visual artist, but only the principle that Ancient Greek and Roman artists have conformed to, Lessing also emphasised in pointing out that the goals of the visual arts have changed since then, and thus the art of his contemporaries is concerned with the "truth and expression".[60] While it seems Lessing is not very consistent in applying these historically-aware principles in his own analyses of various artworks (as I will try to show later in this paper), I will look out for this historical awareness in the other parts of *Laocoon*, especially in his words on the "rules" that dictate the artistic creation.

As mentioned in the fourth reason why Leventhal thinks there are hermeneutical tendencies in Lessing's theoretical works, every time the German critic refers to certain art pieces in *Laocoon*, he is doing this while also commenting on the previous interpretations of these examples. He approaches his interpretations via the conflict with the previous ones, and most of the time his criticism is directed toward the fact that the interpreter is neglecting cultural or historical circumstances or culturally-shaped artistic conventions. It is, first and foremost, what he does in his detailed analysis of the sculpture of the Trojan priest and his sons. This is also the case in the previously mentioned example of two different interpretations of Priam's decision to forbid the crying of the Trojan soldiers in *The Iliad*, as well as in Lessing's commentary on Timanthes' painting of Iphigenia.[61] These Lessing's criticisms are

not governed by strict philosophical principles determining how one should interpret the given content or what kind of art pieces should be considered valuable. On the contrary, utilising these principles is exactly what Lessing wants to avoid, as he suggests in the "Preface" of the book when he points to the differences between a "philosopher" and a "critic".[62]

Lessing argues that searching for the universal concept of beauty is the main aim of philosophy, as opposed to marking the specificities of an art form, which is the goal of criticism.[63] It is very likely that the example of philosophical theorising is to be found in the aesthetics of Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, whom Lessing criticises in the rest of the introductory section of *Laocoon*.[64] A critic should not follow the lead of a "systematic philosopher" in writing a philosophical treatise on the principles of beauty and aesthetic experience while consulting second-hand interpretations of the artworks found in art dictionaries.[65] Instead of "deducing from a couple of definitions whatever conclusions we please", we should "savor close to the fountain" and try out these theoretical conceptions on the touchstone of our own experience and interpretation of the art pieces.[66] As a critic, Lessing sees the main purpose of writing *Laocoon* as casting out "false taste" and "ill-grounded criticisms", but also, as proved in his critique of Baumgarten and the way his contemporaries write "systematic books", to combat philosophical conceptions that get away from establishing themselves on careful interpretations of art pieces.

While not commenting on the critic's application of cultural and historical parameters in his interpretations, several theoreticians have also stressed that Lessing as a critic does not simply rely on the universal principles and "rules" of the art form in his analysis of various art pieces. Wellbery states that such a "'rule' will always have to be interpreted anew, and this by both artist and critic in their parallel explorations of the possibilities of the art form".[67] From a different perspective, Paul A. Kottman approaches a similar conclusion while arguing that Lessing's criticism is not derived from philosophical principles but is built on the naive response of the amateur, "by submitting itself to the amateur's felt response from the outset, and then by supplying reasons for taking seriously the amateur's feeling".[68] However, Frederick Beiser argues that the German critic is still conforming to the Rationalist aesthetic tendency

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Friedrich D. E. Schleiermacher, "The General Hermeneutics", in: Friedrich D. E. Schleiermacher, *Schleiermacher's Early Lectures on Hermeneutics: The 1805 'First Draft' and the 1809 'General Hermeneutics'*, Edwin Mellen Press Ltd, Lewiston 1999, p. 109.

59
Cf. G. E. Lessing, *Laocoon*, pp. 8–10.

60
Ibid., p. 16.

61
Cf. ibid., pp. 12–13.

62
Cf. ibid., pp. vii–xi.

63
Cf. ibid., pp. vii–viii.

64
Cf. ibid., p. xi. See also: Paul A. Kottman, "Art and Necessity. Rethinking Lessing's Critical Practice", in: A. Lifschitz, M. Squire (eds.), *Rethinking Lessing's* Laocoon, pp. 327–344, here p. 332.

65
Cf. G. E. Lessing, *Laocoon*, p. xi.

66
Cf. ibid.

67
D. E. Wellbery, "Laocoon Today", p. 70.

68
P. A. Kottman, "Art and Necessity", p. 332.

to define and apply the "rules" of the art, despite that Lessing allows substantial artistic freedom to the artist as a "genius":

"Lessing and Mendelssohn [...] insisted that rules are necessary for the critic."[69]

Indeed, Lessing on several occasions in *Laocoon* fails to stay away from the problematic theoretical procedures ascribed to a "philosopher", as I will try to show in the section dedicated to the difficulties of attributing hermeneutical tendencies to Lessing's theory. Nevertheless, as previous examples from the book have suggested, his interpretative procedures are still closely bound to the approach of a "critic". By practicing art criticism, the author of *Laocoon* does more than the "rules" of the art form could encourage him to do. He applies methods reminiscent of those found in Schleiermacher's theory, including the exploration of the author's intentions and his cultural and historical values, as well as interpreting the figurative meaning of the author's work with the help of "classical" literature. As a critic, Lessing transcends Rationalist aesthetics' tendency to establish his interpretations on ahistorical principles and supplements his criticism with these cultural, historical and, in Schleiermacher's sense, "psychological" interpretative techniques. These methods are once again comparable to those Leventhal analysed in his broader understanding of hermeneutics.

From the perspective of the present analysis of the hermeneutical tendencies of *Laocoon*, the most interesting aspect of Lessing's thoughts on how critics approach the interpretation of art is his suggestion that "poetry can come to the aid of painting" and, just as well, "painting to the aid of poetry".[70] Each of these art forms help one another in providing "illustration and example". By claiming this, Lessing ultimately recommends to the critic the activities similar to those Leventhal has found in his interpretation of the essay on the representations of death – interpreting images via the "scripturalisation" of them, but also the opposite process of interpreting pieces of literature with the help of visual art pieces. However, Lessing does not elaborate on these views on the interpretative methods of the critics. What is exactly the aim of the critics when they want to enhance their interpretation of a visual art piece by searching for an adequate "illustration and example" in a wholly different area of poetry? Taking into account that the comparison between visual arts and literature does not lead critics to philosophy's task of formulating universal principles of beauty, it seems that the main goal of this activity is acquiring the content not immediately represented in the artwork that is to be interpreted.

Analysing Lessing's own interpretations of the artworks, I find that he utilises the comparison between the visual art pieces and literature for several different purposes. Most often, Lessing employs the comparison of the works that depict the same subject matter and belong to the same culture to figure out the characteristics of the culture in which an art piece has been made, characteristics that will enhance the interpretations. It is exactly what he does in the first section of *Laocoon* when he criticises Winkelmann's thoughts on the reason why the Trojan priest is depicted as sighing, but not as screaming. In order to examine Winkelmann's suggestion that the "expression in the figures of the Greeks reveals in the midst of passion a great and steadfast soul", Lessing immediately invokes various examples of Ancient Greek literature in which this is not the case: Sophocles' *Philoctetes* and Homer's *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*.[71] By analysing them, he concludes that suppressing emotions is

not a characteristic of Ancient Greek culture, so the artist's decision to reduce the Trojan priest's emotional expression to sighing could not be explained on cultural grounds.[72] Although this topic was not elaborated in recent theoretical reflections on *Laocoon*, the interpretative potential of the work of poetry is mentioned in Wellbery's study on Lessing: "the poem can make all these aspects present to us and balance them against one another within a historical or narrative understanding of Laocoon's character".[73]

In other parts of *Laocoon*, Lessing is using the same method while interpreting one interesting example. Criticising Joseph Spence's interpretations of the fact that Dionysus (Bacchus) is rarely represented with horns on the Ancient Greek and Roman sculptures, despite the fact that poets usually represent him with them, Lessing once again utilises the interpretation of poetry. While showing that Spence's interpretations are determined by his unawareness of the specific characteristics that distinguish Ancient Greek and Roman god from "fauns and satyrs", Lessing refers to Ovid's verses in which he has found that Bacchus could

> "… show himself without horns, and did, in fact, thus show himself when he wished to appear in his virgin beauty. In this form artists would choose to represent him."[74]

Here, the German critic uses the detailed examination of poetry to find certain mythological specificities which will lead him to the meaning of the common absence of Bacchus' horns on statues. However, after criticising Spence's interpretations in the eighth section of *Laocoon*, he returns to the matter of sculptural depiction of Bacchus once again to show there are no simple formulas in interpreting the art of the Classical Antiquity: Bacchus is actually represented with horns when the statue of him is created for religious purposes, because depicting him with horns means "representing the god in the shape under which he was worshipped".[75] This thought is also based on his interpretation of poetry.[76] This way, while employing his own interpretations of poetic representations of Bacchus, from which he derives the cultural and religious meaning of the depiction of god's horns, Lessing shows that in the dynamic cultural circumstances of Classical Antiquity, it is the interpreter's task to go beyond searching for the uniform solutions. The interpreter should try to be sensitive to the cultural context when approaching two pieces of visual art depicting the same subject matter, but for different purposes. As a critic, Lessing himself applies this method while turning to the different poetic representations of Bacchus.

Not surprisingly, Lessing almost exclusively interprets visual art pieces of Classical Antiquity with the help of the written works by Greek and Roman poets and tragedians, but not the other way around. It is interesting that Lessing does not rely on the advantages of interpreting literature solely in

69
F. Beiser, "Mendelssohn's Critique of Lessing's *Laocoon*", p. 182.

70
G. E. Lessing, *Laocoon*, pp. vii–viii.

71
Cf. ibid., pp. 3–7.

72
Cf. ibid., p. 7.

73
D. E. Wellbery, "*Laocoon* Today", p. 72.

74
G. E. Lessing, *Laocoon*, pp. 55–56.

75
Ibid., p. 62.

76
Cf. note 21; ibid., p. 218.

the cases where written tradition is providing him with the main point that he should be aware of when approaching similar subject matter represented in a visual art piece. He also puts these methods in use when it comes to interpreting certain details in a piece of fine art representing an episode in Ancient Greek mythology. Criticising in one note in the second section of *Laocoon* Spence's interpretation of one relief in which Meleager's death is depicted, Lessing argues that, as opposed to Spence's belief, there is no representation of a fury in one small part of the image, but that this part represents the "maid-servants of Althaea".[77] In order to support this interpretation, he cites verses from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which confirm the presence of maids in this scene.[78] In this case, instead of providing the interpreter with the basic elements of the plot that the work of visual art presupposes, the literary work gives the interpreter an insight into details that do not decisively affect the the interpretation of the narrative itself, but are still considered important. If interpreted properly, details of this kind can improve the interpretation and the overall experience of the work. They can, for example, enhance the credibility of the depicted moment or establish the appropriate dynamics in the visually represented event. If the persons depicted in the relief were interpreted as furies, then they would in no way participate in the represented event, but could only be seen as the personification of anger and despair. But according to Lessing's views from the second chapter of *Laocoon*, in which the importance of the beauty of the represented object in the ancient art is emphasised, this cannot be the case, since the representation of their angriness will result in violating this convention of Ancient Greek and Roman art. Lastly, if the problematic representation is interpreted this way, then this part of the image does not actually play any role in the mythological episode illustrated here, but just decorates the emotional state of the participants, and thus stays completely outside the story that Ancient Greek mythology is telling us with this representation. With the interpretative intervention like this, Lessing is in hermeneutical pursuit of understanding the cohesion of a visual art piece, with the help of the literature.

Finally, yet importantly, Lessing is using the advantages of textual analysis not only when he approaches the interpretation of visual art pieces, but also when he tries to investigate the origin and adequate dating of the sculpture of Laocoon and his sons. Aside from exploring if Lessing was right in his conclusion on this matter (it is worth mentioning that he was wrong),[79] it is interesting to note that Lessing treats this investigation not as an important contribution to art history, but as a starting point for the interpretation itself. Although he indeed engages in the discussion on the origin of this sculpture in various parts of the book,[80] he explicitly states that he is not interested in historical matters when it comes to this investigation – the historical analysis is just a tool for acquiring better interpretations.[81] It seems that the German critic critic does exactly that – utilising the investigation of the sculpture's origin for interpretation purposes – when criticising Bernard de Montfaucon by showing that his interpretations of Virgil were not careful enough.[82] The examination of the origin of the famous sculpture also inspires Lessing to analyse various details of the representations of Laocoon and his sons in both literature and sculpture, the details which lead him to explore the question of inner coherence of these works of art and expand his own theory of the limits of art and poetry.[83] As Avi Lifschitz and Michael Squire indicated, Lessing's critical and historical remarks and his aesthetic conclusions thus become closely intertwined:

"Not only might the material and literary remains of antiquity lead the critic to a better understanding of aesthetics; by the same logic, aesthetic considerations can themselves also shed light on the historical interpretation of ancient texts and images."[84]

Lessing thus enhances the process of interpreting visual art via poetry by taking into account not just the wholeness of the narrative in a literary work, but also the cultural and historical specificities that the literary author incorporated in his work. But the merits of his exploration of the meaning of a visual art piece with comparable examples of literature can be even further expanded by taking into account some of the recent theoretical reflections on Lessing's *Laocoon*. I will just briefly illustrate one direction in which this discussion can be additionally advanced. In a recent paper, Wellbery states that

"[t]he sculpture reduces the complex totality of the priest's life in time to a momentary configuration and, in doing so, essentializes merely perceptible qualities. On Lessing's view, this impoverishes human self-understanding" [85].

On the other hand, Kottman suggests that

"the narrative aspect (...) distinguishes poetic representation as not merely 'temporal' (...), but also as that medium in which the kind of self-understanding afforded by a consideration of human beings in action most fully comes to the fore" [86].

Although these authors do not explore the potential for the interpretative cooperation between poetry and visual arts, their suggestions can be explored by assuming that interpreting visual art via the narrative dimension of the poetry could lead to the improvement of the "self-understanding" potential of the visual. Not relying solely on the visual content but supplementing the interpretation with the poetry's take on the same topic, the interpreter could more closely consider the "actions" of the people represented in a painting, which could more strongly provoke reflection on them.

Lessing and Schleiermacher – Certain Similarities in Their Interpretative Methods

So far, I have compared some of Lessing's theoretical views with the way Schleiermacher formulated his hermeneutical thought more than half a century after *Laocoon* was published. Now, I want to offer a more general comparison between these two theoretical conceptions while making a departure from Leventhal's interpretation of hermeneutical tendencies in Lessing's theory. Returning to the previously examined Lessing's thoughts on beauty

77
Ibid., p. 197.

78
Cf. ibid.

79
Cf. Claudia Brodsky Lacour, "'Is That Helen?' Contemporary Pictorialism, Lessing, and Kant", *Comparative Literature* 45 (1993) 3, pp. 230–257, here pp. 249–250.

80
Cf. G. E. Lessing, *Laocoon*, pp. 33–34, 42–48, 168–182.

81
Cf. ibid., p. 36.

82
Cf. ibid.

83
Cf. ibid., pp. 34–41.

84
A. Lifschitz, M. Squire, "Introduction", p. 18.

85
D. E. Wellbery, "*Laocoon* Today", p. 72.

86
P. A. Kottman, "Art and Necessity", p. 342.

as the main principle of visual arts in Classical Antiquity and the history in which these principles were established as artistic conventions through trial-and-error, I will propose a somewhat unconventional interpretation of Lessing's views on the "rules" an artist should follow in the creative process, an interpretation that can link his thoughts with the main ideas of the father of Romantic hermeneutics. Additionally, I will point out the connections between Lessing's analyses of the intentions of the artist and Schleiermacher's psychological part of the interpretative process.

Despite the fact there are no explicit methodological remarks of this kind in *Laocoon*, it seems Lessing has used the interpretative procedures somewhat comparable to Schleiermacher's dichotomy of linguistic and psychological tasks in an interpretative process. Firstly, it seems Lessing treats the conventions artists have in mind when creating an art piece the same way Schleiermacher deals with language when it comes to interpreting texts. As Schleiermacher argues there are "rules for the use of words" an interpreter of the text should know when carrying out the linguistic part of the interpretation process,[87] for Lessing, there are the rules of the art form (that also define the limitations of the art form) an interpreter of a fine art piece should take into account. Moreover, when Schleiermacher argues that the linguistic aspect of the interpretative process is concerned with the "boundaries" of what the author of a text or a speech can express in language,[88] the very terminology of the father of hermeneutics evokes associations with Lessing's endeavour to establish the boundaries of painting and poetry, the boundaries marked on the basis of the artistic conventions. Schleiermacher employs language as a (socially and culturally shaped) common ground between a writer and a reader, taking into account there are specific individual habits of using the language as well that are a challenge for the interpreter.[89] Similarly, Lessing shows in *Laocoon* how the producer of a visual art piece is utilising artistic conventions in order to communicate meanings in the most appropriate and beautiful way, so the interpreter should be aware of these conventions. At the same time, as I will try to show in one example found in *Laocoon*, he is also suggesting that in certain art pieces there are individual decisions of the artist that cannot be explained from the perspective of these conventions, so the interpreter should be careful when approaching this kind of art.

As there is no guarantee that the interpreter will understand the meaning of the text simply because he speaks the writer's language, Schleiermacher introduces the psychological part of the interpretation process, in which the interpreter tries to determine the artist's intentions and all the relations there are between written content and the artist herself – the relations that can be utilised in the interpretation process and that the content itself implies.[90] On the other hand, Lessing points out that artists are not limited to the conventions that serve as the "language" of their creative process, but they can create a piece of art following their own artistic decisions, in which they can even transcend the boundaries of the conventional. These decisions can lead artists to create "a work of genius", but they can just as well result in a valueless piece of art, as many of Lessing's examples of poetic works in *Laocoon* show.[91] It is exactly these situations that are challenging for an art critic because they serve as extraordinary exceptions "the timid critic [...] would never have dreamed of".[92] The "timid critic" mentioned here is the one who is strictly governed by the "rules" of the art form and its "boundaries" in her evaluation of an art piece. If we return once again to Beiser's claim that, according to the German

critic, the "rules are necessary for the critic, if not the genius; and that they are often an aid for those artists who are learning their craft",[93] then I would argue instead that Lessing's remark on the "timid critic" suggests that the "rules" of the art form are only a "language" a critic has to "learn" to practice her "craft", but practicing successful criticism is more than acquiring this kind of "language". In interpreting artistic examples that do not conform to these "rules", the critic should deeply examine the reasons behind the unconventional artistic decisions and include them in the exploration of the meaning of the art piece. While not directly linked to the visual arts, such an example is Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, which thus deserves a more detailed comment in this context.

Lessing's analysis of Sophocles' *Philoctetes* proves that the German critic employs a method similar to Schleiermacher's psychological part of the interpretation process. According to Lessing, the dramatic arts should follow the rules of visual arts because drama is basically a "living picture for the spectator".[94] Still, argues the author of *Laocoon*, Sophocles has neglected them in *Philoctetes* by letting the main character of the tragedy loudly "moan and weep, scream and roar" – but this is a problem only "in theory" because Sophocles managed to create an art of genius.[95] Examining the reasons why he thinks the Ancient Greek tragedian succeeded in creating an aesthetically valuable tragedy, Lessing turns to analysing Sophocles' intentions in choosing the unconventional artistic methods. Among other reasons Lessing lists in the part of the fourth section of *Laocoon* dedicated to *Philoctetes*, he holds that Sophocles knew that Philoctetes' screams and groans that "die away on the desert air" would amplify the feeling of compassion in the spectators because they will adequately represent the loneliness, illness, and despair of this Trojan soldier.[96] According to this interpretation, Philoctetes' screams and cries do not simply violate the "rules" of the tragedy as an art form but are utilised as a way of depicting the dreadful circumstances in the most truthful way. This kind of realistic representation of Philoctetes' pain would lead the spectator to feelings of greater intensity than those achievable with the more conventional dramatic techniques. This way, Lessing's analysis of the reasons behind Sophocles' artistic decisions serves as an appropriate complement to the interpretation of an art piece solely in terms of the utilised conventions of the art form.

87
Cf. M. Forster, "Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher".

88
Cf. F. Schleiermacher, "The Aphorisms of 1805 and 1809-10", pp. 40–41.

89
Cf. F. D. E. Schleiermacher, "*The Hermeneutics*: Outline of the 1819 Lectures", p. 2.

90
Cf. M. Forster, "Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher".

91
Cf. G. E. Lessing, *Laocoon*, pp. 106–107, 127–128.

92
Ibid., p. 23.

93
F. Beiser, "Mendelssohn's Critique of Lessing's *Laocoon*", p. 182.

94
G. E. Lessing, *Laocoon*, pp. 21–22.

95
Cf. ibid., pp. 22–23.

96
Cf. ibid., pp. 24–25.

Of course, there are limitations to this comparison between Schleiermacher and Lessing. While Lessing applies the interpretative methods similar to the ones found in hermeneutics while comparing the pieces that belong to different art forms, Schleiermacher's hermeneutical theory is not only restricted to the written works but also disallows the comparison of the works that belong to the different "genres". According to the father of hermeneutics, the "objectively unintelligible" in a written work can be explained via other texts that "belong to one and the same genre".[97] Schleiermacher argues that "poetry, history, and oratory" should not have the same interpretative treatment, but when it comes to the texts that belong to the same "genre", "all authors who deal with the same object are to be treated as one".[98] Thus, unlike in the previously described Lessing's interpretative procedures, in Schleiermacher's theory, the comparison of the works that represent similar subject matter cannot be utilised beyond the boundaries of a particular genre.

The way Lessing approaches the meaning of Sophocles' representation of Philoctetes suggests that Lessing's interpretative forces are always mediated through adequate aesthetic experience of an artwork, especially through the suitable emotional response to the piece being interpreted.[99] The dependence of Lessing's interpretational methods on his views on the aesthetic experience will be further examined in the next section while expanding on Burwick's thoughts on the hermeneutical tendencies in *Laocoon*.

Building on Burwick's Remarks on Laocoon – *Hermeneutical Interpretation and Aesthetic Experience of Visual Art*

According to Burwick, Lessing in his interpretations of visual art pieces establishes some kind of temporal dimension of the represented content and thus utilises the methods hermeneutics has implemented for dealing with the literature.[100] Burwick's point is that Lessing's interpretation of a visual art piece is not limited to spatial relations that arise between the parts and the whole of an image, but also includes reflections on the temporal relations the very representation of certain subject matter presupposes. Without the mention of the tradition of hermeneutics, a similar interpretation of Lessing's theory is present in some other studies on the role of the imagination in *Laocoon*.[101] In itself, it is not clear how this Burwick's claim is bound with the tradition of hermeneutics, as he does not analyse it thoroughly, so I will try to bring it closer to the interpretive methods of Schleiermacher and the Romantic hermeneutical theory.

It seems Burwick's thoughts on hermeneutical tendencies in *Laocoon* can be derived from Lessing's remarks that can be considered as his aesthetic theory. In the third section of *Laocoon*, the German critic is emphasising that the most valuable art pieces are those that encourage the active aesthetic experience by providing "free play to the imagination"[102] of the spectator. The aesthetic experience Lessing refers to is a dynamic and temporal process:

> "The more we see the more we must be able to imagine; and the more we imagine, the more we must think we see."[103]

Lessing illustrates this dynamic aesthetic experience on the example of his own impression of Timomachus' *Medea*, in which the German critic argues that spectators of this painting of Medea and her children that are soon to be killed by her hand "anticipate the result and tremble at the idea of soon seeing Medea in her unmitigated ferocity".[104] Having in mind that the painter

depicted a scene that occurs before the horrific murder, we are not solely looking at the representation of Medea and her children – we are also witnessing "her prolonged indecision", which is "so far from displeasing us", but instead

> "… makes us wish it had been continued in reality. We wish this conflict of passions had never been decided or had lasted at least till time and reflection had weakened her fury and secured the victory to the maternal sentiments."[105]

Lessing's illustration of the aesthetic experience of the valuable art piece such as Timomachus' *Medea* is reminiscent of Burwick's thoughts on the interpretative methods he detected in *Laocoon*, but how can they be linked with the tradition of hermeneutics? Although this has not been elaborated in Burwick's paper, it can be further expanded on the basis of hermeneutic circles involved in the interpretative process of this kind. Interpreting what is represented in a painting is not confined solely to the hermeneutic circle that arises between spatial parts of the image, on one side, and the image as a unity these parts establish, on the other. The interpreter also needs to consider a hermeneutic circle between the represented scene itself as a part of a narrative as a whole, a narrative that this image indirectly represents. The narrative as the whole in this kind of hermeneutic circle is not directly given to the spectator's immediate perception but needs to be reconstructed by the spectator, and this reconstruction will attach a temporal dimension to a subject matter represented in a painting. It is both reconstructing the narrative from a depicted scene as its part and imagining the particular events that belong to this narrative as a whole that determine the spectator's interpretation of the picture of Medea, and lead to his "trembling" as the emotional aspect of his aesthetic experience. The spectator's ability to ascertain the temporal relations between these events in a narrative is of crucial importance in his experience and interpretation. Both the spectator's "trembling" and his interpretation are based on the assumption that the depicted woman is Medea *before* the murder and that a murder is about to happen soon *after* the represented moment. Because of these experiential and interpretational procedures of the spectator, Lessing

97
F. D. E. Schleiermacher, "The General Hermeneutics", pp. 94–95.

98
Ibid., p. 94.

99
This makes Lessing's theory comparable to Herder's hermeneutics as well. See: Hugh Barr Nisbet, "Lessing and Philosophy", in: Barbara Fischer, Thomas C. Fox (eds.), *A Companion to the Works of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing*, Camden House, New York 2005, p. 139.

100
Cf. F. Burwick, "Lessing's *Laokoon* and the Rise of Visual Hermeneutics", p. 223.

101
Cf. David E. Wellbery, *Lessing's* Laocoon. *Semiotics and Aesthetics in the Age of Reason*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1984, p. 133; M. Squire, "Laocoon among the Gods, or On the Theological Limits of Lessing's *Grenzen*", p. 102; Jason Gaiger, "Transparency and Imaginative Engagement. Material as Medium in Lessing's *Laocoon*", in: Avi Lifschitz, Michael Squire (eds.), *Rethinking Lessing's* Laocoon*: Antiquity, Enlightenment, and the 'Limits' of Painting and Poetry*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2016, pp. 279–305, here pp. 291–292.

102
G. E. Lessing, *Laocoon*, pp. 16–17.

103
Ibid.

104
Ibid., p. 18.

105
Ibid., pp. 18–19.

argues that the ultimate task of the creator of an art piece is to set the spectator's imagination in motion so it can effectively reconstruct a narrative while freely moving between the depicted scene and the events happening "before" and "after" it.

In an aesthetic experience like this, the spectator's acquaintance with the adequate poetic or dramatic narrative is doing more than just enhancing the experience of a visual art piece. Although Lessing's comments on the depiction of Medea are not accompanied by his analysis of the poetic or dramatic work representing analogous subject matter, it is clear that in his remarks on Timomachus' masterpiece the German critic presupposes that the spectator has to rely on the external source of the narrative in order to successfully experience this painting. No tragic plot can be discerned from the depiction without it, and almost every aspect of the aesthetic experience of this painting that Lessing mentions in *Laocoon* depends on it. Nevertheless, it seems that this fact still has not received enough attention in the theoretical writings on Lessing's thoughts on visual art. While I already mentioned that contemporary scholars such as Avi Lifschitz, Michael Squire, and Luca Giuliani do find this connection between literary narrative and visual arts remarkable, but do not elaborate on it in their studies, it is important to note that some theoreticians have a different view on this matter.

In his "Envoi" for the collection of essays *Rethinking Lessing's* Laocoon*: Antiquity, Enlightenment, and the 'Limits' of Painting and Poetry*, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht remarked that the awareness of the role of consciousness in early modernity, which resulted in the affirmation of the aesthetic experience of fine art, was the reason "why Lessing so decidedly resisted the interpretative transformation of the visual arts into actions and narrative".[106] However, it seems that in the cases such as Timomachus' *Medea*, a strong reliance on the narrative is needed exactly for the successful realisation of the aesthetic potential of a visual art piece. While not being "transformed" into the narrative, but rather accompanied by it, the imagination of the critic is being supported and conducted in the right direction. But how can a narrative, derived from a poetic or dramatic work with the same subject matter, support the emotional experience of *Medea* that Lessing describes in *Laocoon*? If we follow Wellbery in his suggestions that the task of the critic is "to weigh the nuances of emotional meaning" and that "Lessing's discussion of Philoctetes thus reveals that the emotions [...] involve complex discriminations of situational, historical, and comparative factors",[107] it seems that the previously illustrated emotional effect of *Medea* also depends on these "factors". A person does not "tremble" in front of this painting if he has not been previously acquainted with the complex circumstances in which the depicted scene takes place. To gain an emotional response of that intensity, the spectator of this painting cannot simply rely on a couple of facts about Medea's intentions and behaviour. To be deeply moved by this artistic creation, the spectator illustrated in *Laocoon* probably has no other choice than to get closely acquainted with a poetic or a dramatic representation of this mythological story.

Difficulties in Ascribing Hermeneutical Tendencies to Lessing's Theory

By following this analysis of the hermeneutical tendencies in Lessing's theoretical conception, it can be hastily concluded that the German critic can be regarded as a genuine precursor of the tradition of hermeneutics, but there are certain difficulties in interpreting Lessing's thoughts in *Laoocon* as an

example of the hermeneutical thinking. As mentioned in the previous chapters of this paper, Lessing is promoting historical awareness when it comes to interpreting the work of art of Classical Antiquity. Most importantly, his own interpretations of visual art pieces of this period are governed by his careful explorations of values and beliefs of Ancient Greek and Roman culture. However, while he points to the differences between Ancient Greek art and the artistic tendencies of his contemporaries, by which the main goal of the artist is to represent most faithfully the chosen subject matter, Lessing emphasises in the third section of *Laocoon* that there are certain "rules" that are bound to the artistic medium itself and thus does not change throughout history.[108] Similar universal principles Lessing proposes in his famous belief that poetry represents actions happening in time, while visual art represents bodies existing in space.[109] Additionally, in later sections of *Laocoon*, Lessing talks again about the goals of visual art when it comes to representing beauty and ugliness, but this time without referring to the historical differences between the art of Classical Antiquity and the art of his contemporaries:

"Painting as imitative skill can express ugliness; painting as a fine art will not express it."[110]

Promoting universal principles of visual art that transcend historical differences already raises the doubt that Lessing's theory can be adequately compared to the tradition of hermeneutics, but this is not the only problem when it comes to interpreting his thoughts in *Laocoon* – the difficulties also arise in his interpretations of certain artworks. When Lessing compares the representation of Laocoon and his sons with the portrait of Julien Offray de La Mettrie (by Georg Friedrich Schmidt) and praises the former while criticising the latter, it seems that he utilises these universal "rules" exclusively and suddenly forgets the historically-aware position that the main goal of the contemporary artists, in addition to representing "truth" in their artworks, is to "convert what is unsightly in nature into a beauty of art".[111] Why Lessing does not allow that the depiction of a La Mettrie smiling is exactly the consequence of this kind of artistic effort? It seems Lessing is better at utilising historically-aware principles of interpretation when he approaches ancient art, as opposed to his treatment of the art of his contemporaries. There is a certain clash of his historical and ahistorical principles in Lessing's theory here – and it seems that the ahistorical principles win.

Turning to Lessing's views on the way the interpreters approach a visual art piece they are interested in, I find that German critic also tends to formulate the universal, ahistorical principles of the aesthetic experience and the interpretative process. These principles transcend both the historical or cultural specificities that should be taken into account when dealing with the art of different epochs and the peculiarities of the artistic medium. Lessing's thought that art is valuable only if it gives rise to the free flow of the spectator's

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Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, "Envoi: The Twofold Liminality of Lessing's *Laocoon*", in: A. Lifschitz, M. Squire (eds.), *Rethinking Lessing's* Laocoon, pp. 365–372, here p. 367.

107
D. E. Wellbery, "*Laocoon* Today", pp. 80, 82.

108
Cf. G. E. Lessing, *Laocoon*, p. 16.

109
Cf. ibid., pp. 91–92.

110
Ibid., p. 153.

111
Ibid., p. 16.

imagination can be interpreted as the principle of this kind. While this is indeed an important aspect of Lessing's theoretical conception, having in mind that this way he emphasised the active role of the spectator in experiencing, interpreting and evaluating an artwork, it seems that this thought, as some kind of a Kantian "transcendental principle" of the experience and evaluation, cannot be easily reconciled with the hermeneutical tendencies in *Laocoon*.[112] But if the complex interpretative procedures that Lessing promotes throughout this book include analysis of historical and cultural circumstances in which the artists created the artwork, their artistic intentions and conventions they utilised, and a close explication of a narrative behind the subject matter they represented, how can the interpreter always conform to such a principle?

It is clear that the portrait of La Mettrie can be easily disregarded as valueless if we apply only this principle, because this depiction does not provoke the free flow of imagination. However, it can be evaluated differently if we take into account that the artist here wanted to create a portrait by following the artistic conventions of the time, by which a portrait should represent a person realistically but also emphasise the character of the person represented.[113] Although, to be fair, the painters of that epoch are not unfamiliar with the fashion of depicting a person in an activity (which is the case, for example, in the various portraits by Sir Joshua Reynolds, but not with Schmidt's depiction of La Mettrie), the represented content of a portrait will not encourage the "free play of imagination" of a spectator the way a carefully chosen moment of a dynamic narrative will – and it will certainly not be as inspiring to the spectator as a visually depicted scene taken from the Ancient Greek epic poetry. If we recall Lessing's context-sensitive analysis of the representations of Philoctetes's screaming in pain or Medea before the murder of her children, we certainly do not expect that Lessing will rely on uniform principles on other occasions. Joined by the fact Lessing promotes the universal principles of artistic creation as well, we should conclude that, besides close similarities with the Romantic hermeneutics, there are other theoretical tendencies in Lessing's thought as well, even those that make theoretical conception in *Laocoon* closer to the occupations of the criticised "philosopher" than to the matters the praised "critic" is interested in.

Conclusion

After the exploration of Leventhal's and Burwick's thoughts on the hermeneutical tendencies in Lessing's theoretical works and the examination of additional possibilities for connecting the interpretative methods in *Laocoon* with the tradition of Schleiermacher's hermeneutics, I am not inclined to simply conclude that Lessing should be regarded as a hermeneutical thinker, as I have already stated. Instead, I want to point out how the reception of Lessing's interpretative techniques in *Laocoon* can be altered following this analysis.

Although it has been already observed that there is no equality between poetry and visual arts in the theoretical conception Lessing presented in *Laocoon*, it is interesting that the examination of hermeneutical tendencies in his thought cast new light on this matter. While this disproportion between these art forms is essentially bound to the fact that the German critic claimed poetry has a greater potential in representing various subject matter than visual arts,[114] this interpretation of Lessing's thought, aided by Leventhal's and Burwick's views, suggested that the similar imbalance can be found in the corresponding

interpretative processes directed at these kinds of artistic creations. Not only the interpretation of poetry is superior compared to the interpretative techniques used when approaching visual art pieces, but the interpretation of the former usually conducts the understanding of the latter in Lessing's theoretical conception. This is especially important when it comes to applying the temporal dimension of the narrative – the dimension that is directly represented in the literary work – to the interpretation of the visual art piece. Adequate examples of poetry, as well as the appropriate works of Ancient Greek tragedies, provide an interpreter of a visual art piece with the key for the comprehension of a subject matter represented, as well as the historical and cultural circumstances a visual art piece presupposes.

In addition to this, it seems that already mentioned Lessing's famous remark that poetry represents "actions" in time, while visual art depicts "bodies" in space, can also be re-evaluated with the analysis of the hermeneutical tendencies in Lessing's theoretical works. While Lessing argues poetry and visual art have a whole different subject matter they represent, the interpretation of visual art is done not solely by explicating what "bodies" are represented in an artwork, but through the narrative established in a written tradition in which the interpreter should find a key for interpreting the meaning of visually represented "bodies". Following Lessing's own interpretations, it is more convincing to conclude that the German critic himself does not conform to the theoretically simplified principles of poetry and visual arts, but spontaneously interprets a visual art piece through the previously conducted analyses of literature. While not exactly words themselves, as presented in Leventhal's interpretation of Lessing's essay on the representations of death, it is the poetic text that provides the interpreter with adequate interpretative requisites for dealing with visual art.

Finally, in this paper I also proposed several alternative interpretations of Lessing's theoretical methods. As opposed to interpreting Lessing's views on the rules of the artistic creation as his claim that there are universal, ahistorical principles that are deeply rooted in the very essence of the art form, I suggested that these rules Lessing proposes should be interpreted as historically established artistic conventions, taking into account Lessing's views in the second section of *Laocoon*, in which he analyses how the beauty has become the main goal of visual arts in Ancient Greece. I tried to connect Lessing with Schleiermacher while presenting these conventions as the artistic "language" which not only artists use in their creative acts, but also interpreters of art utilise in their activities. This way, I tried to put stress on the impressive historical awareness that characterises Lessing's interpretative techniques in *Laocoon*.

112

For an elaboration on the similarities between Lessing's and Kant's theory, see: C. Brodsky Lacour, "'Is That Helen?' Contemporary Pictorialism, Lessing, and Kant", pp. 250–254. Several recent studies on Lessing have stressed that Lessing's claims on the role of the imagination are comparable to Kant's theory in *Critique of Judgement*. See: A. Lifschitz, M. Squire, "Introduction", p. 42; D. E. Wellbery, "*Laocoon* Today", p. 62.

113

Cf. Jonathan Richardson, *The Works of Mr. Jonathan Richardson*, Thomas Davies, London 1773, pp. 7–13.

114

Cf. Paul Guyer, "18th Century German Aesthetics", in: E. N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Available at: https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/aesthetics-18th-german/ (accessed on 31 May 2022.).

Dušan Milenković

Hermeneutičke tendencije u Lessingovim interpretacijama likovne umjetnosti u *Laokontu*

Sažetak

U ovom članku razmatram u kojoj se mjeri s hermeneutičkom tradicijom mogu usporediti teorijske procedure koje Gotthold Ephraim Lessing primjenjuje u poznatoj knjizi Laokont ili o granicama slikarstva i poezije *prilikom interpretiranja djela likovne umjetnosti. Da bih ovo ostvario, analizirat ću način na koji Robert S. Leventhal i Frederick Burwick pristupaju Lessingovim metodama interpretacije i pokušati primijeniti njihove stavove na Lessingovo učenje iz* Laokonta*. U radu ću najveću pažnju posvetiti stavu da Lessingove metode interpretiranja djela likovne umjetnosti u izvjesnoj mjeri ovise o metodama koje primjenjuje u analizi književnih djela. Iako ti autori nisu izravno uspoređivali Lessingove stavove s hermeneutičkom teorijom Friedricha Schleiermachera, u radu ću razmotriti postoje li izvjesne sličnosti u njihovu razumijevanju osnovnih karakteristika interpretativnog procesa.*

Ključne riječi

Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laokont*, hermeneutika, likovna umjetnost, estetika

Dušan Milenković

Hermeneutische Tendenzen in Lessings Interpretationen der bildenden Kunst in *Laokoon*

Zusammenfassung

In diesem Beitrag examiniere ich, inwieweit die theoretischen Verfahren zur Interpretation von Werken der bildenden Kunst, die Gotthold Ephraim Lessing in seinem berühmten Buch Laokoon oder über die Grenzen der Mahlerey und Poesie *darlegt, mit unterschiedlichen Interpretationsmethoden aus der Tradition der Hermeneutik vergleichbar sind. Zu diesem Zweck analysiere ich, wie Robert S. Leventhal und Frederick Burwick an Lessings Interpretationstechniken herangegangen sind, und versuche, ihre Ansichten auszuweiten sowie auf Lessings Gedanken in* Laokoon *anzuwenden. Ich werde mich auf die Disposition fokussieren, dass Lessings Verfahren zur Interpretation von Werken der bildenden Kunst in begrenztem Umfang von seinen Methoden der Literaturanalyse abhängen. Auch wenn diese Autoren Lessings Gedanken nicht mit der hermeneutischen Theorie Friedrich Schleiermachers in Verbindung brachten, werde ich gleichfalls erforschen, ob gewisse Similaritäten in ihren Betrachtungsweisen der Hauptbestandteile eines Interpretationsprozesses bestehen.*

Schlüsselwörter

Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laokoon*, Hermeneutik, bildende Kunst, Ästhetik

Dušan Milenković

Les tendances herméneutiques dans les interprétations de Lessing sur les Beaux-Arts dans le *Laocoon*

Résumé

Dans cet article, j'examine dans quelle mesure il est possible de comparer les procédures théoriques avec la tradition herméneutique que Gotthold Ephraim Lessing applique dans son fameux livre le Laocoon ou des frontières de la peinture et de la poésie*. À cette fin, j'analyserai la manière par laquelle Robert S. Leventhal et Frederick Burwick abordent les méthodes d'interprétation de Lessing et tenterai d'appliquer leurs pensées à l'enseignement de Lessing du* Laocoon*. Dans ce travail, je me concentrerai sur la pensée selon laquelle les méthodes d'interprétation des œuvres du domaine des Beaux-Arts dépendent des méthodes dont il se sert pour analyser les œuvres littéraires. Bien que ces auteurs n'aient pas directement comparé les*

pensées de Lessing avec la théorie herméneutique de Friedrich Schleiermacher, je tenterai de voir s'il existe des similarités dans leur compréhension réciproque des caractéristiques principales du processus d'interprétation.

Mots-clés

Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Laocoon, herméneutique, beaux-arts, esthétique