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## Can We Represent the Truth?

**Abstract:** The Romanian language gives the notion in question neutral significations. The ambiguity is found in the undecided formula that states that 'the truth is in the middle', neither on one's side, nor on the other's. The doubts take the certainties' place and inversely. According to circumstances, we oscillate undecidedly between duty and inclination; the duty to tell the truth and the inclination – pragmatically justified – to hide it. The only localization somewhat firmer comes from the Latin tradition, when we admit that *in vino veritas* ('in wine there is truth') – that is in the very source of head disturbances, when euphoric speaking can no longer be censored. The French language, instead, gives truth feminine dignity (*la vérité*), dissociating the undisputed attribute of beauty from the negative qualifications (trickery and deceit) fatally inherited by all of Eve's descendents. This is precisely why the painters, sculptors and philosophers, almost in unison, will endeavour to portray especially the pleasant, attractive side of the truth. In the following pages I will seek to answer two questions: Can we represent the truth? And if we can, how can we represent the truth?

**Keywords:** Image, Truth, Body, Representation, Beauty, Liberty, Emancipation

When we think – linguists say – we bring to attention not the things themselves (it would even be impossible), but only their concepts or their mental images. We think, therefore, in images, even when the subjects have a rather abstract stake. Invoking *the truth*, for instance, we 'visualize' situations that don't have an immediate justification to us. We often say that we are 'in search' for it, that we want to 'reveal' it or to 'bring it to the surface', that we wish to 'possess' it entirely or to contemplate it 'stark-naked', that is exactly how it really is. We speak as if the truth had concreteness, a distinct body, tempting us with its charms. The causes should be sought in the very manner to configure our own language; we think according to how we speak, but also according to how exactly we mentally represent our words. Things seem complicated, therefore I would prefer to explain myself...

Starting with Nietzsche, the philosophers have expressed optimism regarding openness towards art, indicating it as the favourite land of speculative halts. One of the suppositions regarding art claims that in the work of art there is a hidden or camouflaged truth, which must be found, located and 'brought to light'. Last century philosophers argued in favour of a complicity between art and truth. Art – Heidegger writes – is the 'enactment' of the truth; it would 'install' the truth in the world. The work of art facilitates

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the 'occurrence' of the truth, its removing from 'oblivion', from the multi-millenary 'hiding'. Plastic artists thus pass as 'installers of the truth', as they proceed in the assembling of objects, or in the collage of materials by which they signify most sophisticated ideas and concepts.

There is truth in painting. So claims even Jacques Derrida in one of his books of reference (*La vérité en peinture*, Flammarion, Paris, 1978). He identifies four hypostases of truth in painting: as 'presentation' (the real truth, circumventing any representation), 'representation' (the truth portrayed allegorically), 'disclosure' (regarding the proper sense of presentation or representation) and 'adequacy' (regarding the subject of the painting or the fidelity of pictorial art). Scrutinizing the picture, we find the truth in several ways: we have truth in the evoked subject, also in the fair and adequate pictorial representation, in the proper, unequivocal meaning – evident in the picture, and in regarding the authenticity or falsity of the work, but also represented in its portrait itself.

How truth represented in its portrait itself looks like? The classical artists had insisted on the allegorical association of the truth with the woman (beautiful and seductive, but incomprehensible), captured in her nudity (undressed of the veils). This is how it appears at Botticelli, for instance, as antithesis of calumny – as can be seen in the work with the same title (*Calumnia*, 1495). Cesare Ripa, in its famous *Iconography* (1603), describes the truth in the outline of a naked woman, stepping with one foot on the Earth globe; in one hand she holds the sun, and in the other – a wide open book and a palm branch. What does each detail symbolize? Nudity may be the clue of simplicity and of natural purity. The sun is the friend of the truth, lighting it persistently with the radially distributed rays. The book shelters between its covers the profound wisdom or the hidden truth of things. The artist suggests thereby that the truth, as sovereign value, stands above the world, drawing attention to its authority and majesty.



Sandro Botticelli, *Calumnia* (1495)



Cesare Ripa, *La verita* (1603)

Some of the modern representations depict the truth in mythological garment, assuming the paternity of Time; it firmly intervenes to save it from the arms of deceit and envy. It is the motif practiced, among others, by Annibale Carracci, Rubens, Nicolas Poussin, Giovanni Battista Tiepolo and François le Moine. In their works, truth is shown fragile, vulnerable, yet enjoying the affectionate protection of its parent, the one who protects him from the hostile attacks.

A theme equally prolific is the one of the truth hidden in the depths of a pit. This can be encountered in two of the paintings belonging to Jean-Léon Gérôme (around 1895), but also an Édouard Debat-Ponsan (1898). The artists capture at first instance a truth immersed in the darkness of the fountain, reflecting the light with the help of a mirror, but also another one, managing to surface, against the resistance of those who oppose it. The attitude is one of tension, decidedly bellicose, reminiscent of Liberty leading the people, by Delacroix. Besides, in the depictions of the time, freedom and truth seem to intermingle, as we see at a sculptor such as Augustin Dumont. Brought to light, contemplated in its nakedness and beauty, the truth radiates power and seduction. In his work *La vérité* (1870), Jules-Joseph Lefebvre insists especially on these qualities.

Enriched with several new elements (the torch and the crown), the image will become the model of the Statue of Liberty, the one built also by a Frenchman – Frédéric Auguste Bartholdi – in Paris and New York. The truth appears now as a symbol of solidarity, emancipation and power. Only *Nuda veritas* (1899), the work of the Austrian Gustav Klimt, will emphasize the erotic and slightly misogynistic size of representing the truth, impression given by the association of the woman with the snake – symbol of cunning and hypocrisy.



E. Delacroix, *La Liberté guidant le peuple* (1830)    *La statue de la Liberté*, New York

How should be viewed, therefore, "the body" of truth? The option for nudity sends us to eroticism and desire. The woman-truth is subject to an irresistible attraction. To possess the truth means to possess knowledge. Enveloped or enrobed excessively, it raises suspicions. It is precisely why it ought to be released from the burden of appearances and 'un-veiled', brought to the surface. The mirror symbolizes the willingness to reflect – term which regards both reflection-thinking and reflection-light. The truth needs the mirror not to admire itself, but to acknowledge itself.



Jean-Louis Lefebvre,  
*La Vérité*



Jean-Léon Gérôme,  
*La Vérité au fond du puits*

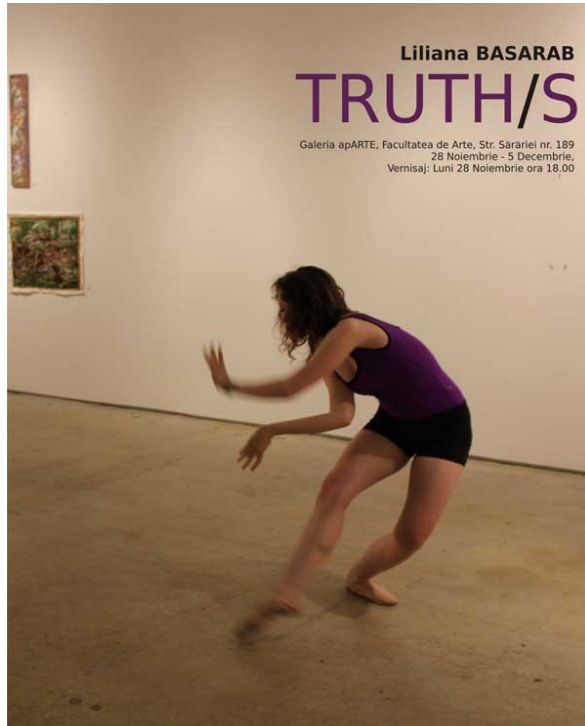


Édouard Debat-Ponsan,  
*La Vérité sortant du puits*

How does the truth look like in the eyes of the nowadays artist? I would propose for illustration a project of Romanian *Liliana Basarab*, entitled *Truth/s*. Its sphere of interest regards the recycling of symbols, the visual transposition of some concepts and studying the mechanisms for converting abstract languages in plasticizing formulas.

Liliana Basarab is the adept of collaborative (participatory) projects, to which she asks for the involvement of other artists and even the public. In a previous endeavour ('Monument for concepts') were tested the significances of notions such as Neutrality, Objectivity, Stability. Initiated in Iași, the project *Truth/s* continued in Chișinău, then in Poland, being finalized in the USA. It consists in a three-minute video made in successive stages, on the pattern of a *work in progress*. In the present context, three ballerinas have been invited to 'interpret' through dance and suggestive movements the concept of truth. The filmed images have been posted online, for 'the best represented truth' to be voted. The winning interpretation has been the ob-

ject of two more interpretations, the last one finalized by precisely the movie made by the artist.



The idea of validating the representations by democratic vote is close to the pragmatic concept of truth, one that needs the public's conviction and adhesion in order to be accepted as useful or functional. The sum of subjective votes gives us, in principle, the largest possible objectivity.

Can art represent the truth? Yes, art can represent the truth, but it will be only a (symbolic) representation, an image or a projection of it, not the truth itself. A photograph or a painting is not reality, but only the representation of reality. Art reveals the truth, brings into light the truth, but is a lie, a construction that takes into consideration the differences between countries and people.

We think, therefore, in images articulated according to the caprices of our own vocabulary. This explains the fact that, when they speak of the truth, the French think first of... the woman (*cherchez la femme...*), taking her body as pretext for the delights of symbolization and allegorizing. The Romanian, instead, prefers to cultivate the equivocal. The truth has neither body, nor face; we find it 'in the middle' or in the wine. In the best of wine.