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# Disputations over images: Baroque university graphics from the Czech lands and *Rhetorische Bildanalyse*

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## Introduction into the subject of study of the PhD thesis

As a university student in the baroque era your defense at the end of an academic grade came with an obligation possibly surprising by today's standards: to fit a series of short sentences of your theses from your final paper into a graphic image (it was mostly your supervisor, called *praeses*, who formulated the theses from your work on a topic). The students were sometimes so fully occupied with the preparation in cooperation with artists, that their final months of study were marked by neglect; and if the whole preparation process took longer than expected – too bad, the disputation had to be delayed (and it happened often – changes had to be made to the first drawing, and the engraving and printing was mostly done in Augsburg). When ready, this print was propagated for various uses: as an announcement of the upcoming disputation, as an invitation, as a handout for the people in the audience (and later as memorabilia), and it was also on display “on stage” of the academic disputation. The most unthinkable aspect for today's academic integrity (at least for today's faculties of philosophy and theology that mostly carried out this practice) was that the most prominent person in the whole was the patron: the one, who sponsored the print, and in most cases, also the whole study period; and the higher rank (i.e. the emperor) the better. The 17<sup>th</sup> century saw the explosion of these broadsheets: from rare showpieces of aristocratic students to the practise becoming a custom for the next century (terminated by the suppression of the Jesuitic order in 1773). The democratisation spurred the use of templates, mostly made in Augsburg; and understandably, the emphasis shifted away from the concrete figure of the patron to more symbolic phenomena. But they were still images charged with the intention of endorsing the student to succeed in the disputation with his opponents. Even the templates could have sentences printed in almost as cheat sheets for arguments and retorts.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> APPUHN-RADTKE, Sibylle. *Das Thesenblatt im Hochbarock: Studien zu einer graphischen Gattung am Beispiel der Werke Bartholomäus Kilians*. Weissenhorn: Anton H. Konrad 1988., ZELENKOVÁ, Petra. *Sbírka univerzitních tezí z Národní knihovny ČR, Collection of university thesis' plates from The National Library of Czech republic*, Národní knihovna České republiky, Praha 2020.

## The main problem in focus

The discipline of art history gave rise to the subfield of *iconography* or *iconology* as framework for interpreting the figurative arts. Evolved principally on renaissance painting, prints, drawings, sculpture, heraldry etc., it is in modified forms used for medieval art (as done also by the one who most famously systematised the method, Erwin Panofsky<sup>2</sup>) and baroque art. The problem with the essential form of *iconography* is that it mainly answers the question “*what is there?*”, but this positivist identification is often taken too quickly for a satisfying explanation. It leaves out the more difficult questions of “*How is it there?*”, “*How was this work supposed to be interpreted?*”, “*What did the spectators know instantly?*”, “*What was boring and what was controversial?*” and important nuances like what was *ironical* about an image, what was deliberately *unmentioned*, *exaggerated*, *compared*, *alleged*, *allegorized*... Tropes and figures of speech and figures of thought were taught as the basic “food for thought” used for later work.<sup>3</sup> Especially the Jesuit intellectuals indulged in composing and unravelling images with “riddles” – both in text and spoken word during preaching for the imagination of the recipients, and by works of art appealing to the senses. Accessing the hidden meaning was already a part of the persuasive strategy. So how to interpret the thesis broadsheets while retrieving something of the “period eye”?<sup>4</sup>

## The method(s)

The theoretical focus of my doctoral thesis lies upon working out and sampling a cohesive method of interpretation of the thesis broadsheets in accordance with the apparatus and practice of the oratory arts in their time. Markus Hundemer formulated it and demonstrated it on a case study of baroque ceiling paintings in his 1997 book *Rhetorische Kunsttheorie und barocke Deckenmalerei: zur Theorie der sinnlichen Erkenntnis im Barock*<sup>5</sup>. He generously laid the foundations of period theory of images, their *invention* and their reception based on the then widely disseminated Jesuit education, but also looked for the preceding steps in modern art history for this approach; and therefore, is a useful critical incentive, opening a range of possibilities. The method labelled as *Rhetorische Bildanalyse* has since been openly used only a few times – for example Dominic Hand ran it on “*Avanzo del pronao del tempio di Giove Tonante*” of Giovanni Battista Piranesi<sup>6</sup>, Martin Mádl

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<sup>2</sup> PANOFSKY, Erwin. *Studies in iconology: humanistic themes in the art of the renaissance*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1939.

<sup>3</sup> Systematised e.g. in the works of Jiří Kraus, as KRAUS, Jiří. *Rhetoric in European Culture and Beyond*, Praha: Karolinum 2014.

<sup>4</sup> A concept for research proposed by Michael Baxandall, first in BAXANDALL, Michael. *Painting and experience in fifteenth century Italy: a primer in the social history of pictorial style*. new edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991.

<sup>5</sup> HUNDEMER, Markus. *Rhetorische Kunsttheorie und barocke Deckenmalerei: zur Theorie der sinnlichen Erkenntnis im Barock*. Regensburg: Schnell & Steiner, 1997. Studien zur christlichen Kunst.

<sup>6</sup> HAND, Dominic. *Die Rhetorik des Bildes. Rhetorische Bildanalyse von Piranesis "Avanzo del pronao del tempio di Giove Tonante"*, München 2008.

(my thesis supervisor) brought innovative interpretations of the ceiling paintings of Carpofofo and Giacomo Tencalla<sup>7</sup> in correlation with seemingly unrelated textual sources. Some of the contents of their paintings have been partially composed the Augustinian erudite and draughtsman Martin Antonín Lublinský, also famous for his thesis broadsheet designs.<sup>8</sup> Hundemer proposes a concrete progression of steps modelled on the classical main parts of an oratory speech: exordio, narratio, argumentatio, conclusio. While a baroque ceiling painting in a church can be considered an imposing pictorial sermon with a beginning and an end, thesis broadsheets were already made in anticipation of disputations. We might have to consider a certain open-endedness and argumentativeness. Did the classical types of arguments shape the image?<sup>9</sup> How was the meaning to be grasped in correlation to the image? What performativity did it channel? What figures of speech and thought were used in the image to make its meaning both felt and readable?<sup>10</sup> How can we reformulate the basic four steps of an oration according to the practices of disputations? What are the limitations of one approach and how should the changing form and technique reflect in it?

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<sup>7</sup> MÁDL, Martin a Marjeta CIGLENEČKI. *Tencalla: barokní nástěnná malba v českých zemích*. Praha: Artefactum, 2012. ISBN 978-80-86890-41-8.

<sup>8</sup> ZELENKOVÁ, Petra. *Martin Antonín Lublinský (1636-1690) jako inventor grafických listů. Pohled do střeoevropské barokní grafiky druhé poloviny 17. století*, Národní galerie v Praze, Praha 2011. The need to precise interpretative methods for thesis broadsheets is already mirrored in the work Petra Zelenková, but the corpus of the bohemical material is massive – only in the Czech National library 526 broadsheets are preserved, and more are to be found in other local and foreign collections.

<sup>9</sup> The literature on disputation practices only partially considers the imagery, and the art historical research only uses it scantily, offering space for syntheses. E.g. KOTALA, Lukáš. *Novověká ústní disputace: kořeny, proces, úskalí a možnosti*. Praha: Krystal OP, 2014, or FRIEDENTHAL, Meelis, ed., MARTI, Hanspeter, ed. a SEIDEL, Robert, ed. *Early modern disputations and dissertations in an interdisciplinary and European context*. Leiden: Brill, 2021. Intersections; volume 71-2021.

<sup>10</sup> The literature on tropes and figures in early modern art is varied and interdisciplinary, often not distinguishing the method. E.g. BENTHIEN, Claudia, *Barockes Schweigen. Rhetorik und Performativität im 17. Jahrhundert*, München 2006, or GORDIAN, Michael, *The Culture of Dis/simulation in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Europe*, A dissertation submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Combined Historical Studies, Warburg Institute, The University of London 2014.