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“THE BIRTH OF VENUS: INTER- AND INTRAMEDIAL TRANSPOSITIONS TO
CONTEMPORARY BRAZILIAN ART AND CULTURE”

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INTRODUCTION

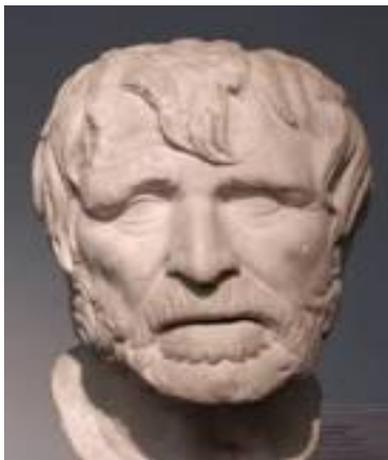
The study of the relationship between Literature, the Arts and the Media has been the subject of intense interest and research, not only among the artists themselves but also among scholars, art critics, philosophers and contemporary theorists of intersemiotic translation, all of them fascinated, among other aspects, by the new cultural perspectives and different world visions these relationships can offer.

Among the visual arts, Botticelli’s *Birth of Venus*, through its interaction with the past and present, provides us with the opportunity to carry out a long-range intermedial reading:

I – on the one hand, it makes us return to its origins in Greek mythology – in the writings of Homer, Hesiod, Anacreon and Ovid, among others – as well as to Sandro Botticelli’s own times and place: 15th century Florence, with Angelo Poliziano’s description of *The Birth of Venus* in his poem *Stanze per la giostra*.

II– on the other hand, Botticelli’s painting, as visual source text, allows us to discuss its transposition into our own Brazilian art and culture, by way of Di Cavalcanti’s and Mauricio de Souza’s recontextualizations of *The birth of Venus* in painting and cartoon, thus giving us a better understanding of how these two artists have absorbed and interpreted the original Greek myth through Botticelli’s Renaissance painting.

I – THE BIRTH OF VENUS: from Hesiod’s Theogony to Botticelli’s painting



Hesiod

<https://www.google.com.br>



The Theogony

[jpg.Windows Live Photo Gallery](#)

In many cultures, narratives about the origin of the cosmos and about the gods that shaped it are a way for society to reaffirm its native cultural traditions. Theogonies, specifically, tend to affirm kingship as the natural embodiment of society.

As the first Greek mythical cosmogony, Hesiod's *Theogony*, in describing the origins and genealogies of the Greek gods, affirms the kingship of the god Zeus himself over all the other gods and over the whole cosmos. The narrative, structured as a hymn of 1.022 lines written in the epic dialect of Homeric Greek, presents the most famous version of the myth of Aphrodite: the foam-born goddess arising from the sea and floating ashore to the island of Cythera on a scallop shell.

As her birth was the consequence of a castration, a summary of the preceding events takes us to the interconnected genealogies of the gods that shaped the cosmos: from Chaos came Gaia (Earth). From Gaia came Uranus (Sky) and Pontus (Sea). Uranus mated with Gaia to create three sets of offspring: the Titans, the Cyclops and the Hecatonchires. Uranus was so disgusted with the Hecatonchires that he pushed them back into Gaia's womb. Angered by this, Gaia begged the Titans to punish their father. Only Cronus was willing to do so and he castrated his father with Gaia's sickle. Cronus then threw the severed testicles into the Sea, and the foam from his genitals gave rise to Aphrodite.

As this last episode is described in *The Theogony*,

“(...) And so soon as he [Cronus] had cut off the members with flint and cast them from the land into the surging sea, they were swept away over the main a long time: and a white foam spread around them from the immortal flesh, and in it there grew a maiden.

First she drew near holy Cythera, and from there, afterwards, she came to sea-girt Cyprus, and came forth an awful and lovely goddess, and grass grew up about her beneath her shapely feet.

Her gods and men call [her] Aphrodite, and Aphrogeneia, because she grew amid the foam, and Cytherea because she reached Cythera (...).” (*The Theogony*, ll. 176-206).

<http://www.sacred-texts.com/index.htm>

Hesiod's reference to the creation of Aphrodite as "risen from the foam" (ἀφρός > *aphros* > foam) will now be discussed, as we move from the Greek cultural context to the Renaissance, by way of its pictorial transposition to Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*. This will allow us to assess the function that this transposition of the "verbal source text" (Clüver, 1989, p.76) into another art form, culture and age has acquired.

As the theme of the birth of Aphrodite was inserted in the Florentine culture of Botticelli's times – the Renaissance, flourishing in the court of Lorenzo de' Medici in the 1480s and thus open to the use of a pagan narrative for subject matter – the foregoing summary and transcription of Aphrodite's birth in *The Theogony* will prove seminal for a better understanding of the "literary model" in Botticelli's painting.



Sandro_Botticelli pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/

As Clüver points out, in his discussion of intersemiotic transpositions,

Book illustrations are intended to be published side by side with their source texts (...). But there are also paintings on specific literary texts that are meant to be viewed by themselves (...). Like innumerable two- and three-dimensional works that are versions of a literary *Stoff* rather than a specific passage, they demand that the viewer be familiar with the literary model; otherwise, their representational content will remain largely inaccessible. (1989, p.78-9).

Botticelli's *Nascita di Venere* (c.1485), commissioned by Lorenzo de' Medici, was revolutionary in its time as the first Renaissance painting with an exclusively secular and mythological theme. It depicts Venus, born of the foam, as she rides towards the shore on a scallop shell, with the figure of the god Zephyrus carrying the nymph Chloris as he blows the wind to guide Venus and, on the shore, Pomona, the goddess of Spring, welcoming Venus with a mantle in her hand:



it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nascita_di_Venere

Although no single text provides the precise imagery of Botticelli's painting, its iconography is similar to a description of the event in Angelo Poliziano's poem *Stanze per la giostra* (1475-8):

XCIX 99

In the stormy Aegean, the genital member is seen to be received in the lap of Tethys, to drift across the waves, wrapped in white foam, beneath the various turnings of the planets; and within, both with lovely and happy gestures, a young woman with nonhuman countenance, is carried on a conch shell, wafted to shore by playful zephyrs; and it seems that heaven rejoices in her birth.

C100

You would call the foam real, the sea real, real the conch shell and real the blowing wind; you would see the lightning in the goddess's eyes, the sky and the elements laughing about her; (...)

CI101

101

You could swear that the goddess had emerged from the waves, pressing her hair with her right hand, covering with the other her sweet mound of flesh; and where the strand was imprinted by her sacred and divine step, it had clothed itself in flowers and grass; then with happy, more than mortal features, she was received in the bosom of the three nymphs and cloaked in a starry garment.

https://www.oneonta.edu/faculty/farberas/arth/arth213/botticelli_poliziano_birth_venus.htm

Therefore, if Botticelli had Poliziano's *Stanze* as an alternative "literary model", Poliziano himself based his work partially on Hesiod's *Theogony*, in an intertextual confrontation in keeping with the humanist tradition to make the past alive again, by translating and updating the classics.

In Botticelli's canvas, Venus is depicted slightly to the right of center. Her waving hair, reminding us of the waves that carried her across the sea and the winds that are still blowing from Zephyrus' mouth, also reflects the painter's interest in the way women wore their long hair in the late 15th century. He has also given Venus an idealized face on which he has made one side lighter and the other more shaded. The slight tilt of the shaded side towards the sea behind her, plus her contemplative look, could suggest that she is still attached to the sea, as she has ridden on its waves in a scallop shell. The size of the shell suggests the unknown depths of the sea from which the winds have raised it in order to bring the goddess ashore, while its golden iridescence seems to reflect her golden-blond hair .

The dark line around the contours of her body underscores her sculptural forms against the background, as well as the color of her pearly, marble-like skin. Her posture is reminiscent of the *Venus de' Medici*, a marble sculpture from classical antiquity, as well as of the *Aphrodite of Cnidos* statue, in which the goddess attempts to cover herself in a gesture of modesty:



en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Capitoline_Venus



en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Venus_de'_Medici

Venus' nudity is thus significant, for the depiction of nude women in paintings was not normal in the Middle Ages.

The background showing the sky, the sea and the earth reminds us of the invisible presence of Uranus, Pontus, and Gaia. The other gods and nymphs are represented in their anthropomorphic shape: suspended by wings and enveloped in floating clothes, Zephyros is embracing Chloris, his wife. While both blow with force to conduct Venus to the land, they scatter flowers, created at the moment of her birth as the goddess of love.

In the right foreground, Pomona, the goddess of Spring, is waiting for Venus with a billowing mantle in her hands. The same movement is apparent in Pomona's dress, while the cornflowers on both garments seem to be an extension of the roses thrown by Zephyrus and Chloris, so that Venus is surrounded by flowers from all sides. The orange trees behind Pomona with their white blossoms and the golden outlines on the leaves, trunks and boughs seem also to be imbued with Venus' divine presence.

The lyrical beauty of Botticelli's painting turned it into one of the pinnacles of the pictorial arts, with Venus, as a manifestation of the feminine in Greek culture, now becoming the feminine aesthetic ideal in the Renaissance. Although the painting can be viewed from a variety of perspectives — mythological, political, religious — art historians have found a Neoplatonic interpretation to be the most enduring way of understanding the painting, as Botticelli represented the Neoplatonic idea of divine love in the form of a nude Venus.

Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* thus continues to enrapture the general public as well as connoisseurs, challenging all of us to read new meanings in it as the painting is recreated and recontextualized in other times and cultures.

II – THE BIRTH OF VENUS: From Botticelli to Di Cavalcanti’s painting

As we now follow a re-reading of Botticelli’s painting by means of its intramedial transposition to Di Cavalcanti’s *O nascimento de Venus* (1940), it is worthwhile remembering that Di Cavalcanti (1897-1976) was one of the organizers and participants of our *Semana da Arte Moderna* (1922) and, as such, of 20th century Modernism in Brazil.

In tune with the new aesthetic and cultural manifestations of his time, his themes are typically Brazilian. They include popular festivities, workers, *mulatas*, *favelas* (slums), social protests, thereby enhancing the nationalistic weight exerted by the social, cultural and political context in which he lived and worked. (<http://www.dicavalcanti.com.br/>)

Furthermore, Di Cavalcanti’s *Birth of Venus* not only reflects his interest in Greek mythology and its revival during the Italian Renaissance, but also the way his direct acquaintance with Renaissance art served to give a new depth to his paintings. As he states, “Art only becomes universal when the values it reveals, which are immanent to a certain society, surpass the geographical and historical limitations of this culture. The transcendence of these values, however, does not erase their own peculiarities. The art of ancient Greece became universalized without denying its origins.” (DI CAVALCANTI, 1968, p.2)¹ (my translation).



Di Cavalcanti <https://www.google.com.br/search?q=Di+Cavalcanti>

Considering the differences in style, context and size – Botticelli’s tempera on canvas is 175cm. x 279 cm. and Di Cavalcanti’s oil on canvas is 54 cm. x 65 cm – it is astonishing how much of Botticelli’s painting is recreated in Di Cavalcanti’s:

¹ “A arte só se torna universal quando os valores que revela e que são imanentes a uma dada sociedade ultrapassam as limitações geográficas e históricas dessa cultura. A transcendência desses valores, no entanto, não apaga suas particularidades próprias. A arte da antiga Grécia universalizou-se sem renegar sua origem.”



O Nascimento de Venus <http://dicavalcanti.com.br>

In the background, we can also imagine the invisible presence of Uranus in the sky, with the clouds adding a touch of color to the blue, as well as that of Pontus in the rough sea, with its choppy waves reminding us of Zephyrus blowing. At the same time the white foam represents the element from which Aphrodite was born. We can further imagine, in the foreground, the presence of Gaia in the sand and earth on which three women are sitting.

The fact that all three women – like their mythological counterparts Zephyrus, Chloris and Pomona – are looking at Venus lying half-asleep on the lap of one of them, as if awakening from a dream, confirms the strangeness of the event for them: who might this beautiful white naked girl/woman be, born of the sea?

Her face, like that of Botticelli's Venus, is slightly tilted to her right, as if she too is remembering the sea from which she has just emerged. The undulations of the white sheet she is lying on recall the waves of the sea, while the special nuance the woman's pink skirt adds to the sheet reminds us of the nuances of the mother-of-pearl of the scallop shell on which Botticelli's Venus is standing. The white and softly shaped hat the woman is wearing, in its turn, seems to reproduce the scallop shelf in miniature, thereby increasing the significance of Di Cavalcanti's intramedial recontextualization. Similarly, the detail of the woman in the background holding an open white towel in her hands also recalls the figure of Pomona with a mantle in her hands, coming to cover Venus.

While the different shades of the women's dark skin, enhanced by the play of light and shade, again recall the warm colors of the earth, as well as of Brazil's racial mixture, they simultaneously contrast with and thus enhance the lighter tone of the nude figure of Venus, which evokes the marble-like color of Botticelli's goddess. Her wavy hair, like that of the other three women, reminds us once more of the waves of the sea.

Furthermore, in contrast to the women's skins, the colors of their skirts and blouses, with their tones of blue, pink, red and white, seem to match and heighten the colors in the sky, while

the wave-like forms of their skirts again replicate the waves in the sea, thereby producing an interrelation between background and foreground, landscape and human beings.

Unlike Botticelli's color scheme, with its cold greens and blues, its warm areas of pink with golden touches, in keeping with the birth of the goddess, Di Cavalcanti's painting pulsates with strong, pure colors, and strong chromatic contrasts, reminiscent of Fauvism and in keeping with the tropical climate of Brazil. Only Venus is kept in a lighter but golden hue, uniting ethereal and earthly beauty.

The similarity in theme of this painting with Di Cavalcanti's painting *Pescadores* (1950)



Pescadores <http://www.dicavalcanti.art.br/anos40/obras>

suggests that the three women are probably fishermen's wives. This contributes to Di Cavalcanti's recontextualization of Venus arriving at the shore and being received not by mythical beings, but by dark-skinned women who are used to working by the seashore.

The heaviness of their contours, in contrast to Botticelli's delicately drawn figures, seems to confirm this possibility. Further, the prominence of their strong feet, arms, and hands (symbolic of strength, protection and hard work), significantly enhance their gestures: one is braiding her black hair, reminding us of Venus' long hair; another is holding a towel, while the third is holding Venus herself, with one arm around her shoulders and the other protectively placed on one of her knees. The position of the arms and hands of the "newly born" Venus in turn recalls the coy gestures of Botticelli's Venus: she has her right arm across her body below her breasts, while her left arm rests on her right leg, covering her groin.

Moreover, the three dark women, so striking for the strength of their expression and physique, and the vibrant colors of their garments, could be seen as representations of contemporary Brazilian "mythical figures" – our own brand of tropical and multiracial beauty – thus creating a mythical continuity, a "tissue of correspondences" that only enhances the nationalistic weight of Di Cavalcanti's social, cultural and political context. The detail of Di Cavalcanti's Venus being in a reclining position in the left foreground, in contrast to the standing

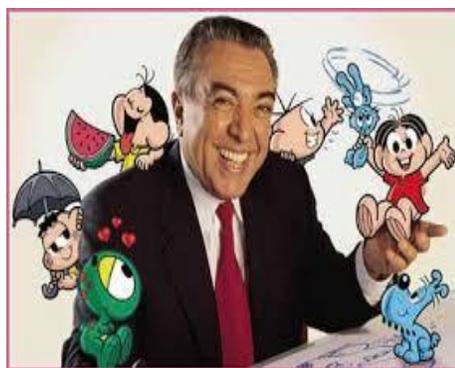
position of Botticelli's *Venus*, is reminiscent of Giorgione's *Sleeping Venus* (1509) and Cabanel's (1863) and Gervex's (c.1896) *Birth of Venus*, among other paintings.

Thus, if in Botticelli's painting we are aware of the classical birth of Venus, in keeping with European cultural rebirth, in Di Cavalcanti's transposition to Brazilian Modernism the classical theme has become revitalized in terms of compositional criteria, forms and human figures.

Moreover, the fact that in Di Cavalcanti's works the predominance of human figures is a "manifestation of his essential humanism" as he "has made of man the object of his attention" (ARAÚJO, 1998, p.46-8)² (my translation) confirms the universalizing quality of his *Birth of Venus*. Even Venus is presented as multiracial, thereby reinforcing Di Cavalcanti's words: "Our art has to be like our food, our air, our sea. It has to reveal our culture, for good art is always cultural, and its specific dimension is to anticipate a cultural moment. The real artist becomes modern for his own time: he brings the new, he is the herald of a new era" (1968, p.2)³. (my translation). This is the artist's legacy to us.

III- THE BIRTH OF VENUS: from Di Cavalcanti to Mauricio de Souza's *Monica no nascimento de Venus*

If Di Cavalcanti's "continuous concern in producing a Brazilian art, connected to everyday aspects of Brazilian life and thus trying to define through them our cultural identity" (SCHENBERG, 1988, p.197-80)⁴ (my translation) is so apparent in his *Birth of Venus*, this concern receives a different but related function with Maurício de Souza, the creator of *Monica's Gang* (*Turma da Mônica*), the popular Brazilian comic book series that started in 1959.



Maurício de Souza <https://universoaleatorio.wordpress.com>

² "manifestação de seu humanismo essencial" (...) pois ele "fez do homem o objeto de sua atenção".

³ "A nossa arte tem de ser como a nossa comida, o nosso ar, o nosso mar. Tem de ser reveladora da nossa cultura, pois a boa arte é sempre cultural, e sua dimensão própria é a de antecipar um momento cultural. O artista verdadeiro torna-se moderno para a sua época: ele traz o novo, é o arauto de uma nova era".

⁴ "contínua preocupação em fazer uma arte brasileira, ligada aos aspectos cotidianos da vida brasileira e procurando através deles definir a nossa identidade cultural".

As Maurício de Souza states, “I hope, with this work, that our public, mainly the children, draw close to the history of the great masters of painting, by knowing their lives, their works and having their playful moment with our re-readings”⁵.(my translation).

Monica no nascimento de Venus (1992): It was after visiting MASP (Art Museum of São Paulo) at the end of the 80’s that he became inspired and thus started to research paintings of famous artists in order to create parodies of known works, such as Pink and Blue, Mona Lisa and The Creation of Adam, “to incentivate creativity and make art known in an amusing way”.

He spent fourteen years researching and his complete work was published in 2002 as *Histórias em Quadrões: as pinturas de Mauricio de Sousa* – in playful contrast to his comic strips “história em quadrinhos”. The fact that he “tried to scrutinize the details of these paintings, such as the use of paints, the way the strokes were done, everything with great care”⁶, becomes apparent as we examine his 1992 acrylic painting *Monica no Nascimento de Venus* (106cm x 145,5 cm).



Monica no Nascimento de Venus <http://books.google.com.br/books>

From the sky and sea in the background, to the land with the trees, to the figures of Venus standing on the shell, Zephyrus and Chloris blowing and throwing roses and the goddess of

⁵“Espero, com esse trabalho, que o nosso público, principalmente as crianças, aproximem-se da história dos grandes mestres da pintura, conhecendo suas vidas, suas obras e tendo o seu momento lúdico com as nossas releituras”. <http://arteimitaavida.blogspot.com.br/2009/01/historia-em-quadres-as-pinturas-de.html>

⁶“Procurei verificar detalhes das pinturas, como a utilização das tintas, o jeito das pinceladas, a iluminação, tudo com muito cuidado”. <http://arteimitaavida.blogspot.com.br/2009/01/historia-em-quadres-as-pinturas-de.html>

Spring welcoming Venus, we have, in this intramedial transposition from Botticelli to Maurício de Sousa, a humorous recontextualization for children of the original painting:

- with Mônica, the short, fat, toothy seven-year-old cartoon character representing the goddess of Springtime welcoming Venus; the fact that she is courageous and determined as leader of her Gang but has also moments of femininity and poetry, seems to justify her being chosen to receive Venus on land;

- with Anjinho, the guardian angel of Monica's Gang, who lives in the clouds and is constantly called to help Monica and all her friends, befittingly becoming Zephyrus, holding a smaller winged angel at his side, while both continue to blow the goddess to land;

- and with the mermaid, associated with sirens, and thus belonging to Greek mythology, as Venus herself: although her demure posture reproduces that of Botticelli's Venus, she looks smilingly to her left – in contrast to Botticelli's Venus –, where Monica as the goddess of Springtime stands, as if anticipating her becoming part of the Gang.

However, by transposing his own comic universe to Botticelli's recreation of the Greek universe, Maurício de Souza has not merely recontextualized Botticelli's painting in the form of parody (not as a negative “mock song” but as a “subsidiary” humorous song), as he has called his “quadrões”, in which the intramedial transposition of mythological beings recreates the original according to new parameters: the cartoon painting.

As “the rhetorical function of a rewriting can be as varied as the variegated nature of these recreations, inside the same code or from one to another semiotic code” (OLIVEIRA, 2012, p. 66)⁷ (my translation), Maurício de Souza's recreation – introducing Brazilian children to Greek mythology by way of his comic strip characters – has given a new function to Botticelli's painting. The “difference” he has introduced is one easily detected by children, thus helping them to explore, enlarge and transfer latent trans-cultural and trans-historical aspects to their own Brazilian cultural context.

The fact that in 2007 the cartoonist received the title of UNICEF ambassador for his contribution of almost fifty years in the transmission of “values like friendship, the importance of education, of family and communal life” confirms the importance of his “quadrões” among his many other artistic creations.

CONCLUSION

Jan Mukarovsky tells us that although “the visual arts can and do serve to please the eye and the feelings”, as well as being “of great value for national self-esteem and prestige” and “for the propagation of ideas or principles”, “their most essential function, without which all the other tasks remain mere shadows or are not even realized, lies in their influence upon man's

⁷ “A função retórica de uma reescrita pode variar tanto quanto a variegada natureza das recriações, ocorrendo dentro de um mesmo código, ou de um para outro código semiótico.”

attitude toward reality” (1977, p. 244). This draws our attention to the way these functions become interrelated, inserted as they are in Botticelli’s, Di Cavalcanti’s and de Souza’s different historical and cultural contexts.

► Irina Rajewski observes that “medial practices do not occur in isolation from, but in a ‘constant dialectic’ with other media” and that “it is the importance of specifying each particular understanding of intermediality (in a narrower sense), and of clarifying in respect to which objects and to which epistemic objectives it gains heuristic and practical value” (2005, p.64). We can see how this constant dialectic established between Hesiod’s text and its visual re-creations in Botticelli, Di Cavalcanti and Maurício de Souza, with their changing apprehensions of the “original” birth of Venus, not only enhances important features of their own aesthetic and cultural manifestations but, from a Brazilian perspective, also demonstrates the extent to which Brazilian artists have absorbed and recreated European art to increase awareness of our own cultural identity.

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