

Dangerous disorder: '*confusione*' in sixteenth-century Italian art treatises

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In sixteenth-century Italian writing on art, *confusione* is a much-maligned concept. While many scholars skim over the word, swiftly pressing on to examine neutral or positively charged words like *composizione*, *varietà* or *grazia*, the connotations of *confusione* as used in Renaissance art treatises are far from self-evident.¹ Particularly in the second half of the *cinquecento*, writers used the word *confusione* to express manifold concerns regarding the supposedly detrimental effects of confused and hence confusing artworks upon the beholder's enjoyment or pleasure, as well as upon their intellectual, psychological, and spiritual experiences. The profusion of *cinquecento* instances of the word, in the treatises of artistic practitioners and non-practitioners, is potentially symptomatic of writers' reactions against so-called 'mannerism' and their concerns about the perceived decline or senescence of art; more explicitly, some important instances are bound up in counter-reformation debates about sacred images. Most fundamentally, considered in the context of Renaissance art theory and faculty psychology, *confusione* indicates the prevalent fears surrounding inherently 'bad' artistic qualities.

I thus begin not with artworks but with the words that writers used to describe artworks. Such words are revealing of the 'broad phenomena' of responses that David Freedberg expounded as the stuff of legitimate historical inquiry.² I argue specifically that images were also thought to reveal their efficacy through a perceived formal defectiveness, as distinct from the kind of morally dubious subject matter examined by Freedberg in relation, for example, to Savonarola's burning of 'profane' images.³ Words like *confusione*, expressing negative value-judgements about the quality of artworks, can help to detect and diagnose the concerns of their users regarding the potentially malign powers of images considered defective.

¹ The literature on neutral or positive terminology is extensive. There is a notable emphasis on good quality in David Summers, *Michelangelo and the Language of Art*, Princeton 1981, especially in the chapters on 'Quality and the *giudizio dell'occhio*' and '*Furia*'. See also Michael Baxandall's landmark study, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style*, Oxford 1988, 2nd edn, 109-50. Roland LeMollé's lexicon of Vasari's '*vocabulaire appréciatif*', as this phrase itself suggests, comprises only positive words; see his *Georges Vasari et le vocabulaire de la critique d'art dans les "Vite"*, Grenoble 1988, 19. See also Thomas Puttfarcken, *The Discovery of Pictorial Composition: Theories of Visual Order in Painting 1400-1800*, New Haven and London 2000, 44-68; and Charles Hope, '"Composition" from Cennini and Alberti to Vasari', in François Quiviger and Paul Taylor eds, *Pictorial Composition from Medieval to Modern Art* (London and Turin 2000), 27-44.

² David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response*, Chicago 1991, xxiv.

³ Freedberg, *Power of Images*, 348.

I restrict my study to paintings, since the sources primarily use *confusione* in relation to paintings. After proposing some notional definitions of *confusione*, I begin in the *quattrocento*, with Alberti's *Della pittura* and its Latin counterpart *De pictura* (both composed in the mid-1430s), wherein there is an early use of *confusione* in a Renaissance art treatise to describe an undesirable artistic characteristic. Bridging Alberti and the late-sixteenth-century authors, Paolo Pino's *Dialogo di pittura* (1548) echoes the Albertian sense of *confusione*. I then consider examples of the word's usage from a psychological and intellectual standpoint and in possible connection to 'mannerism' in Giorgio Vasari's *Vita di Iacopo da Pontormo pittore fiorentino* from the second ('Torrentiniana') edition of his *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori scultori e architettori* (1568), Lodovico Dolce's *Dialogo della pittura intitolato l'Aretino* (1557), Paolo Lomazzo's *Trattato dell'arte de la pittura, scoltura, et architettura* (1585), and Giovanni Battista Armenini's *De' veri precetti della pittura* (1586). Finally, I turn to the particular theological significance of *confusione* in two counter-reformation treatises on art, namely the cleric Giovanni Andrea Gilio's *Dialogo nel quale si ragiona degli errori e degli abusi de' pittori circa l'istorie* (1564) and the bishop Gabriele Paleotti's *Discorso intorno alle imagini sacre e profane* (1582). Despite this wide variety of texts and contexts, *confusione* is invariably treated as a negative characteristic.⁴ Based on this commonality, it is a useful diagnostic tool for identifying the recurring anxieties associated with 'bad' artistic qualities.

Defining *confusione*

Renaissance art theorists and critics do not explicitly define *confusione*. This lack of definition suggests the assumption that their usage of *confusione* would be self-explanatory, and indeed it seems probable that the property might have been considered somewhat objective.⁵ Given the lack of contemporary definitions, and in order to understand the concerns motivating *cinquecento* uses of *confusione*, I offer here some notional attempts at definition.

Renaissance writers use *confusione* to denote both a pictorial and a mental phenomenon. The noun bears the force of its Latin root, *confundere*—literally 'to pour together', 'to mingle'. The *Vocabulario della Crusca* (1612) nods to this etymology, defining the Italian *confondere*, the verbal cognate of *confusione*, thus: *mescolare insieme senza distinzione, e senza ordine. Lat. confundere, permiscere*.⁶ As in this definition, *confusione* is frequently opposed to pictorial order (*ordine*) in the

⁴ On the negativity of *confusione*, see Philip Lindsay Sohm, 'Maniera and the Absent Hand: Avoiding the Etymology of Style', *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 36, 1999, 102, 123. Sohm identifies *confusione* as one of the key negative words used by Marco Boschini when discussing fingerprints or blemishes in brushwork ('macchie').

⁵ Cf. Medieval treatments of 'ugliness' as an objective property: see Naomi Baker, *Plain ugly: the unattractive body in early modern culture*, Manchester and New York 2010, 13. On aesthetics and 'objectivity' in Italian art theory and especially Alberti, see Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz, 'Objectivity and Subjectivity in the History of Aesthetics', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 24 (2), 1963, 164-65.

⁶ 'To mix together without distinction, and without order' (translation mine). Accademia della Crusca, *Vocabulario degli Accademici della Crusca*, Venice 1612, 209.

sources—or, alternatively, to composition (*composizione*) or clarity (*chiarità*). Indeed, *confusione* appears primarily as a formal pictorial property, denoting an intermingling or pouring together of limbs, figures, or vanishing points. Very occasionally, the word denotes confusion of subject matter. And, importantly, pictorial *confusione* is often seen as springing from *confusione* in the artist's mind, or as spawning *confusione* in the beholder's mind.

The latter notion of mental *confusione*, caused by pictorial *confusione*, can be fruitfully considered in the context of Renaissance faculty psychology. Several *cinquecento* writers connect the act of beholding *confusione* in an artwork to the mind's consequent inability to make sense of this hodgepodge data. The process might be usefully viewed as a frustration of the *phantasia* (loosely translatable as 'imagination'), prompted by a confused image. As François Quiviger has elucidated, in Renaissance faculty psychology, the *phantasia* was believed to 'compose' intelligible images out of 'scattered incoming sensory data'.⁷ But what if this sensory data is scattered to the point of *confusione*? As Quiviger argues, the 'compositional' function of the *phantasia* has a kinship with Renaissance notions of pictorial composition.⁸ To aid a beholder's cognition, a picture—especially one treating sacred subject matter—should be painted intelligibly. When they judge an image to be unintelligible, Renaissance authors tend to regard it as defective and problematic. This framework underpins part of my definition of *confusione* as the state of mind that results from beholding *confusione* in a picture.

Given the sheer variety of its usage, it will be helpful to formulate some distinctions between the different problems associated with *confusione* in the sources. I categorise these problems into four sets, but these are far from discrete and frequently overlap:

1. an aesthetic problem, relating to the beholder's enjoyment or pleasure
2. an intellectual problem, relating to the beholder's cognition
3. a psychological problem, relating to the beholder's mental state
4. a theological problem, relating to the beholder's spiritual state

The above list is arranged according to a general pattern observable in the sources, whereby *confusione* begins as an aesthetic problem, which then often causes an intellectual problem, and, in some cases, this in turn triggers a psychological or theological problem. But this sequence is not consistently linear: *confusione* is a slippery word. It is hoped that the above systematisation can give a sense of the word's breadth of applicability without implying that its usage was itself systematic. Moreover, I use the modern terms 'aesthetic' and 'psychological' with full cognizance of their anachronistic whiff. I do not mean to suggest that these were the terms or categories used by sixteenth-century Italian writers. The modern terms

⁷ François Quiviger, 'Imagining and Composing Stories in the Renaissance', in François Quiviger and Paul Taylor eds, *Pictorial Composition from Medieval to Modern Art* (London and Turin 2000), 47.

⁸ Quiviger, 'Imagining and Composing', 52.

are useful to think with in performing my *post factum* diagnostic analysis: how can a study of the word *confusione* help to identify the manifold problems that poor or faulty art was believed to cause?

Albertian beginnings

In his *Della pittura* and its Latin counterpart *De pictura*, the key power that Alberti attributes to *confusione* is the generation of aesthetic and intellectual problems.⁹ In Book 2, Alberti polarises painters who give due consideration to composition (Italian *composizione*, Latin *compositio*) and those who fling everything about confusingly (Latin *confuse*) and sloppily (Latin *dissolute*) in their pictures (the Italian text pithily collapses these adverbs into the noun phrase *dissoluta confusione*).¹⁰ In the latter case, Alberti claims, the painted story (Italian *storia*; Latin *historia*) does nothing but throw its constituent parts into disorder (Italian *tumulto aviluppata*; Latin *tumultuare*).¹¹ The passage falls within Alberti's discussion of *composizione* and the qualities of copiousness (*copia*) and variety (*varietà*), viewed as critical for a good painting, but as veering towards *confusione* when improperly deployed. On the face of it, then, Alberti views *confusione* as a formal characteristic posing an aesthetic problem.

⁹ As Freedberg notes, Alberti was in general interested in the power of images (Freedberg, *Power of Images*, 44-45). It is important to bear in mind the on-going debate regarding the dating of Alberti's Italian and Latin texts. Whereas scholars had long assigned temporal priority to the Latin *De pictura*, internal evidence to the contrary has recently been presented: see, e.g., Lucia Bertolini, in *Leon Battista Alberti*, ed. Joseph Rykwert and Anne Engel (Milan, 1994), 423-24. Rocco Sinisgalli has most recently advanced an argument for the priority of the Italian vernacular version: see his *Il nuovo de pictura di Leon Battista Alberti*, Rome 2006, 25-26; and the sections entitled 'From Tuscan to Latin, and Not Vice Versa' and 'The False Priority of Latin' in his *On Painting: A New Translation and Critical Edition*, Cambridge 2011, 3-4, 9-11.

¹⁰ For the Latin version, see Cecil Grayson ed., *Leon Battista Alberti. On Painting and On Sculpture* (London 1972), 78; for the Italian *Della pittura*, see Grayson ed., *Opere volgari*, Bari 1973, vol. III, 68. In his more recent edition, Sinisgalli criticises Grayson for his neglect of the *princeps* Latin edition of the text, first published posthumously in Basel in 1540. Remarking that the Basel edition represents Alberti's final revision of the text, in his *Il nuovo de pictura* Sinisgalli places side by side the vernacular Italian version of *Della pittura*, the Basel Latin text of *De pictura*, and modern Italian and English translations of the Basel Latin. As far as the passage in question is concerned, the Latin adverbs *confuse* and *dissolute* appear in both Grayson's and Sinisgalli's Latin texts: see Sinisgalli ed., *Il nuovo de pictura*, 203. Lodovico Domenichi's popular sixteenth-century Italian translation of the Basel Latin text opts for the adverbs *confusamente* and *dissolutamente*: Lodovico Domenichi trans., *La pittura di Leonbattista Alberti tradotta per M. Lodovico Domenichi*, Venice: Gabriel Giolito de Ferrari, 1547, book II, 28v. Cosimo Bartoli's 1568 translation of *De pictura*, by contrast, has the adverbs *scioccamente* ('foolishly') and *confusamente*: Cosimo Bartoli trans., *Opusculi morali di Leon Batista Alberti*, Venice: Francesco Franceschi, 1568, 339.

¹¹ Following *De pictura*, Domenichi simply has *tumulto*, omitting *aviluppate* or any cognate thereof: Domenichi, *La pittura*, 28v. Meanwhile Bartoli uses the verb *tumultui*: *Opusculi morali*, 339.

However, Alberti goes on to emphasise the intellectual problems associated with *confusione*, analogising pictorial and literary practices. To achieve dignity (Latin *dignitas*) in literary works and to ensure that the story is appropriately conveyed (Latin *fabulam doceant*), he argues, *confusione* must be avoided. For Alberti, a disordered or confused *storia* is harder for the viewer to understand — that is, in Quiviger's terms, to mentally 'compose' into intelligible sense units.¹² In the Latin text, Alberti cites the example of tragic and comic poets, and the Roman writer Marcus Terentius Varro (116-27 BCE), who is purported to have only allowed nine guests at his banquets in order to avoid confusion (here *tumultum*).¹³ Painters, Alberti argues, should likewise restrict the number of figures in their pictures. These literary and rhetorical examples, which hinge both upon the intelligibility of the narrative (*fabula*) and upon the picture's overall dignity (*dignitas*), are crucial to Alberti's characterisation of *confusione*, in painting and literature, as posing an aesthetic and an intellectual problem.

Over a century later, Paolo Pino picked up on Alberti's description of *dissoluta confusione* in his *Dialogo di pittura*, using the word *confusione* in a formal and aesthetic sense. Citing Alberti directly, Pino recalls Alberti's Varro *exemplum*, and again places *confusione* in opposition to *composizione*.¹⁴ Pino argues that crowdedness (*tumultuare*) makes a picture 'ill-proportioned and clumsy' (*sporzionato e goffo*).¹⁵ Earlier, Pino uses the word *confusione* in conjunction with *disordinate* ('disordered') to describe the awkward effect of painted figures that face in too many disparate directions: this makes a work graceless (*disgratiata*).¹⁶ Thus Pino's concern is more with the aesthetic qualities of a painting, and its overall grace (*gratia*), rather than with its *historia* in Alberti's dual aesthetic and intellectual sense.

In its confinement to the aesthetic dimension of *confusione*, Pino's usage is atypical among *cinquecento* writers. However, that Pino revisits Alberti's concept of *confusione* bespeaks the enduring validity of the word. Although it is unlikely that all later uses of *confusione* in art treatises made direct reference to Alberti, it is worth bearing in mind that Alberti's treatise was enjoying a long afterlife, marked by the publication of four new editions and two Italian translations (by Lodovico Domenichi and Cosimo Bartoli) between 1540 and 1568.¹⁷ But more importantly, in comparing Alberti's usage, and its revival by Pino, to some later *cinquecento*

¹² Quiviger, 'Imagining and Composing', 47.

¹³ Grayson ed., *On Painting*, 78; Sinisgalli ed., *Il nuovo de pictura*, 205. As Sinisgalli's edition highlights, the Varro *exemplum* is absent from Alberti's Italian text, but it does appear in both Domenichi's and Bartoli's translations of *De pictura*: see Domenichi, *La pittura*, book II, 28v-28r; Bartoli, *Opusculi morali*, 339. Both Domenichi and Bartoli translate the Latin *tumultum* as *tumulto*.

¹⁴ Paolo Pino, *Dialogo di pittura* [1548], in Paola Barocchi ed., *Trattati d'arte del cinquecento*, vol. 1 (Bari 1960), 116. That Pino mentions the Varro *exemplum* indicates that he must have been reading either the Latin *De pictura*, or Domenichi's recent Italian translation thereof.

¹⁵ Pino, *Dialogo*, 116 (translation mine).

¹⁶ Pino, *Dialogo*, 101.

¹⁷ See Philip Lindsay Sohm, *The Artist Grows Old: The Aging of Art and Artisans in Italy 1500-1800*, New Haven and London 2007, 114.

instances of *confusione* in art treatises, one can gain a sense of the multiplicity of anxieties that it was called upon to express.

***Confusione* in the *cinquecento*: intelligibility, psychology, and 'mannerism'**

In the second half of the *cinquecento*, numerous writers use the word *confusione* in articulating concerns about the intellectual and psychological impact of artworks, exploiting the word's ambiguity to suggest a slippage between pictorial and mental *confusione*. The cluster of *cinquecento* occurrences of the word may reflect a broader distaste for the concurrent rise of what is now termed 'mannerism', or, more generally, late-*cinquecento* perceptions regarding the decline or old age of art.¹⁸ However, the dearth of practical-critical applications in relation to specific artworks frustrates a definitive conclusion in this regard.

In the *Vita di Iacopo da Pontormo*, Vasari's use of *confusione*, in close collocation with another important word, *avviluppare*, has a distinctly psychological colouring. Vasari launches a famously acerbic attack on the now-lost frescoes painted by Pontormo for the choir of the church of San Lorenzo in Florence, which were destroyed in 1738.¹⁹ He characterises Pontormo as an epigone of Michelangelo, and states that the fresco showing the *Universal Resurrection of the Dead* overflows with such great and varied confusion (*tanta e varia confusione*) that it exceeds the *confusione* that even the actual event could engender: Pontormo has gone overboard.²⁰ Pontormo's surviving preparatory sketches for the frescoes evoke the *varietà* and *confusione* that Vasari condemned, observable in their intermingling of forms (figs 1-3). But for Vasari, this pictorial *confusione* also breeds psychological *confusione* for the beholder. According to the chronicler, Pontormo has sought to 'envelop' or 'entangle' (*avviluppare*) himself and the viewer with his entangled figures, which threaten to drive the beholder insane (*impazzarvi*).²¹ The verb *avviluppare* recalls Alberti's usage of this same verb in his *Della pittura*, the Italian version of his treatise, to characterise paintings ruled by *dissoluta confusione* as being

¹⁸ Sohm, *The Artist Grows Old*, 137-48.

¹⁹ Much has been written about the possible biases underpinning Vasari's attack on Pontormo's frescoes; these debates are discussed at length in Sharon Gregory, 'The unsympathetic exemplar in Vasari's *Life of Pontormo*', *Renaissance Studies*, 23 (1), 2009, 2-4. Notably, Philippe Costamagna argues that there is a post-Tridentine subtext to Vasari's aversion (Philippe Costamagna, *Pontormo*, Milan 1994, 92-3, 252-66). In her detailed study of the San Lorenzo frescoes, Elizabeth Pilliod revisits Vasari's negative account: see Pilliod, *Pontormo at San Lorenzo. The Making and Meaning of a Lost Renaissance Masterpiece*, New York 2020, especially the Introduction and 'Chapter 5: Then and Now: Pontormo's Place in History'. Whatever Vasari's reasons for criticising Pontormo, I hope to show that the terms he uses to express the criticism are worth examining in their own right in order to gauge the concerns to which Vasari appeals, and which are echoed in a non-practical-critical context by his contemporaries.

²⁰ Giorgio Vasari, *Vita di Iacopo da Pontormo pittore fiorentino* [1568], in Rosanna Bettarini and Paola Barocchi eds, *Giorgio Vasari: le vite de' più eccellenti pittori scultori e architettori nelle redazioni del 1550 e 1568*, vol. V, text (Florence 1966-1997), 332.

²¹ Vasari, *Vita di Iacopo da Pontormo*, 332-33.

entangled in turmoil (*tumulto aviluppata*).²² Vasari's literary adviser, Vincenzo Borghini, elsewhere uses *avviluppate* to refer to confused (*confuso*) pictures.²³ Borghini's and Vasari's uses of the word *avviluppate* might notionally be connected with a broader reaction against what Philip Sohm terms 'the Mannerist propensity to be repetitive, confusing, sloppy, and loquacious in packed compositions'.²⁴ More basically, these verbal collocations suggest a close connection between the 'enveloping' or 'entanglement' denoted by *avviluppate*, and both pictorial and psychological *confusione*. As Sohm argues, Vasari here slips into a 'psycho-stylistics', whereby pictorial *confusione* acts as a vehicle through which the viewer can be infected with the artist's psychological ailment, in this case Pontormo's melancholia (*malinconia*).²⁵

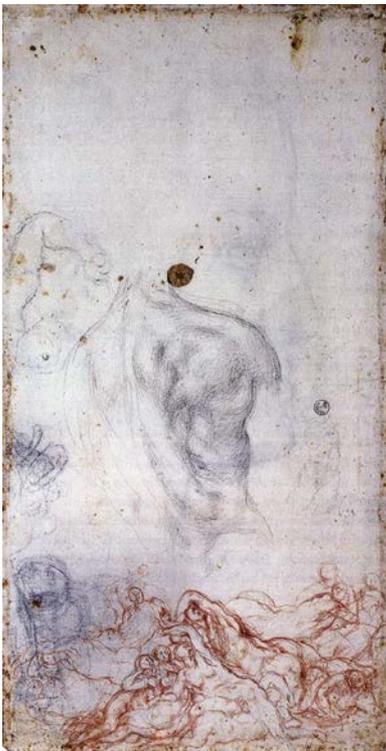


Fig. 1 Jacopo da Pontormo, study for *Deluge*, c. 1546 (red and black chalk on paper), 42.1 x 2.15 cm. Florence, Gabinetto dei Disegni e delle Stampe degli Uffizi, inv. GDSU n. 6528 F

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Fig. 2. Detail of Fig. 1.

²² Grayson ed., *Opere volgari*, Bari 1973, vol. III, 68; Sinisgalli ed., *Il nuovo de pictura*, 203. Both spellings—*aviluppate* and *avviluppate*—were in common usage.

²³ Vincenzo Borghini, 'Da una selva di notizie' [c. 1564], in Benedetto Varchi and Vincenzo Borghini, *Pittura e scultura nel cinquecento*, Paola Barocchi ed. (Livorno 1998), 119.

²⁴ Sohm, *The Artist Grows Old*, 145.

²⁵ Sohm, *The Artist Grows Old*, 113; Vasari, *Vita di Iacopo da Pontormo*, 333.

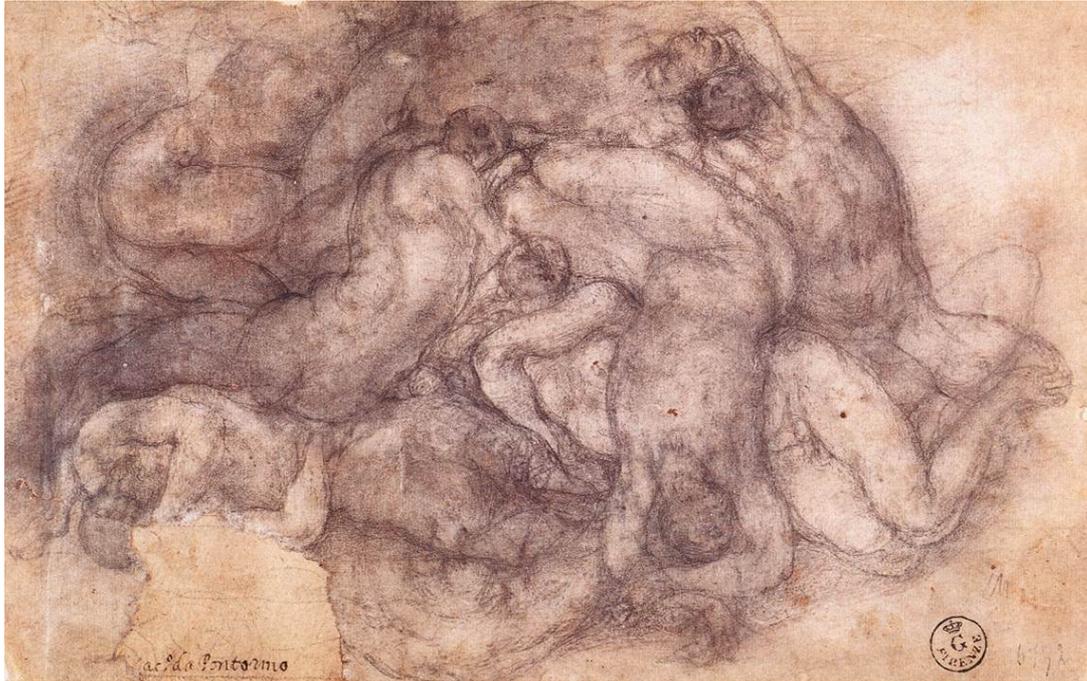


Fig. 3. Jacopo da Pontormo, *Group of the Dead*, c. 1546 (red and black chalk on paper). Florence, Gabinetto dei Disegni e delle Stampe degli Uffizi, inv. GDSU n. 6752 F

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Other *cinquecento* writers are deeply concerned with the mental dangers of *confusione*, primarily from an intellectual or cognitive standpoint. In Dolce's *Dialogo*, Aretino argues that a painting with excessive crowdedness (*troppa moltitudine*) complicates its narrative (*istoria*), making the beholder (*riguardante*) confused (*confuso*) and provoking annoyance (*s'infastidisce*).²⁶ Later, Paolo Lomazzo argued that the failure to fix a single vanishing point (*termine*) in a painting caused confusion for beholders (*confusione del mondo*) and that such artworks did not even deserve to be called pictures, but merely *confusione*.²⁷ For Dolce and Lomazzo, then, the concern about *confusione* lay with its potential to frustrate the beholder's understanding.

A further example of the relationship between mental and pictorial *confusione* occurs in the proem to Armenini's *De' veri precetti della pittura*, in which *confusione* is characterised as an affliction in the artist's mind. Armenini criticises young students for choosing overly eclectic and improper exemplars, surrounding themselves with a confusion of pillars, statues, histories, models, and objects of nature (*in una confusione di pilli, statue, istorie, modelli e naturali*), and thus glutting their minds with a thousand confusions and follies (*mille confusioni e goffezze*) rather than with good style (*buona maniera*) or beautiful inventions (*belle invenzioni*).²⁸

²⁶ Lodovico Dolce, *Dialogo della pittura intitolato l'Aretino* [1557], in Paola Barocchi ed., *Trattati d'arte del cinquecento*, vol. I (Bari 1960), 171.

²⁷ Paolo Lomazzo, *Trattato dell'arte della pittura, scoltura, et architettura* [1585], in Paolo Ciardi ed., *Gian Paolo Lomazzo. Scritti sulle arti*, vol. II, Florence 1974, 230.

²⁸ Giovan Battista Armenini, *De' veri precetti della pittura* [1586], Marina Gorreri ed., Turin 1988, 14.

Likewise, Armenini says, a traveller without good guidance is like a blind man without a cane, and will wind up ensnared in intricate tangles (*intricati viluppi*).²⁹ The noun *viluppi* is a cognate of the verb *avviluppare*, and so once again there is an association between psychological *confusione* and pictorial entanglement, since in Armenini's conceit the intricate tangles ensnaring the wayward traveller are analogous to the entangled artworks of a confused artist.

The occurrences of *confusione* in Vasari, Lomazzo, Dolce, and Armenini are united by their enactment of a slippage between the artwork's pictorial *confusione* and a confused state of mind. The chronological coincidence between this cluster of textual occurrences of *confusione* and the period with which early 'mannerism' is identified—with its attendant art-theoretical concerns about the senescence of art—is compelling and merits further study. When it comes to the theological dimension of *confusione*, however, the impetus for its usage in *cinquecento* texts is unmistakably derived from the counter-reformation context of their production.

***Confusione* and the Counter Reformation: a theological problem**

In the counter-reformation art treatises of Gilio and Paleotti, *confusione* appears as a serious artistic problem, variously from an aesthetic, intellectual, and theological standpoint.

The Counter Reformation motivated a particularly vehement opposition to pictorial *confusione*, as indicated by the decree *De invocatione, veneratione et reliquiis sanctorum, et de sacris imaginibus* from the twenty-fifth session of the Council of Trent (1563).³⁰ Among more predictably moralistic injunctions against indecorous (*inhonestum*) or profane (*profanum*) images, the decree expressly forbids the use of anything disorderly (*inordinatum*) or confusedly arranged (*tumultuarie accomodatum*) in places of worship.³¹ The prohibition is in service of the decree's notion that appropriate sacred images should inspire reverence for God (*ad adorandum ac diligendum Deum*) and the cultivation of piety (*ad pietatem colendam*), suggesting that confusedly (*tumultuarie*) arranged pictures somehow prevent these aims.³² The decree does not use the word *confusione* or any cognate thereof, but it is nonetheless important for its specific criticism of artworks lacking order (*inordinatum*)—whether this is meant in terms of form or subject matter or both. This decree is an important intertext for Gilio's and Paleotti's treatises, typifying the deep-seated fear of disorderly pictures in devotional contexts and from a theological point of view.

In Gilio's *Dialogo*, *confusione* is viewed as an aesthetic and intellectual problem as well as, ultimately, a theological problem. Gilio's treatment of *confusione* is epitomised when the interlocutor M. Pulidoro states that a painting (or indeed

²⁹ Armenini, *De' veri precetti*, 13. For the trope of authors as guides, see David Young Kim, *The Traveling Artist in the Italian Renaissance: Geography, Mobility, and Style*, New Haven and London 2014, 193.

³⁰ Giuseppe Alberigo ed., *Conciliorum oecumenicorum decreta*, New York 1962, 750-52.

³¹ Alberigo, *Decreta*, 752.

³² Alberigo, *Decreta*, 751.

written work) will be beautiful if it is clear and accessible (*chiara et aperta*).³³ Ostensibly, the chief concern is aesthetic; however, in the following sentence, the issue of intelligibility arises. Pulidoro compares the pictorial principle to the act of reading: if one reads a story (*istoria*) that is confused, obscure, and complicated (*confusa, oscura et intrigata*), they will be compelled to condemn it to the flames just as, he recalls, St Jerome was fabled to have done with the works of the Roman satirist Aulus Persius Flaccus (34-62 CE), due to their incomprehensibility.³⁴ Thus, Pulidoro theorises, intelligibility depends on formal felicity, which itself depends upon the narrative (*istoria*) not being confused (*confusa*). Intelligibility, for Gilio, is important when it comes to sacred painting, on the grounds that a sacred painting ought to convey its *istoria* with just enough concern for beauty to avoid *confusione*, but not to distract and hence detract from the beholder's spiritual engagement with the artwork.

Gilio's use of *confusione* as an aesthetic, intellectual, and theological problem is epitomised when one of the interlocutors, the ecclesiastic M. Ruggiero, discusses Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* in the Sistine Chapel. It may be worth recalling that Vasari had characterised Pontormo's San Lorenzo frescoes as an inferior imitation of Michelangelo's *Last Judgment*, suggesting that *confusione* could reflect a widespread aversion to such works that are now often called 'mannerist'.³⁵ Despite Vasari's idealisation of Michelangelo, the Sistine Chapel frescoes were themselves heavily criticised on theological grounds by several sixteenth-century reforming critics, among them Gilio. In Ruggiero's speech, *confusamente* and *confondere*—both close cognates of *confusione*—are used to criticise Michelangelo's painting, primarily for its *confusione* of content. Ruggiero argues that a proper sacred painting should not confuse (*confondere*) true things (*le cose vere*) with false (*la falze*).³⁶ This distinction plays into Gilio's broader argument that painters of sacred subjects should not confuse doctrinal truths with fictitious (*finto*) or fantastical (*favoloso*) inventions.³⁷ Hence Ruggiero criticises Michelangelo for having confusedly (*confusamente*) mixed together (*mescolati*) the blessed and the damned, contrary to the Gospel.³⁸ Again, the concern is primarily with an inappropriate *confusione* of subject matter, although there may also be a formal criticism implicit in the adverb *confusamente*. Thus Gilio's *Dialogo* echoes the Tridentine injunctions against disorderly images, which Gilio positions as endangering beholders aesthetically, intellectually, and spiritually.

Similarly, Paleotti characterises *confusione* as both an intellectual and theological menace. Paleotti was a bishop and enthusiastic patron of artworks, and

³³ Giovanni Andrea Gilio, *Dialogo nel quale si ragiona degli errori e degli abusi de' pittori circa l'istorie* [1564], in Paola Barocchi ed., *Trattati d'arte del cinquecento*, vol. II, (Bari 1961), 99.

³⁴ Gilio, *Dialogo*, 99. The ancient source for this anecdote is not known.

³⁵ See Gregory, 'The unsympathetic exemplar', 23-32. For the notion that Gilio's *Dialogo* epitomises counter-reformation distaste for the aestheticism of 'mannerism', see John K. G. Shearman, *Mannerism*, Harmondsworth 1967, 177-8.

³⁶ Gilio, *Dialogo*, 71.

³⁷ See Michael Bury, 'Gilio on Painters of Sacred Images', in Michael Bury, Lucinda Byatt and Carol M. Richardson eds, *Dialogue on the Errors and Abuses of Painters, Giovanni Andrea Gilio* (Los Angeles 2018), 10-12.

³⁸ Gilio, *Dialogo*, 71.

thus uniquely positioned to comment upon the use of sacred artworks, as Paolo Prodi emphasises.³⁹ Paleotti devotes a chapter in his *Discorso* to paintings that are obscure and difficult to understand (*Delle pitture oscure e difficili da intendersi*).⁴⁰ Cognates of *confusione* appear four times in this short chapter.⁴¹ Paleotti claims that painters ought only to act in accordance with the teachings of select religious writers (*santi dottori*) and of the Church.⁴² According to Paleotti, painters who do not honour these writings are motivated by pride (*superbia*), rather than by a desire to be understood.⁴³ The consequence of all this *confusione* is dire indeed: while sacred paintings should illuminate the intellect (*illuminando l'intelletto*) and inspire devotion and contrition (*eccitare insieme la divozione e pungere il cuore*), obscure or unintelligible paintings confuse (*confondono*) the beholder's mind, pulling it every which way (*in mille parti*) and thwarting devotion.⁴⁴ Paleotti's diatribe against *confusione* in paintings powerfully indicates the endurance and amplification of fears surrounding pictorial *confusione* as an intellectual and theological hazard during the late *cinquecento*.

Despite their specific participation in counter-reformation debates, Paleotti's and Gilio's uses of *confusione* are very much in line with contemporary trends, indicating the persistent anxieties that were tied to the concept throughout the *cinquecento*.

Concluding Remarks

The power attributed to images in the Renaissance was not limited to those pictures whose efficacy was ensured by their technical fitness; it also extended to pictures seen as bad or as possessing badly executed qualities such as *confusione*. Such images were viewed as having the power to cause serious problems relating to pleasure, cognition, sanity, and spirituality.

Most of the examples here considered occurred in the Sixteenth Century, particularly in connection with possible concerns about 'mannerism' and unambiguous concerns about the use of images in a post-Tridentine context. Such a close look at texts from the *cinquecento* might suggest tools that could also be applied to a larger study of the word *confusione*, or indeed of other words denoting undesirable pictorial qualities—such as, for example, *disonestà* or *oscurità*—as used both in the Renaissance and in art-theoretical writing at large. Analyses of this kind might constitute useful contributions to the history of human responses to art. Even more fundamentally, there might be in this nature of work some possible answers to the frequently pondered question of why people throughout history have viewed it

³⁹ Paolo Prodi ed., *Gabriele Paleotti. 'Discourse on Sacred and Profane Images'*, trans. by William McCuaig, Los Angeles 2012, 13.

⁴⁰ Gabriele Paleotti, *Discorso intorno alle immagini sacre e profane* [1582], in Paola Barocchi ed., *Trattati d'arte del cinquecento*, vol. II, (Bari 1961), 408-12.

⁴¹ Paleotti, *Discorso*: 'confondono' (408); 'confuso' (408), 'confusamente' (411); 'confondono' (411).

⁴² Paleotti, *Discorso*, 409.

⁴³ Paleotti, *Discorso*, 409.

⁴⁴ Paleotti, *Discorso*, 408.

as culturally, intellectually, and ideologically important not only to make art, but to make *good* art—or, at least, art that will not be considered 'bad'.

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