Reverdy between poetry and painting
Cubism and paragone in Pierre Reverdy’s art discourse (1912-1926)
The poetry of Pierre Reverdy (1889-1960) has generally been associated with the cubist paintings of the artists he became acquainted with in Montmartre, especially Picasso, Braque and Gris. The young poet was fascinated by the new cubist aesthetics, which would become a source of inspiration for his poetry. Until now literary scholars have merely compared pictorial and poetic practice. Reverdy’s poetry and aesthetics have been related to cubism by relating, for instance, his syntactical innovations to fragmentation techniques in cubist paintings or to cubist aesthetics. This study will not focus on works of art, but places the issue of inter-artistic comparisons within the contemporary artistic discourse by formulating two main questions: how did Reverdy regard the relation between visual and verbal art and more precisely between cubism and modern poetry? And in what way is his reflection on the arts related to the contemporary artistic debate?

Reverdy’s texts on art and poetry published between 1917 and 1926 reveal close parallels between pictorial and literary art. Cubism as well as poetry should no longer imitate nature but create a new artistic reality. At the same time, however, Reverdy makes significant distinctions between art and poetry, which have not been examined so far. My hypothesis in this study is that in his articles, generally interpreted as a defence of cubism, Reverdy advocates a hierarchy of the arts, with poetry at the top. In order to test this hypothesis, I explore the situation of the arts in the 1910s and early 1920s and consider Reverdy’s aesthetics within the context of the contemporary debate on the arts.

The relation between poetical and pictorial art has been an issue in art theories since antiquity. Launched by Horace in his *Ars poetica*, the concept ‘ut pictura poesis’ presumed a parallel between poetry and painting, which both aspired to *mimesis*, a naturalistic representation of reality. By claiming superiority for the visual arts, Leonardo da Vinci challenged the idea of the sister arts, but only during the eighteenth century the ‘ut pictura poesis’ formula did become a contested one. Philosophers such as Du Bos, Diderot and in particular Lessing argued that poetry and painting used different means of imitating reality: painting depicted objects in *space*, while poetry could express succession in *time*, a distinction which entailed poetry’s hegemony and which would dominate the *paragone*, the debate on the hierarchy of the arts, until the beginning of the twentieth century.

In the late 1900s, painting broke with the ideal of *mimesis*. Artists like Manet, Gauguin and Denis no longer strived for a naturalist representation of reality, but
emphasized the pictorial and material qualities of the picture. Painting gradually abandoned the traditional narrative subject matter and acquired artistic autonomy. In the 1910s, cubism kept on moving away from naturalism and headed toward the development of a new artistic reality. The rejection of *mimesis* in painting brings about a shift in the interdisciplinary hierarchy. Being defined by contemporary art critics as a non-mimetic, intellectual art, cubism accessed the spiritual realm of poetry and thus became a threat to the traditional supremacy of literature. Reverdy’s reflections on art and poetry have to be considered within the context of a growing prominence of the visual arts.

The first chapter analyses the theories on cubism which had been developed when Reverdy published his first articles on art and poetry in 1917. From the beginning, cubism had given rise to discussion and confusion in contemporary art criticism, which was partly due to the name *cubism* itself. Applied in 1908 to the pictorial innovations of Picasso and Braque, the name was also used for the paintings of artists like Metzinger, Delaunay and Léger, who gathered at Montparnasse and who exhibited their work at the official Salons. Cubism was generally qualified as a non-mimetic art, but contemporary publications reveal several interpretations of its non-mimetic character. By 1912, Apollinaire and Raynal, poets associated with the cubist painters at Montmartre, were defining cubism as an art which no longer relied on *sight*, but which created a new *conceptual* reality, thus continuing the symbolist privileging of the intellectual, the *ideas*, above the visual appearances, the *forms*. At the same time, Gleizes and Metzinger, cubists of the Montparnasse group, freed themselves from art criticism’s literary bias and emphasized the pictorial and material properties of painting. Early theories of cubism displayed a new rivalry between painting and poetry.

By the end of the First World War, cubism had been transformed from a non-figurative avant-garde style into a more traditionally figurative one, based on line and harmony of colours. Contemporary critical writing reflects the classical orientation of the ‘call to order’ which characterized the arts after the war and reveals a new aesthetics which combines modernist and classical elements. In the Galerie de “L’Effort Moderne”, opened in 1918 by the art dealer Léonce Rosenberg, cubism re-emerged as a more idealized and classical art.

In Chapter 2, I expound Reverdy’s theory of cubism. Inspired by the ideas of Apollinaire and Raynal developed before the war, Reverdy presents cubism as a non-
mimetic art, which no longer imitated nature but which created a new artistic reality: 
*un art de conception et non de reproduction ou d’interprétation*. According to Reverdy, 
this new non-imitative art could only be achieved by adopting new pictorial means. Art 
should represent the essence of reality and leave out accidental and superficial aspects 
such as perspective and the rendition of light and shade. Reverdy’s first publications 
are related to the controversies that began to colour the debate over cubism at the 
end of the war and which divided cubist artists, but also painters and poets. Reverdy 
strongly defended the art of Picasso, Braque and Gris, whom he qualified as the ‘true 
cubists’. At the same time, his writings display the influence of the ‘call to order’. The 
poet emphasizes the importance of controlling and structuring the artistic process. 
The creation of non-mimetic art requires discipline and order: Reverdy’s aesthetics 
combines modernity and the new classical orientation.

In Chapter 3 I associate Reverdy’s cubist theory with his reflections on poetry in 
order to examine his ideas on the relation between the arts, which I place in the context 
of contemporary artistic debates. Reverdy’s thoughts on poetry reveal close parallels 
with his cubist aesthetics: literature should not *imitate* reality, but *create* a new artistic 
reality. In order to realize a non-mimetic literature, he advocates new literary means 
to replace the traditional anecdote and description: a new syntax and typographical 
design as well as a new poetic *image*. At the same time, however, Reverdy’s articles 
testify to his wish to set painting and poetry at a distance from each other. Rejecting 
the fusion of visual and textual means, which before the war had characterized the 
search for poetical simultaneity by Apollinaire and Cendrars, Reverdy asserts that 
each art should use its proper artistic means, and he presents poetry and painting as 
different disciplines in this respect. Reverdy’s aesthetics thus fits in with classical art 
theory, which since Lessing had distinguished pictorial from poetical means.

When by the end of 1917 contemporary poetry came to be qualified as ‘literary 
cubism’, a label which implied poetry’s subordination to painting, Reverdy counter-
attacked by defining cubism as ‘a branch of poetry’: *une poésie plastique*. In the history 
of modern art, he argued, the poetical innovations of the symbolists had prefigured 
the revolution in the visual arts realized by cubism. Mallarmé and Rimbaud had 
preceded the cubists in creating non-descriptive, non-imitative art. By a sophisticated 
argumentation reinforced by stylistic means such as aphorism, definition, contrasts 
and parallelism, as well as an appropriate critical vocabulary, Reverdy reasserts the 
supremacy of poetry in relation to the visual arts.
Reverdy’s aesthetics can be placed within the debate on artistic hegemony which took place in the 1910s and early 1920s and coincides with a shift in the conventional hierarchy of the arts in favour of a new primacy of painting. After the First World War, the publications of artists like Severini, Mondrian, Ozenfant and Jeanneret reinforced the position of the visual arts. No longer relying on literary interpretations of works of art, they stressed the essentially plastic and material properties of painting and thus assured its artistic autonomy. The former cubist painter André Lhote occupied a hybrid position among the artists who struggled for artistic hegemony, because he addressed in his art criticism the issue of the interdisciplinary hierarchy by privileging poetry. Apart from Reverdy, contemporary poets hardly challenged the loss of the conventional superiority of their discipline. Apollinaire had been one of the most fervent defenders of cubism. Both his and Cendrars’s writings testify to their fascination with the visual arts, but also to their highly ambivalent position in the debate on artistic hegemony. Inspired by symbolism and Kahnweiler’s idealist theory of cubism, Raynal’s writings reflect the traditional literary approach of art, but do not explicitly challenge the shift in prominence from poetry to painting.

By examining contemporary artistic discourse, this study demonstrates that the relation between Reverdy and cubism is more complex than has been presumed so far. Cubism is the inspiration for his aesthetics and poetical work, but at the same time the new art has become a serious threat to the conventional prominence of poetry. In his articles on art and poetry, Reverdy attempts to reassert the primacy of poetry as opposed to the new hegemony of the visual arts. Balancing between poetical purity and pictorial plasticity, Reverdy’s efforts to restore the privileged position of poetry did not in the end bear fruit. The debate on interdisciplinary hierarchy in the 1910s and 1920s marked the shift to a new hegemony of visual art, and more generally, to modern image culture.