Chapter 2

The Hemicycle: The Image of the Nation-Form

Direct Dialogue

‘One would have to imagine it as it was before’, says David, in a letter dated 9 December 1789. So begins the painter’s explanation of the allegory of France, ‘torn and tattered’, sketched for a study requested by the city of Nantes to celebrate the uprising that anticipated the Revolution.¹

The first of such attempts, which took nearly half a year, backfired. The second, which will be the focus here, resulted in a visual conception developed in the form of a detailed drawing, a project for a painting that was left unfinished. The project reveals an ample renewal of David’s pictorial view, which abandons allegory as the primary figurative element.

This time it is a work commissioned by the National Constituent Assembly. According to a proposition by the deputy Dubois-Crancé on 28 October 1790, the painting should celebrate the act of 20 June 1789, considered one of the starting points of the constitutional order. The deputies of the Third Estate (at a meeting in Versailles where the Estates-General were summoned by the king) found that the doors of the meeting hall of the Hôtel des Menus-Plaisirs du Roi, where they were supposed to gather, were locked. They then headed to a sports hall – the Salle du Jeu de Paume (an ancient form of tennis), in the village of Versailles – and there made the public oath to remain there until they had set out a constitution for the country.²

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¹ See Michel 1988a, pp. 56–57.
² See Michel 1988a, pp. 58–60. The pledge was primarily intended to preserve the room where the historical oath took place (said du Jeu de Paume). Secondly, it proposed the realisation of a painting by David, which depicted the oath and even stipulated the dimensions: 30 feet high × 20 feet wide (approx. 10 × 6.6 m) – dimensions that would later be inverted by the painter in his drawing, so that the dominant axis of the drawing was horizontal. The painting was intended to adorn the plenary of the Assembly. The pledge was probably drafted in collaboration with the painter, a friend of the deputy. The oath literally stated the intention of the deputies: ‘not to separate, and to reassemble wherever circumstances require, until the constitution of the kingdom is established and consolidated upon firm foundations’ [‘jamais se séparer et de se rassembler partout où les circonstances l’exigeront, jusqu’à ce que la Constitution du royaume soit établie et affirmée sur des bases solides’]. See Soboul 2005b, p. 979.
David presented the project for the painting *The Tennis Court Oath* at the Salon of 1791 as a drawing (*Le Serment du Jeu de Paume*, 1791). It was exhibited right below his painting *Oath of the Horatii* (1785), already presented at the Salon of 1785, with great success. We can assume that the re-presentation of the latter was meant to evoke a comparison between the new and the previous work, both belonging to the genre of historic painting, which according to tradition carried enlightening standards. Thus, on my assumption, it highlighted the fact that, while the 1785 painting alluded to an incident of ancient history (in this case, the formation of the Roman Republic when the Etruscan king was overthrown), the 1791 project, in turn, faced the challenge of focusing on the present; it flouted the academic rule that only permitted themes from ancient history to enter the historic genre.³

The theme of *The Tennis Court Oath* is, in short, the proud union of free men, a theme typical of the *philosophes* such as Rousseau. The composition is structured according to a frontal axis that articulates the aesthetic pact as a direct dialogue between different political actors, and is the main vector of dialogue with the public, embodied by the spectator of the painting.

From here, David’s procedure escapes both Baroque scenes and Diderot’s aesthetic naturalism. Earlier, in the *Oath of the Horatii*, David had followed the set of anti-academic and anti-palatial views of Diderot, set out in *Essays on Painting* (1765). The philosopher had proposed a new pact for painting on two fronts: the relation with reality, and that with the spectator; in short, a painting close to things and to the visual participant, with a colloquial and dramatic *diction*.⁴ According to this, in the *Oath* of 1785 David had elaborated a form of painting that was severe yet conducive to the exaltation of civic sentiments – encouraged by a Diderotian theatrical perspective, which led the spectator, close to the characters in profile, to feel like a direct witness to the scene.

**Frontality and Transparency**

In the new *Oath*, of the *Tennis Court*, however, by turning the main vector of the scene, making it frontal or symmetrical to the vector of the spectator, David found a way to make a pictorial pact in a context of direct dialogue. Brought

³ One could argue that the focus of the thematic shift from ancient to modern responded to the controversy in the 80s salons between the neoclassical tendency, to which David had belonged, focusing on ancient history, and a new trend that advocated themes from national history. See Michel 1985, p. 120.

⁴ See Diderot 1996a.