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Some Remarks on Aesthetic Appearances

In discussing the Winged Eros of Picadilly Circus in London, Gombrich states the "elusiveness of meaning."¹ In my present rereading of some of Gombrich's papers on art theory and art historical theory I find myself confronted with another "elusiveness" – the vagueness concerning aesthetic appearances. The kind of "appearance" I suggest is the look of the artwork to the beholder – the form according to which he/she can infer the possible significance of the work.

This elusiveness is all the more surprising since his achievements in art history commonly have been connected with psychological approaches.²

Rereading Gombrich is like coming back to the house where you once lived, recognizing so many things but still feeling that everything has changed. You have to visit the house to really get this perspective. The famous and for art history so formative works from the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s have naturally become the target of the next generation of powerful theorists; the attack needed a lot of support from full-fledged and far-reaching theories such as semiotics and poststructural

¹ (*Symbolic Images*; 1972, 1 and passim)

² Lars-Olof Larsson, *Metoder i konstvetenskapen*, 3 ed., 1989, p 21; Udo Kultermann, *Geschichte der Kunstgeschichte*, Wien Düsseldorf, 1966, p 391–394; W. Eugene Kleinbauer, *Modern Perspectives in Western Art History*, 1971, p 72–73.

philosophy.³ From the point of view of the attackers, the Gombrich philosophy looks aesthetic enough, bent on “perception” as it is always held to be; one would expect the visual appeal of the work of art to be the heart of the matter, in Gombrich’s opinion, if the guide-lines from the poststructuralist and linguistic “new” art history were to determine the profile of his theory. But, in fact, Gombrich and his opponents could rather shake hands in agreement on the discursive element, on the necessity of verbal patterns and verbal theories applying to the image.

In 1992 J.W.T. Mitchell wrote about the new “pictorial turn” in the philosophy of humanities, meaning that art historical methods were approached as paradigmatic instead of linguistic; this was obvious, according to Mitchell, through the awakening interest in the iconology of the Panofskyan school and in Panofsky’s writings in general.⁴ I find it hard to agree with him, partly because I don’t think of iconology as a “pictorial turn.”

Science is naturally discursive, knowledge is verbal – at least it has to be communicated and tested verbally, since there are no other means of finding criteria of verification or falsification. In no other way can the structures of argument be expressed than in logic. These basic conditions make way, though, for explanations and theories on verbal matter which apply also to other means of expression; the medium of the analysis tends to influence the understanding of the matter of observation; the supposed similarities between the scientist’s own expression and what he/she studies suggest an easier way of grasping the essential. It probably would not be so tempting to treat a picture verbally if the picture were not an expression or a symbol, just like the words, sentences, or other verbal signs are. Still, the peculiarities of a visual sign seem to escape the semiotic as well as the iconologic ways of expla-

³ Norman Bryson, *Vision and painting. The Logic of the Gaze*, 1983; *Calligram*, ed. N. Bryson, 1988 (especially in this volume: Louis Marin, “Towards a theory of reading in the visual arts: Poussin’s the Arcadian shepherds”); Mieke Bal and N. Bryson, “Semiotics and Art History”, *The Art Bulletin*, June 1991, Vol. LXXIII, number 2, p.174–208; Mieke Bal, *Reading ‘Rembrandt’: Beyond the Word Image Opposition*, 1991; J.W.T. Mitchell, *Iconology*, 1986; Donald Preziosi, *Rethinking Art History*, 1987; ?, rev. of Preziosi, *The Art Bulletin*, March 1990, vol. LXXII number 1, p.156–162.

⁴ “The Pictorial Turn,” *Art Forum*, March 1992, 89–94.

nation, although the words of the explanation match perfectly well the supposed signification inscribed into the picture.

With this reflection in mind I found it utterly revealing and even comforting to read in Michael Baxandall's *Patterns of Intention* (1985) the statement that interpretations of pictures are always based on descriptions, and such descriptions are not about pictures but represent thoughts on having seen pictures (p 1). We don't have to pretend that the descriptions are of the pictures – so we can really feel free to permit ourselves to look and to find in looking. What we are dealing with is our own thoughts. In a truly Kantian mirror-hall we can never get away from the forms of our own thinking; we can never get the answers, just the questions over and over again. The picture, like any other matter of thought really, gets away as usual; but the words, the thoughts, remain faithfully, and we thankfully give them credit and make them the pattern of the universe.

I suppose I have to accept these conditions; I have to face that my knowing is based primarily on my knowing. The only faintly recognizable ways out are the “abouts.”

Although Gombrich deals with theories on the origin of creative behaviour, on the need for images, on the survival value (biologically speaking) of certain aesthetic preferences and on the change of representational methods (all this in the field of the psychology of art), he seems to avoid the outcomes of the act of looking – the intermediate level between the work of art and whatever it is made to convey. Observing this level would turn the interpretation into a meta-interpretation, and this meta-interpretation would have to be about the different “natures” of the elements upon which the interpretation is based. Stepping down from the meta-level the analyst discovers that the differences “behind” verbal matter tend to dissolve.

In his presentation of the scholarly interpretations of Botticelli's Mythologies, Gombrich mentions how differently the appearances of the figures had been described by the various writers.⁵ Without explicitly saying so he suggests, through this comparison, the difficul-

⁵ “Botticelli's Mythologies. A Study in the Neo-Platonic Symbolism of his Circle,” *Symbolic Images*, 1978, 31–78; a revised version with a new (1970) preface of a text published 1945 in the *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*.

ties, from a methodological point of view, of basing anything worth saying on the impressions of the eyes and minds caught in the very moment of meeting with the artwork.

One task for the art historian, he would agree, is to detect the “meaning” of the painting, sculpture, etc. This meaning must not be as vague as an association, its nature must not be psychological; fundamentally it is “a question of social acceptance.”⁶ This is not final, however. The meaning must also be flexible; it must be made extensible to fit with the concept of “creation.” Therefore, it must not be “conventional” either, in the sense that it submits to rules of style.⁷ Not “conventional” or a “code,” but confirmed by “social acceptance.” In the elasticity of these utterances he looks for space, a remaining unfilled area, where the “life” of the painting is to take place. Stating that the exact borderline between significant and non-significant cannot be drawn he says:

In looking at a work of art we will always project some additional significance that is not actually given. Indeed we must do so if the work is to come to life for us.⁸

It is clear that the expression “the meaning of x,” strictly speaking, to Gombrich stands for approximately something like this: what (in distinct words as far as possible) the person (persons) who created x wanted it to be and convey. In this sense statements have meaning, images a little less so, and things of nature not at all.⁹ Images thus hold a position between words and nature – more elusive, more matter of fact. To pin them down is to connect them with words.

Gombrich distinguishes between the “meaning” and the “significance” or “implication” of a work of art; the first is connected with the creation and is intended, while the others might be the result of associations, allusions or impressions in later times, even of beholders not informed about the determining circumstances. The meaning is

⁶ “Aims and Limits of Iconology,” *Symbolic Images*, 1978 (2nd ed), 17–18.

⁷ *Meditations on a Hobby Horse*, 8.

⁸ “Aims and Limits of Iconology,” *Symbolic Images*, 18.

⁹ “Aims and Limits of Iconology,” *Symbolic Images*, 2.

found out by the art historian when the *genre* of the work is found out.¹⁰ What is intended by the reference to genre is really the expected reactions of the beholder, the “use” of the picture. What disqualifies the significance is the lack of genre, that is, a properly defined use.

This distinctive focus on use or function is the root of explanation in Gombrich’s theories. It recurs in the most fundamental and vital of his issues, namely, the various discussions of two, in many ways different, kinds of pictures: the Representation (R here), and the Image (Im here).

The R is basically a substitute; it has distinctive features showing differentiation of the species that are needed in the function of the thing that R substitutes and whose power it can perform.

The constituent qualities of the Im, on the other hand, are the following:

- It can leave out essential functional properties of the depicted object, being a view of it; it can add casual aspects (not pertaining to the type of thing depicted)
- It records visual experiences; in doing so it refers outside itself to what it shows and to the visual experiences per se
- It is thought to be convincing, not bearing on truth but on persuasion of the vision
- It gives impressions of moments of life
- It permits “dreaming” and “imagining”
- It is close to, maybe even caused by, the use of detailed narrative; it can function as a counterpart to detailed narrative

The last two entries deal with the function of the Im, the others are witnesses of this function.

So, now we can imagine the scholar represented by Gombrich’s theory, in front of these two kinds of pictures. What is he supposed to see? As a preliminary we can state that he cannot see to identify shapes without an interpretation; Gombrich is specific on this point.¹¹ In front of the R he sees the distinctive features that permit a certain desired function of

¹⁰ Gombrich refers explicitly to D.E. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, 1967, in “Aims and Limits of Iconology,” 4.

¹¹ Art and illusion

a thing represented; the sign R is similar to the items performing a game. In front of the Im he recognizes properties identified as “perceptual”; to Gombrich’s mind such perceptual pictorial devices are:

- the modelling of volume-impressions through light and dark (“shade”)
- the use of perspective, to indicate three dimensions
- the use of foreshortening

We can regard Gombrich’s descriptions of the R and the Im as the result of inferences he makes from his own looking at the works, but what he chooses to report from these events are rather abstract or general accounts of the functions that are, in turn, inferred from the typified qualities. Generalization is of course a guarantee for validity. Still, the structure of argument is circular: the visual qualities are explained by the function, and the function is inferred from the visual qualities. (This state of reasoning is not at all exceptional; it is more or less a basic pattern of all hermeneutics, i.e., parts explained by the whole, and the whole explained by the parts, etc.)¹²

The relation of inference in connection with vision is not clearly demonstrated in Gombrich’s theory of scientific interpretation. Three different kinds of visual experience are actually involved in the phenomenal field of pictures: the scholar’s look at the work of art, the visual experience of the creator of the work, and the gaze or gazes represented in the work. These three levels actually appear as integrated or transparently connected in Gombrich’s theory.

If I want to find out what he, as a scholar, sees or thinks in the act of looking or in connection with contemplating the effects of looking, I have to follow the path he himself finds in tracing what other scholars have said about their experiences – that is the language of art criticism. In quoting other statements he testifies to his own views through a kind of agreement. This practice of verbal description and evaluation “betrays” the visual experience, as it were; it functions as “diagnostics” of the way visual art shows itself to us.

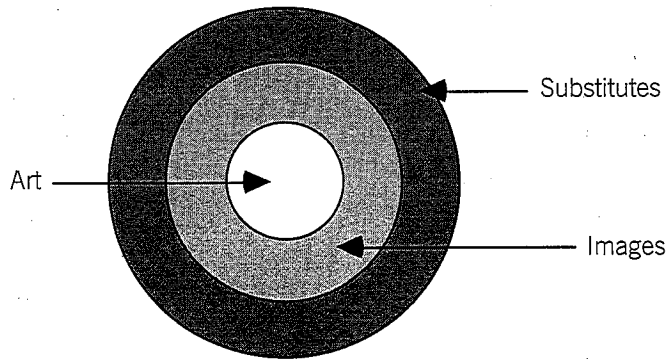
If an expression is labelled as “sincere” in art critical discourse, it is because it is “convincing,” states Gombrich; and it cannot be

¹² On the difference and interrelation between R and Im, see *Art and Illusion*, chapter “The Greek revolution.”

“convincing” unless it is supported by a whole structure of expressions (or symbols) that enforce the character of the single expression’s significance. So, what it reveals to him about aesthetics is, once more, a confirmation of what is appreciated fundamentally by the human perceptive mind: the balancing relation between the part and the whole, the feeling of controlled energy and “bridled emotion.” As the opposite of these value criteria we find, not unexpectedly, unstructured and scattered elements of figuration, “disconnected symptoms.”¹³

To Gombrich’s mind – as I understand his writings now – there is a centre in the universe of art, like a still water that remains just the way it has always been, from the dawn of mankind. It is the centre and it also represents the origin (biology). There is no need to argue for its relevance, and all the strong, well-grounded, qualified and authentic statements on aesthetic appearances and aesthetic value refer somehow to this centre. The statements that succeed to refer are accordingly those that use a vocabulary of the noblest ethical notions and those that connect different senses – vision with smell, etc.¹⁴ These two kinds of judgments concern meanings that qualify as “evident,” needing no argument but only mention.

The R and the Im share a common essence in spite of the differences; that is also why there is a common undisputed area of judgment. Following Gombrich’s reasoning in “Meditations on a Hobby Horse,” I can make the following illustration of the main concepts:



¹³ “Visual metaphors of value in Art” (1952), *Meditations on a Hobby Horse*, 1971 (2nd ed), 26.

¹⁴ “Visual Metaphors...”

All signs that belong to Art are images; all images (some of which do not belong to Art) are substitutes; there are substitutes that are not images (and not art).

Although Gombrich stresses the great shift from R to Im, caused by a difference in function, he also sticks to the idea that the aspect of substitution remains somehow relevant to the image. This is really a fascinating perspective that is worth thinking about.

Imagine the hobby horse and the more or less illusionistic picture of a horse. You can ride one and only imagine yourself riding the other. According to Gombrich, the hobby horse really does belong to the class of horses, as long as it is rideable, but the picture-horse, determined by another function (“dreaming,” “imagining”), belongs to the class of pictures.

Still, according to Gombrich’s own theory, the picture-horse also belongs to the class of substitutes, where the hobby horse is to be found as well. The picture-horse is a substitute for the real horse (not a copy of it). Gombrich confirms this by stating that it points outside itself; it is no longer what it shows but directs our attention to that which it is separated from in reality and united with through expression.

In what ways can the image be an improvement, as a substitute, compared to the rideable substitute? Maybe in the way that a make-believe riding can be more fully surrounded by details and an emotional atmosphere (with no sharp boundaries between mind and world) – if you are prepared to lose the real function of riding. The fullness of the experience is regained when it is transferred to the imaginary dimension, while the use of the rideable substitute seems reminiscent of riding the animal in a much too narrow and poor way. Then, the function is not really different at all, but the image is a better substitute that covers more of the situation it is meant to invoke.

The need for images (not only illusionistic ones) might be analyzed in still another way, though. Maybe the image does not refer outside to some “original” that it rescues from the passing of time. Maybe the act denoted does not serve some real act now lost. In that case the work of art is self-referring; the world it shows is only there, depending only on that very occurrence in that very medium. This thought does

not imply, however, that the signifying process is independent of connections between the sign and other phenomena – life, impressions, other pictures, etc. On the contrary, its ties with other things through various kinds of similarities, regularities and omissions are prerequisites for its functions as an image.

As an alternative to the Gombrich theory I can think of pictures in this way: the picture is the original of itself. It does not come instead of what it shows, but its showing is its act. It invites reflection, and the reflection on, for example, riding cannot be a substitute for riding; it is a different kind of experience, involving identification of signs and observation of the process of knowledge and feeling. (I suppose riding also contains elements of this kind, but looking at pictures is an event arranged for the purpose of reflecting.) The quality of the reflection is totally dependent on the appearance of the sign. The difference in observing the meaning more than the appearance is like the difference in considering somebody's statements more than her facial expressions and her gestures.

What is really elusive is not the meaning of the work of art; the meaning is verbal and familiar, while the elusive is the aspect of the work that makes it comparable to a face, a performance and an individual posture.

We are in a verbal turn. There is no other turn to be in. In dealing with significance, though, we have *meaning* and *looks* – and there is more to looks than scheme and overall perception. If we examine perceptual experiences we can consider the character of natural law in vision – but then we drop from the scope of knowledge the kind of vision Roland Barthes called “punctum.”¹⁵

Gombrich's reluctance vis à vis the looks is based, I think, on a certain concept of science according to which there has to be a borderline between sense and thought, between meaning and emotional impressions. The dangerous position is not, however, to admit the impact of the senses on reasoning and arguments, but to avoid accepting this impact.

¹⁵ *La chambre claire*, 1980, 49 and passim.

