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PICTORIAL ART AS A NATURAL AND A CULTURAL PHENOMENON

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1. Essentialism and truth in aesthetics

Surprisingly, even today some generally estimated authors offer us an essentialistic account of art. Art, however, is so diverse in its manifestations in different places and in different times and can be so diverse even in one culture and one period that it is hard to see how it could be defined by essential properties, even if we would admit that essences exist.

The term aesthetics dates from the eighteenth century, when the theory of art became a separate domain in philosophy. From then on it flourished with Kant, Hegel and Schopenhauer. In the twentieth century the number and the variety of theories of art has been considerable, as not only philosophers, but many great artists have expressed in their views on the subject. We, westerners of the twentieth and twenty first century, do not seem to share one general view on art. We do not agree about what beauty is, nor about what can be considered genuine art, and what not. In consequence, it seems a hopeless task to define either of them. The variety in the art phenomena in one culture, let alone world wide, is so considerable that instances can always be found to which a criterion or a rule cannot be applied. Our own culture has once been more traditionalistic and developed at a relatively slow pace, but it seems that at the end of the Middle Ages and in the Renaissance we came to like novelty more and more, and today we even seem to like novelty for novelty's sake. In consequence, the styles and trends have succeeded each other ever more rapidly. This does not mean, however, that nothing sensible can be said about art in general, as long as it is not in the spirit

of the old idealistic tradition, which speculated about its true nature, its essence. Like Wittgenstein suggested, in order to classify and define things it often makes more sense to look for 'family likeness' than for essences. It is not an unchanging common set of properties that must be sought in art phenomena, which must first be studied empirically before we can understand them. Then we can examine if indeed a core of recurrent characteristics exists. The phenomenon under scrutiny must not possess all these characteristics at the same time, but merely a minimal number of them in order to count as art.

The idea that art and beauty are related to truth has been a constant in western metaphysics and it seems hard-to-die. The truth is in this conception absolute, and in order to attain it we must have an intuition of the essence of the various kinds of things that surround us. These essences either exist as ideal forms or ideas in a transcendent world (Plato), or in the substances, i.e. in individual things (Aristotle). In both cases they are the unchanging models after which different kinds of things are made. In this view, a work of art can be defined as the best possible way to permit mortals to have an intuition of the eternal forms upon which the phenomenal world is moulded.

In antiquity a succession of philosophers, Pythagoras, Plato, Aristotle, were already preoccupied by Beauty. Plato makes a kind of amalgam of 'eros', the desire of beauty as encountered in the bodily charms of young men and the desire of Beauty as such. After having rejected lust, because it is vile and turns men into animals, he describes sublimated love, in which a man remembers the ideal forms he has seen in the short time his soul dwelled in the realm of the stars, in between two reincarnations. He describes the rapture of the contemplation of beauty as follows:

> But when one who is fresh from the mystery, and saw such a vision, beholds a godlike face or bodily form that truly expresses beauty, first there come upon him a shuddering and a measure of that awe which the vision inspired, and then reverence as at the sight of a god, and but for fear of being deemed a very madman he would offer sacrifice to his beloved, as to a holy image of a deity.[1]

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[1] Plato, The Collected Dialogues (eds.E. Hamilton & Huntington Cairns, Princeton University Press, 1961) *Phaedrus*, p. 497, (251, a).

He recognises that beauty can also be present in works of art, and he develops a theory implying a distinction between art that is an imitation of what we directly perceive and art that renders the true nature, the essence of things.[2] The most famous text in Plato's work about imitation in art is to be found in *The Republic*: *God*, i.e. the Demiurg, is the first Creator, who invents the eternal model; the *craftsman* making an artefact following the eternal model is a maker in a secondary sense, but not a creator; in the third place comes the *painter*, who is only an imitator. Plato gives as an example the painter who represents a bed:

> (...) But tell me now this about the painter. Do you think that what he tries to imitate is in each case that thing in nature or the works of the craftsmen?
> -The works of the craftsmen, he said.
> -Is it the reality of them or the appearance? Define that further point.
> -What do you mean? He said.
> -This. Does a couch differ from itself according as you view it from the side or the front or in any other way? Or does it differ not at all though it appears different, and so of other things?
> -That is the way of it, he said. It appears other but differs not at all.[3]

The painter in this case makes a representation of an artefact made by the craftsman after the eternal model, and therefore, concludes Plato in the same text, *he is far from the truth.* Even worse is *deceptive* imitation, as he states in *The Sophist*: a painter can imitate things and fool children, making them believe that the image is the real thing. Artists are capable of deceiving people, using tricks, by which the representation resembles the concrete thing, but only looked at from a definite point of view. For example, they often alter the proportions of their model when painting a décor for the theatre and using a large format; they paint namely what is represented upon the lower part of the panel proportionally smaller, what is represented upon the higher part larger, in order that all the parts of their subject seem to correspond for the spectators to what they could see if they looked at a scene in the real world: this kind of painting gives them the illusion of a likeness, without

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[2] Ibidem, *Republic*, p. 821, (X,597); *Sophist*, pp. 978-979, (235,d,e, 236, a, b, c.)

[3] Ibidem, *Republic*, p. 823, (X,598,a.)

being one. If we do not, like the public in the theatre, look at it from a low point of view relative to the panel, but from any other point of view, the trickery becomes clear.[4]

In fact Plato dismisses painting as a deceptive art, and he is right that, being sensorial by excellence, it never can achieve the lofty goal that he had set for art in general, because no visible form can be more than a gross and imperfect reflection of Ideal Beauty. Realistic pictures are the least general and do not render the unchanging aspects of reality, and therefore Plato prefers the traditional Egyptian way of painting above that of some of his Greek contemporaries, who were trying to represent objects in time and space, i.e., from a definite, but ephemeral point of view. In the Egyptian examples he thinks of, the subject is shown as if it was looked at from different angles at the same time, in its universality as it were, allowing us to have a glimpse of its true nature. Contrary to what Plato believed, traditionalism in Egyptian art was not due to a propensity towards universality, but to the fact that what was represented in painting or in sculpture had a religious meaning, its aesthetic value being of secondary importance. The subject of the painting had to be guarded against impious innovation; for the full exertion of its power it had to be represented the *right*, i.e. *traditional* way, whatever way that was.[5] Writing on music in the religious rites and the laws pertaining to this form of art in Egypt, Plato himself incidentally mentions traditionalism in painting and sculpting:

> (...) So they drew up the inventory of all the standard types, and consecrated specimens of them in their temples. Painters and practitioners of other arts of design were forbidden to innovate on these models or entertain any but traditional standards, and the prohibition still exists, both for these arts and for music in all its branches. If you inspect their paintings and reliefs on the spot, you will find that the work of ten thousand years ago – I mean the expression not loosely but in all precision – is neither better nor worse than that of today: both exhibit an identical artistry.[6]

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[4] Ibidem, *Sophist*, pp. 978-979, (235, d, e, 236, a, b, c,).

[5] E. H. Gombrich, *The Image and the Eye*, Phaidon Press, Oxford, 1982, p. 219.

[6] Plato, The Collected Dialogues (eds.E. Hamilton & Huntington Cairns, Princeton University Press, 1961) II, Laws, pp 1253-1254, (656-657, d,e,a).

Even if the Platonic aesthetic theories would be adequate for understanding certain forms of western art, what I contest, it cannot account for art in general. In many cultures the paintings and sculptures are cult objects having divine power, and they are not to be seen as endeavours to represent general and abstract aspects of reality.

In the Platonic conception, the *right* and *truthful* representation is more important than what our senses tell us. What we perceive cannot be trusted; it is not a basis for truth, but on the contrary misleading. It is only by our higher faculty of reason that makes us long to see the eternal forms that we can attain beauty and truth. The link between beauty and truth is automatically made by many of us, because it is so well entrenched in our culture. We expect of a great work of art that it does not just ravish us and move us, but it must render, by whatever means judged to be accurate, *a deeper truth*.

We would expect scientific progress would encourage a naturalistic approach of art. However, this is not necessarily the case. For example Semir Zeki, a well-known neurobiologist, interested in the relation between our visual system and works of art, compares the creative process, in casu painting, with the working of the brain and draws the conclusion that both show great likeness. The brain seeks in the flow of stimuli that reach it universality and constancy, and in his opinion that is also exactly what the artist tries to do: he wants to render his subject, '*as it really is*'. He is obviously not aware that it is possible to believe that reality 'as it really is' can never be general, but must always be particular, i.e., that a nominalist point of view is possible. Especially interested in visual processes, he stresses that our brain, once fed with the stimuli received by our retina, starts to process the information received, and distils what is general and constant in them. He omits to mention that other important aspect of our cognitive activities, namely the process of identification and recognition of individual elements in our surroundings that are of particular interest to us, and to be aware of changes in them. For him, like for Kant, art is the attempt to represent perfection and perfection implies immutability.[7] In order to corroborate his thesis, Zeki cites, the following lines of Matisse:

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[7] S. Zeki, "Art and the Brain", in: "The Brain", issued as Volume 127, N°2 of the *Proceedings of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, 1998, p. 78.

> Underlying this succession of moments which constitute the superficial existence of things and beings, and which is constantly modifying and transforming them, one can search for a truer, more essential character, which the artist will seize, so that he may give to reality a more lasting interpretation.[8]

In order to give extra credit to this idealist statement he also quotes John Constable:

> The whole beauty and grandeur of Art consists...in being able to get above all singular forms, local customs, particularities of every kind... [The painter] makes out an abstract idea of their forms more perfect than any one original.[9]

That the brain generalises, orders, selects and seeks constancy is well known,[10] but this does not mean that all our brain processes contribute to gain knowledge of what is general and constant. Moreover, we can ask ourselves if it is true that *all* artists are, perhaps unknowingly, idealists, and that their main concern is to discover what is universal rather than what is idiosyncratic. It is true that several great artists have expressed their wish to go beyond rendering as faithfully as possible sensorial impressions that are always particular, but it is also true that rendering the reality they perceived by all the pictorial means they disposed of was the passion of others. Before tackling this question we must examine in greater detail the idealistic conception of art.

Zeki goes into Plato's aesthetic theory at some length, and then opposes it to the theories of Kant and Hegel, because Plato, as Zeki admits, does not mention the brain as the instrument for constructing the universal and constant features of reality. Yet, he seems to be convinced that the Platonic theory can give us an indication of the general validity of his hypothesis that *the artist and the brain achieve the same goal*, namely to reach universal truth. This is of course nonsense and even if considered as a metaphor, misplaced. Plato was very critical of different

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[8] Ibidem, p. 77.

[9] Ibidem, p. 79.

[10] G.M. Edelman, *The Remembered present A biological Theory of Consciousness*, Basic Books, New York, 1989.

forms of art, because they did not reach the truth, showing us the reality hidden behind reality. Moreover, we all know that Plato, even if an artist attained this goal, would never have looked for the source of the lofty forms discovered by the artist in a material organ and in the various ways it functions, because these forms are transcendent, eternally given, and not constructed by mental processes. Indeed, ideas are of course not the *product* of the soul for an idealist, let alone of the soul's material seat, the brain, but they are substances in a transcendent world. In the Platonist version, after an initiation and a lot of training, we can have a vision of them *by remembering them* as we saw them in between two incarnations when our soul dwelled briefly in the realm of the stars.

In an excellent and very learned work, *Plato and Greek Painting*, E. C. Keuls has given an interesting analysis of the often ambiguous attitude of Plato concerning painting. In her opinion Plato was not really interested in this form of art, and his references to it have a philosophical and moral bearing rather than an aesthetic one. She believes that though Plato of course knew the different styles of painting of his time and the most famous painters, he was not really interested in this form of art. The general line of his thought was that painting does not lead to truth, and this for different reasons: it can give us an impression of reality, but is nevertheless deceptive; the reality it purports to render is sensorial and not abstract; it gives us pleasure, but this can be no criterion for artistic quality. Though Plato was not always completely negative about the art of painting, when he grew older his judgement became more harsh. He rejected the aesthetic theory of Democritus, a rival philosopher he particularly disliked. Democritus declared that the artist when creating beauty, rather than making an effort for attaining pure rationality, had divine inspiration and was carried away by enthusiasm, an idea which had probably an orgiastic origin. His ultimate criterion of usefulness seems to have been pleasure, a principle he also applied to art. These ideas are of course incompatible with the spirit of Plato's philosophy. The famous Sicyonian school of painting, introduced the study of mathematics as an instrument for rendering reality more accurately. It could be believed that Plato would appreciate this innovation, but he was opposed to this method, because he rejected the use of mathematics for all practical purposes, such as gain, utilitarian aims or astronomy. The true purpose of the study of mathematics is to discover eternal truth in abstract forms,

and to free the soul from the chains of the sensorial world.[11]

Kant and Hegel, in the opinion of Zeki, link concepts more tightly to human subjectivity, and thereby come even closer than Plato to the conception that there is a parallelism between creating a work of art and the neurobiological theory of the functioning of the brain. He is wrong on two accounts. The first is that he should have said *a* neurobiological conception, which identifies cognition mainly with categorisation, and not with the identification of particular elements of reality. The second is that these philosophers, no more than Plato, believe general ideas are *produced* by our mind, let alone our brain. Both for Kant and for Hegel the mind is not the same thing as the mere functioning of a material organ. Kant believed that all human beings share inborn structures of the mind, but never identified the mind with the brain. On the contrary, the subject was a transcendental entity to him. Hegel repeatedly rejected the idea that the mind could be identified with its material counterpart or its functioning, which in his opinion had only a second order kind of reality.

Looking more closely at theories of the mind in the past, we can understand why a neurobiologist believing that the construction of the general out of particular sense data, having only a superficial knowledge of philosophy, can sympathise with a rationalist or even an idealist account of what goes on in our minds. Nevertheless this remains a misunderstanding. Rationalists like Descartes considered concepts as universal, given a priori and present in the mind of all human beings, but how they came there in the first place, was explained by a 'deus ex machina': God created Man in his image, providing him with rationality. Matter having extension, spirit none whatsoever, they could have nothing in common; the mind was neither situated in time nor in space.

Kant was a pupil of the Cartesian Christian Wolf, and he believed like Descartes *that the structure of our mind is inherited and universal*, (though, when trying to reconcile rationalism with empiricism, he realised that without perception the mind, for all its categories, must remain blind). It is not, however, in the structure of the material brain that we must look for the origin of the a priori given structure of our thought, but in Reason, a special faculty of human beings. The 'self' or subject is a transcendental, i.e., a logical requirement. That it is 'I' who is feeling,

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E.C. Heller, *Plato and Greek Painting*, Bril, Leiden, 1978.

perceiving, thinking is a priori given to us, but this 'I' has in itself no content. The flow of experiences that I am can only be known to me as a flow, if set against a background of external more or less constant objects, one of which is my body. In Kant's work, like in that of most of his contemporaries, the relation between body and mind, between the subject and its brain remains a mystery. In the same vain Kant philosophises about our aesthetic judgements. The beauty of nature, rather than works of art, is the main subject of his aesthetic theories. That we are able to experience it is *not due to a favour accorded to us by objective reality, but due to a special faculty of our mind.* Men are the source of beauty, which is a subjective emotion, though beauty can be at the same time the object of rational discussions, as we can communicate about it and reach a conclusion. It is founded in human subjectivity, the super-sensory substratum, that gives man the capacity to know the truth, to will what is good and to have aesthetic experiences. Great works of art are created by exceptional men, by geniuses, who dispose of this capacity to a larger degree than other men. Why we are what we are, namely rational beings with these extraordinary gifts, cannot in its turn be explained on rational grounds alone. To Kant, in spite of the fact he rejected metaphysics in his *Kritik der Reinen Vernunft*, Divine Providence remained the ultimate ordering principle in the world, and the source of our rationality and our sense of what is good and beautiful. Though Newton could rightfully claim 'give me matter and I'll make the world out of it', he could not have thus declared in the same way 'give me matter and I'll make a caterpillar out of it', let alone human consciousness. It is clearly God who is the source of both rationality and the human sense of what is good and of what is beautiful, not our brain.

Hegel, finally, certainly offers us no more than Kant a conception that opens perspectives for the corroboration of Zeki's thesis that there is a common measure between the activities of the brain and the creation of beauty by the artist. The ultimate nature of the phenomenal world is ideal, and this is proven by the fact that phenomena can be understood by our mind, that they can be thought, grasped conceptually: reality is what is given to the mind, not what is given to the senses. Materiality as such is a kind of non-being, containing no truth at all. Of course the seat of the mind is the brain, but it would be folly to identify both, just like it was a folly to derive mental and moral characteristics from the form of the skull covering the grey cells, as was tempted by some of his

contemporaries.[12] His theory is that art is the exterior realisation of the inner subjectivity; it is born and reborn out of the immaterial mind. Art, simply because it is a cultural product, already contains more beauty than nature, as it is the expression of human spirituality and freedom.

What must be understood here is that Plato, Descartes, Kant and Hegel, all *distinguish sharply between mind and body*. This proves sufficiently how misleading it is to associate them with a neurobiological study of art phenomena. What can be conceded however is that artists have often instead of looking at scenes outside them and trying to copy them, found the source of their inspiration in their subjective interpretation of them. Though Zeki of course seeks the mind and its structures in the brain, he says no word about the rest of the body. The reason is probably that his experiments take place in the laboratory, i.e. in an artificial environment, where only very specific stimuli, under strict control, are received by the subject and the response of their brain to them is then measured. In such a situation the body, as a totality of which the brain is only a part, plays no active role. What counts is the mind ≡ the subject ≡ the functioning of its seat, the brain.

It is Aristotle, who for the first time explicitly stated that concepts are a *product* of the mind, *deriving them from sensorial experience by a process of abstraction*. In other words, concepts are not substances, they have no independent existence. This theory was only rediscovered, when, after more than thousand years of hegemony of Platonism in Christian thought, in the thirteenth century the philosophy of Aristotle had eventually become equally important. Ockham, the fourteenth century nominalist, believed, like Aristotle, that a process of abstraction led to the formation of 'natural signs' in the mind. He called them natural, because they were not a priori given, but derived from our experience of the outside world. It is remarkable that he explicitly stated that our brain formed them '*occulte sed naturaliter*', in an occult, but natural way. These natural signs or concepts were then afterwards associated with conventional terms, with the words we learn as children from our parents. Universals were thus explained in a naturalistic manner and would remain so in the empiricist tradition, which in many respects is the continuation of nominalism. Moreover, universals apply to many things

[12] Hegel, *Pänomenologie des Geistes*, Felix Meiner, Hamburg, 1952, p.244-255.

in a vague way, and therefore, though useful as tools for reasoning and classification, remain always mere approximations. Reality consists exclusively of particulars, which can be known intuitively, i.e. directly, by our senses, but which, strictly speaking, are ineffable, because concrete reality in its particularity can never be grasped by universals, (though perhaps it can be *shown* in pictures). Contemporary neurological models of identification and recognition of particulars, *and* of the way generalisation and the selection of constants from a changing environment take place, are compatible with the Aristotelian view of how we acquire knowledge, not with Platonism. Empiricists are the natural allies of neurobiology, not rationalists or idealists.

Now we can return to the problem what artists mean when they say that they want to render reality 'as it really is'.

2. Art and reality 'as it really is'

2.1 Traditionalism and innovation

Many painters, I agree with Zeki, have expressed the desire to render reality 'as it really is', but what does this imply? Their statements about the nature of their art are not always unambiguous. John Constable was mentioned before, who declared that art must leave aside singular forms, local customs, particularities. Yet, his art was not abstract, he always painted a particular person or landscape never leaving out so many details it could be anyone or any scene. What did he mean? Probably that whatever he painted had to be universal in spirit, that it had to be thus that it could appeal to all of us. In a lecture he gave at the Royal Institution in 1836, he said:

> Painting is a science and should be pursued as an inquiry into the Laws of Nature. Why then may not landscape painting be considered as a branch of natural philosophy, of which pictures are but experiments?[13]

He did not reject the work of the great painters that preceded him, but he

[13] Gombrich, *The Image and the Eye*, p. 215.

did refuse to be a traditionalist. This is the logical consequence of the fact that he wanted to paint what he saw *with his own eyes*, as *he* understood it, and not as following the conventional recipes invented by others before him. In Gombrich's words: *he wanted nothing but the truth.*[14] What truth? Gombrich writes about 'The Haywain':

> It represents a simple rural scene, a cart loaded with hay fording a river. We must lose ourselves in the picture, watch the patches of sunlight on the meadows in the background and look at the drifting clouds; we must follow the course of the mill-stream and linger by the cottage, which is painted with such restraint and simplicity, to appreciate the artist's absolute sincerity, his refusal to be more impressive than nature, and his complete lack of pose or pretentiousness.[15]

Nobody can be conventional when using his five senses; a painter cannot use clichés when trusting his eyes. It is in this sense that Constable wants to be objective, not to deliver a fashionable picture by following the conventions, and painting an idyllic scene with as background a landscape that is a mere construction. Constable obviously believed in the inter-subjectivity of complex sensorial experiences. What he paints is universal, because we all have similar perceptual systems and each of us could have seen what he saw, had he or she been there, just on the right spot, at the right moment, and therefore each of us can recognise in his picture reality 'as it really is'.

Western art is far less traditional than art in other cultures, and shows an astonishing variety of forms of expression. Plato admired Egyptian art, because it remained unchanged over thousands of years, whereas Greek art did not show a similar steadfastness. Considering the enormous variety in paintings the West produced, it becomes clear that rendering reality 'as it is', can mean almost anything or, what comes to the same, is in a sense meaningless. If we simply take a book on the history of art and look at the illustrations, we are convinced that there is no continuity in the conception of what art is or should be. The first lines of the introduction to the *History of Art* of Gombrich are: "There really

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[14] Gombrich, *The Story of Art*, Phaidon, Oxford, 1972, p. 393.

[15] Ibidem.

is no such things as Art. There are only artists."[16] Or, as I would like to formulate it, 'there are only works of art'. When comparing different schools with one another we shall discover that the conception of what should be achieved by the painter is something else in each school and even for each artist in particular. Constable does not paint as if he were a camera, but tries to paint the impression he has when he looks at a scene, the world exactly *as it appears to him, and as it could appear to others*. This stress on the exact rendering of what he sees explains that he says painting is the study of the Laws of Nature. Full attention goes to the transitory effect conveyed by the illumination of his subject, which determines the atmosphere he wants to communicate to the beholder of his picture, who probably has had similar experiences. The novelty the impressionists brought was to abandon the idea that the painter must represent his subject as we all know it to be. The Egyptians had painted the elements our body is composed of under what they considered to be their most representative aspect. They knew how to paint, an eye, a foot, a hand, and put all the necessary components together. The idea was, to paint reality, not only as it really was, but as it *ought* to be. Gombrich has drawn our attention to the fact that this requirement has remained central in the art of the Middle Ages, and even in the Renaissance, when the theory of perspective was elaborated, which was a method to draw and paint subjects *correctly*. Till way up in the nineteenth century no artist, however daring his stroke of brush, would have thought to abandon this principle: what we see on the canvas must correspond to what we know about the subject. The impressionists did no longer respect this rule. What they painted was no longer what they knew, but their impression of the moment. The expressionist wanted something else, he wanted to paint his subject in such a way that it rendered the *emotion* the subject provokes, and to this effect he adapted its natural form and colour, transformed it or even distorted it. This permitted him to show his individual emotion, and to make the beholder's soul resonate with his. The cubist saw art as the dialogue between the object and the analysing, ordering mind. As Cézanne, a precursor of the movement, declared, what must be shown is the simple geometrical forms of which the subject of the painting is composed, the cube, cone or cylinder and their relations.

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[16] Ibidem, p. 4.

Constable, Monet, Cézanne, all believed to have found if not *the* way, a way of capturing reality, certainly not according to academic rules, but as they understand it.

It has by now become clear that by no means all artists are fascinated by generality and constancy, nor by ideal beauty. In Plato's dialogue *Parmenides,* the young Socrates, when asked whether ideas exist of such things as filth, hair or mud, answers negatively: there can be no truth or beauty in them. However, art time and again betrayed Plato. For example a famous work by Van Gogh shows us something very ordinary, a pair of worn out shoes. The shoes are not shown under their general aspect, or as timeless ideas, but having taken the form of the feet of their owner. If those shoes move us, it is because Van Gogh painted them with a feeling of tenderness; he obviously loved those shoes, perhaps because they were a modest testimony of whoever was or had been their owner and a testimony of the burden of his existence. To others, like Piet Mondriaan, what the painter should show were the most general and therefore abstract characteristics of the visual world, namely the basic colours and basic forms the painter derives from it. Kandinsky was the pioneer of this kind of art, which was abstract or non-figurative, and his first paintings in this manner date from 1910 and 1913. These painters were not looking for eternal ideal forms, but for the basic elements abstracted from their initial sensorial experiences with which they hoped to be able *to reconstruct* reality. Since then an impressive number of movements have evolved from each other in an ever more rapid succession. Without being exhaustive we can mention: futurism, abstract expressionism, constructivism, neo-plasticism, abstract dadaism, purism, abstract surrealism, zéro, action-painting, op-art... In as far as the artist is a representative of a certain movement, and once the point is reached where such a movement becomes fashionable, the 'truth' to be rendered is an artistic convention. From then on it loses its interest: innovation has become of primary concern in art, traditionalism completely rejected.

2.2 Conventionalism versus realism

At the opposite of an idealist conception of art is conventionalism. For its proponents art is a language with a syntax and semantics, a convention that has to be learned by the beholder before he can understand a picture. The nominalist philosopher Nelson Goodman, in his famous *Languages*

of Art, doubts the possibility of realism in pictorial art: all artistic creations are 'ways of world making'. They are neither true nor false, but they 'work' or do not 'work'. He shows that there is no such thing as painting reality 'as it really is', and, as can be derived from the foregoing, we agree. To start with, each subject has many aspects, we can consider it from very different points of view, under different circumstances, at different moments, etc. In fact, he comes to the same conclusion as Plato, namely that pictorial art can never render the truth about reality, but in contrast with Plato, he claims that all these aspects of reality are equally true. These different aspects are not mere fictions, they contain a statement about reality, but which one is, from a purely objective and descriptive point of view, based upon an arbitrary choice.

He gives the example of a representation of the Duke of Wellington: it would hardly be indicated to represent him as seen by a drunkard through a raindrop.[17] But why is it not indicated? Because it would be highly unconventional? Because this is not as he really is? Because it would not be 'realistic'? Is it not as 'true' as any other aspect? Many artists have pictured rare aspects of reality and rare phenomena. J. Gage draws our attention to the fact that, from the end of the eighteenth century on, painters were more willing than in the past to incorporate in their works special effects of light and changes of weather. The romantic painter combined, sharpened and extended observations with a symbolic or even metaphysical purpose. Caspar David Friedrich's *Landscape with Lunar Rainbow* and John Sell Cotman's drawing of 1815, representing a bow around the sun formed by ice crystals in the atmosphere demonstrate this.[18]

Following Goodman, we cannot *in principle* copy reality. The copy theory of art, which states that a picture must show as strong as possible a likeness to what is depicted, must be wrong:

> The copy theory of representation is stopped at the start by the inability to specify what is to be copied. Not an object the way it is, nor all the

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[17] N. Goodman, Languages of Art, Hackett, Indianapolis, 1976, p. 7.

[18] J. Gage, Colour and Culture, *Practice and Meaning from Antiquity to Abstraction*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1993, pp. 106-107.

ways it is, nor the way it looks to the mindless eye.[19]

Goodman insists that there is no such thing as a mindless eye, that once we are grown up our mind has its culturally determined habits, and concludes: 'there is more to vision than meets the eye'. He adheres to the behaviourist conception that babies do not really think before they speak, or at least that there is no way to know if and what they think. He believes that the moment we learn a language, we also acquire a conceptual scheme, implying a possible way of ordering the elements of reality, rules for interpreting events, for establishing causal links, etc.. There seems to be no way back in his opinion; from then on our perception of reality is coloured by the culturally determined habits of our mind. We can only see what we have conceptually learned. Should we pluck from the bush a native who has never been in contact with westerners, fly him over to a western city and confront him with objects of our daily life, such as a library, ornamental plants, a television set, etc., he would probably see in the first two fuel and food, but lacking a concept for the television set he would not be able to see it for what it is, and in consequence, he would not see a television set at all. This is, of course, highly controversial and at least a curious conception coming from a man who stresses he is a nominalist: the general concept comes before experience instead of the other way round.

It could be objected to this that the native would see exactly what we see, but, lacking information, and having no word for it, would only after approaching the object and experimenting with it know how it worked and what it was. Then he would be able to form himself a concept of it. Long before babies are capable of interpreting the elements of their surroundings according to the cultural conventions of the grown ups, as anyone who has a certain experience with toddlers can confirm, the child is strongly drawn towards unknown objects, examines them, seeks what he can do with them. He has his own, as yet culturally undetermined, interpretation of what they are and are for, i. e., he has a concept for them, though not yet a name.[20] As John Berger in his *Ways of Seeing*

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[19] Goodman, Languages of Art, p. 8.

[20] M. Gosselin, in: E. Oger & F. Buekens (eds.), *Denken in Alle Staten*, De Nederlandse Boekhandel, 1992, 'Goodmans conventionalisme in wetenschap en kunst', p. 23-24.

declares: "Seeing comes before words. The Child looks and recognises before it can speak."[21] Even when we can speak and have acquired cultural habits, we can rely if necessary upon our faculty to perceive what we do not yet know.

I have stressed many times that when considering cognitive phenomena -and creating art, and understanding and liking it or not liking it, are cognitive activities- we must take into account several layers: a first level that is universal in humans, a second and a third level that are culturally determined. All human beings have similar brains and a similar sensorial apparatus. However diverse our surroundings, we all live in one world with general characteristics to which we are adapted. From the moment we are born, we are capable to draw the information from our environment necessary to survive. During the first pre-linguistic stage we interact with our mother and father, with our caretakers, with pet animals and with objects. Like all young animals we are explorers. It is most important that it is in this pre-linguistic period that our brains are going to produce concepts (Ockham's natural signs). Then follows a second stage, in which we learn a language, usually from our mother. This enables us to communicate with the members of our group, and to absorb its culture and become fully integrated in it. The next step is the acquisition of a conceptual scheme; we must learn how to order concepts systematically and how to make use of them in our reasoning, according to the rules of thought valid in our cultural community. It is often forgotten that logic is not universal. Thus, the logic of primitive thought is completely different from the logic of Aristotle. The latter became the logic used in scientific matters, but also the one we use in purely practical matters. However, in religion, in transcendent metaphysics, in occult thought and in superstition, a kind of older, more primitive logic is still in use. It is my contention that many difficulties could be avoided by recognising the existence of different layers of cognitive activities corresponding to different levels in our intellectual development. The eye is indeed never mindless, but it is basically the eye of a (land) animal, and only in addition to this, that of a cultural being.

As grown ups we still want to explore reality with our senses, to see

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[21] J. Berger, S. Blomberg, C. Fox, M. Dibb, R. Hollis, Ways of Seeing, BBC and Penguin Books, Londen, Harmondsworth, 1984 first edition, 1972, p. 7.

for ourselves. I agree with Goodman that *styles* in art are based upon conventions. It is one of the tasks of the art historian to explain their origin and their development. What is fashionable in pictorial art at a certain moment often becomes academic after a certain time. The public becomes accustomed to the convention and appreciates the works created according to it. However, this does not imply that realism is impossible. As I argued elsewhere, in realism 'to paint reality as it really is', means to paint a subject in such a way that it can be recognised in its individuality by the beholder. In order to be able to do this, the artist must rely upon the acuity and training of his eyes and upon his technique to render pictorially what he sees. How to represent a person can be taught, countless books exist on how to paint a portrait, but not how to see just those characteristics that are unique for this person.[22] For new born babies it is vital that they recognise their mother; she is the right one to care for her baby, because she has given birth and produces the right hormones making her able to feed and driven to nurse her baby. And as we, humans, are social animals, later on we know the individually our brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, our friends, and, if the group to which we belong is not too big, its members. We are also capable of distinguishing similar objects from each other, and this enables us to claim our right to possess particular items. We are able to recognise places, to find our own home and not to enter by mistake the house of somebody else without permission. Realism in art reflects our interest for individuals, for unique objects and sceneries.

If there is not such a thing as the mindless eye, as Goodman claims, the conclusion must be that representation is determined by the cultural framework the artist is accustomed to, and in consequence that it is *in principle* conventional and that *realism* is *impossible*. But the point is that the perception is knowledge already, because it is an active process of extracting information from reality and leading to generalisation and the forming of concepts.[23] If this view is right, realism is possible after all.

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[22] M. Gosselin, "Conventionalism versus Realism. The portrait." in: Worldmaking's Ways, L. Aagaard-Mogensen, R. Pinxten, F. Vandamme, (eds.), Communication and Cognition, Gent, pp. 134-135.

[23] Cf. J. J. Gibson, The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception, Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1979.

The painter *purporting to paint realistically*, though as a grown up disposing of a system of general concepts, does not want to register ideas, universals, but to register peculiarities, specific characterisics that cannot be grasped by concepts, nor rendered by words, but can only be *shown* to the beholder. His painting is always an approximation, of course, but if it is a good approximation, showing *similarities* in structures, patterns, colours, with what is painted, it will make possible recognition by the onlooker who knows the subject. The realist painter does not make a copy of reality in the literal sense of course, but he copies certain peculiar features of it and their relations, and he renders them on his two dimensional canvas.

It must be clear that Goodman does not start from *depiction*, but from *representation*, and that this is not by chance. As we have seen, he can easily prove that a picture must not resemble its subject in order to *represent* it, nor to *refer* to it, nor to *denote* it. In fact, almost anything can represent anything by convention. It must be remarked, however, that depiction or portrayal, admittedly existing genres in pictorial art, are not the same thing as mere representation; they *presuppose* that what is painted or drawn can resemble, to a sufficient degree, what is depicted to identify it. A sufficient degree implies that, enough characteristics must be present in order that the beholder will be able to see a strong likeness in forms, patterns, colours, between the painted and the painting, making recognition of what is depicted possible. We have the knack to identify and to individuate, because this is vital to us. Thus, a botanical guide must contain drawings of the plants that enable the reader to recognise specimen of a species, or a variety of it in reality, which means that the picture must be a representation that is a depiction. Though the picture is not a sample of the plant like the specimen we can find in a herbarium, it is used in a similar way: the specimen is compared with it in all its aspects. Does this mean that this is true for all its characteristics and that they must be identical with those of the model? This would indeed be impossible. We all know that a painting never is a duplication of what it represents, and Magritte made a pictorial joke about this fact, representing a pipe and writing under it, "ceci n'est pas une pipe".[24]

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[24] M. Gosselin, "Conventionalism versus realism in pictorial art. Perspective (considered from very different points of view.", Communication and Cognition, Vol. 16, Nr. 3, 1983, p. 240.

Here some conceptual clarification can be useful. We can represent what is general, we cannot depict or portray it. As a picture is always a representation, we can both represent something that is particular *and* we can (at the same time) depict or portray it, but we do not portray the idea 'man', nor *a* man, only a specific person, even if he remains anonymous, and in the same way we do not depict the idea 'manor', nor a manor, but a unique building. A realistic picture is always a portrayal or depiction, which, at the same time and of necessity, also represents, refers to, sometimes denotes what it represents. The Duke of Wellington for example, Goodman remarks, must necessarily be represented either as a child or as an adult, either as an ordinary citizen or as an admiral, and cannot be represented under all these aspects at the same time. He concludes from this that he cannot be represented 'as he really is', because he is or has been all that, while only one aspect can be shown in a picture. What we can do, however, is portray a man as he really is or was at a certain moment, in a certain setting, etc. The peculiarity of a realistic work of art is not that it represents all characteristics at the same time, but that it purports to draw the attention to unique characteristics of its subject. Thus Picasso's cubist works show us things, but also persons by means of forms into which he has decomposed them, seen under different angles at the same time without bothering about traditional pictorial perspective, but this hardly enhances-and was not meant to enhance- the realism of these pictures.

As Goodman puts it, our eyes are not innocent, and, indeed, even on the underlying, primitive level of our cognitive activities, what our eyes see is determined by our common selective interest in the elements of our surroundings, interests dictated by our will to survive. In order to understand our visual system, it is of great importance to consider its biological aspects. As for other animals, for human beings visual perception is necessary for the most basic behaviour: to orient oneself in space, to move about, to feed, mate, flee from enemies. J.J. Gibson has made clear in *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*, that our visual system has not evolved to enable us to *know* reality, but to *survive* in it. If we take this into account, we can clear away many misunderstandings. Indeed, in order to see our surroundings and to function in them, we must not know and understand the world at an abstract level, but we must use its affordances to our advantage and extract the useful information it contains to react appropriately. Only in

the second place we interpret, reason, draw conclusions.[25]

An idealistic approach today is obsolete, and therefore the idea that art can be defined in terms of the Truth must be excluded. Artists offer us works that are neither true nor false, but good or bad. So far we can go along with Goodman, but we must not go all the way with him. Restricting ourselves to paintings, there are different possibilities. Either they represent something that exists, or they represent a fiction. Either, they represent something realistically and are depictions, or they represent something in a more ore less abstract way. If the process of abstraction is carried out to the extreme they represent merely forms and colours, or even nothing but themselves. The way of representing is a convention, and though realism, contrary to what Goodman believes, is possible, it is not more or less truthful than any other way of representing reality.

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[25] M. Gosselin, "Conventionalism versus realism in pictorial art. Is perception basically particular or general?", Comm. and Cogn., Vol. 17, Nr. 1, 1984, p. 71.