

Article 3: Perceptual approaches towards visual spectatordom

In article 2 I examined the interactive relationship between nature [O1], the artist [S1], the work of art [O2] and the viewer [S2] in terms of the aesthetic field. In this article I would like, first of all, to briefly mention (in no particular order) seven perceptual approaches towards visual spectatordom which recent perceptual theorists have used to explain the interactive relationship between the viewer and the work of art. I shall then draw my conclusions on all three articles.

Seven perceptual approaches towards visual spectatordom

1. Gombrich treats spectatordom in the Albertian terms of "I see a picture," in a one-way viewing relation between the active spectator and the work of art as the object of his/her perception. The viewer can only be present in the physical world and thus remains external to the pictorial world, distinct from his/her own, by the frame acting as a window, or *costruzione legittima*, through which the physique of the spectator can be directly addressed (Bryson 1983: 104; see also Steer 1989: 99).

2. Steinberg sets up a two-way relation between picture and spectator: "I see the picture and the picture sees me." Steinberg believes that pictures contain a "built-in idea of the spectator" and that a living encounter, a visual exchange, exists between the viewer [S2] and the work of art [O2] wherein the latter is an alternative pole in a situation of reciprocal self-recognition (Carrier 1986: 8). In placing the viewer before the painting, Steinberg sought to identify the painting with his position as an observer.

3. In Foucault's approach, negation is used to deny that "the picture is seen." This rather radical approach is due to the suspicions certain postmodernists have developed about representation and the removal of the viewer from having access to the picture. Foucault's "negative dialectic" is conditioned by a system of values that he holds about art, his favorite artist being Magritte. Foucault has often delighted in explaining that the normal denotation in a work of art does not immediately point to reality, but that meaning comes before the realized sense of the work of art as a semiotic structure. Accordingly, reality lies in the opinionated 'act' of reality, not in its code, despite the fact that the *parole* of a denotative code is part of the work of art's discourse as a syntactic unity controlled by the code (Vanbergen 1986: 118, 123, 132-137).

4. Fried's approach is to omit the reference to the spectator. He thus transforms Gombrich's statement into "the picture is seen." The spectator has entered into the picture and should be seen as operative within the space of an artwork. The beholder [viewer] is "something other than the 'eye,' a disembodied, [yet] spatially situated

visual apparatus ... [and] occupier of a point of view" (Carrier 1986: 9-10).

Realizing as I.A. Richards did, that the "beholder's share" could contain both technical remarks about an object represented and critical remarks about the value of experience (Freund 1987: 26), Fried introduced into his system of "the spectator in the picture" the concepts of absorption and theatricality. In the absorbed figure, the eliding presence of the spectator's presence made the picture "disappear," thus promising a "disclosure" to the "measure of binding" the "coercive power of the life-world rather than sensation." The pictorial integrity of the work depended on the analysis of the sensation of presentness, its sign and effect, manifested chiefly through the primacy of seeing being able to deal with the object's "seeing ability to deal with diversity and [thus], unify [them] together" (Kuspit 1983: 275-277, 284). Fried's idea of positioning the spectator in the picture meant that the viewer had to become a *voyeur* in the work of art, to follow the position of a "voyage" (indicated in fig. 1), in order to be absorbed by the immediate presentness of his/her point of view, while redirecting the theatricality aspects of the proceedings to the audience position.

5. Wollheim's (1987: 45, 73, 160-162) approach follows Fried's *voyeur* rather loosely. His concepts of visual delight and the viewer's ability to "see-into" a painting, are what he believes are

the twin towers of mental expressive perception. "Seeing-in" may be defined as the artist's power to represent external objects in such a way that they can be recognized together with their configurational aspects. This is because Wollheim believes that the artist fulfills both the role of agent and spectator; the aesthetic appeal of the painting stemming from, and in, the work he/she has created. As the viewer reconstructs the mental set of these given terms, he/she bridges the *Suture* (Kemp 1985: 107) between himself/herself and the work of art, its artistic intention [motivation] and contextualization. Only in this way, does Wollheim believe that the work of art provides the circumstantial evidence for the presence of a spectator, a peripatetic spectator, in the picture.

6. Alpers, using Gombrich's concept of the "beholder's share," describes how the "inevitable factors" in the making of a work of art is that it is made to be viewed, i.e., with a viewer in mind. Her aim was to demonstrate that the viewer is both within and outside the work of art; the two systems representing an appeal to two different systems of representation. Within her system of thinking, the distinction between narratives told without a narrator and the deictic utterance, are pointers which "point back directly to the body of the speaker." She treats style as an integral aspect of the individual work of art, as a manifestation of the essential life of the work of art, or as that of the artist's [S1] imagination, as the im-

print of his/her temperament (Alpers 1972-73: 442, 452; see also Carrier 1986: 14).

7. Bryson's (1981, 1983) initial interest in the work of art stems from the discrepancy he notes which exists between reality, or what he terms "the Essential Copy," and the representational image. Two antithetical forces converge on the site of the "Essential Copy," the painterly trace produced by the material signification of "the aesemantic brushwork" and the discursive, such as a hieroglyph, or pictogram. Both are on a sliding scale toward, or away from, 'natural resemblances' whose reality they noumenally disclose through substitute approximation. The essential features of the reality of the "Essential Copy," however, are always what the consensual forum of recognition which a given society agrees to call "Real."

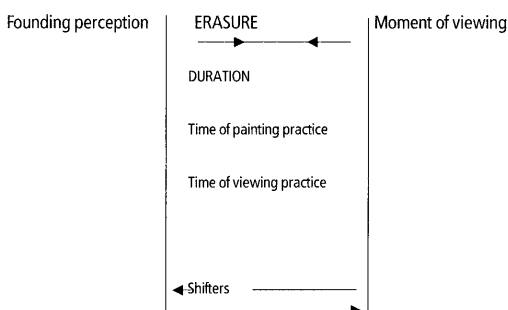
Using this as his starting point, Bryson builds up his theory of figurality and textuality in terms of the painterly trace and the discursive image by examining the image as a paradigm within a language, as the schema of the viewing subject's perpetual transgression of the representational image. He then explains that with the figurality of the image, an area of predominance of the syntagm over the paradigm axis (see fig. 3) is what causes the image to always be on the wrong side of the threshold, because the discursive

properties of the image are always disguised as figural. Bryson defines the discursive as "that-which-belongs-to-the-textual-function" of an image, while the figural is "that-which-belongs-to-the-image-alone," and goes on to say that the identity between the image and the "Essential Copy" are only an instituted difference between figure and discourse rather than analogous to one another. Since the aesthetic organization of the style as a whole, its figuration, functions on a basic level of differentiation, one can say that the production of a 'realistic image' occurs because the discursive content of the represented has shifted sideways across the threshold into "the semantically neutral area" of the image where its figurality comes into play. The "effect of the real" is achieved where connotation so confirms and substantiates denotation that the latter appears to rise to a level of truth by the connotation's persuasion of the viewer that the image's strength lies in its dennotative credibility. Denotation thus belongs to "an internal order of the image, and its codes need not necessarily operate anywhere beyond the four sides of the canvas." Internal logic exists solely therefore within the enclosure of the frame (Bryson 1981: 10, 12-18, 21, 27).¹

From this analysis of representation within the aesthetic field, Bryson developed, via communication theory and the Speech Act Theory of John

¹ See also Bryson (1983: 25, 53, 62, 67-68, 77, 86, 98-99, 122); Van den Berg ([s.a.]: 10).

Austin and John Searle (Odmark 1979: 193, 210),² the concept of the Deixis utterance, which could include “all those particles and forms of speech where the utterance incorporates into itself information about its own spatial position relative to its content and its own temporality.” This proved to be a necessity if one was to acknowledge the point at which the deixis utterance pointed back to the body of the speaker and the moment at which the self-reflexiveness of the speaker’s rhetoric became oratory (Bryson 1983: 88). Not only this, but the duration between the founding perception and the moment of viewing also had to be taken into account, as represented in the scheme below:



(Bryson 1983: 117-118).

In order to accommodate the theory of deixis into his system of textuality and figurality, Bryson developed Baxandall’s concept of scanning habits into a detailed analysis of gazing and glancing. In a Glance the eye traversing the canvas, does so in a movement that is irregular, unpredictable and intermittent. Through its traversals the Glance gradually builds up a conceptual vision

of the corresponding structures existing before and after the Glance [within the rationalization of the *Erwartungshorizont*]. In this perceptualist’s account, both the ‘reflection’ and ‘refraction’ of the Glance are equally weighted within the social formation of perceptual solitude. Since both the act of painting and the art of viewing involve a material work surface of signs co-extensive with society, Bryson believes that both the artist [S1] and the viewer [S2] are agents operating through labor on the materiality of the visual sign: the alteration of the semiotic field in the *durée* of painting being the mobility of the trace and the Glance.

In contrast to the Glance, which is a furtive sideways look, the Gaze is prolonged, contemplative, aloof and tranquil. It is an infinitely extended Glance, in much the same way as I tried to explain it in fig. 1. One could say that the Gaze is victorious over the Glance, and that its logic is subject to the laws of the body [of S1 or S2] reduced to a single point, and the *macula* of the retinal surface. During the movement of the Gaze [of either S1 or S2], the only proposed viewing subject is placed outside the duration of that assumed by the image. Using Renaissance perspective as a model, Bryson then identified the a three-vertice relationship of the Gaze: the Founding perception [the point from which the scene was observed by the painter], the Viewpoint [the point from which the viewer is to look at the im-

² See also Freund (1987: 43); Rabinow & Sullivan (1979: 76); Ricoeur (1979: 74); Upensky (1973: 129).

age], and the Vanishing Point [the point on the horizon towards which the perspective has converged]. The real-time processes of the trace and the Glance meet on the picture plane, but in the depth of the founding perception and the flatness of the picture plane the Gaze handles the many kinds of interference patterns that exist in a composition, and it evenly distributes them between the moment of origin and the moment of viewing (Bryson 1983: 94-96, 107, 117, 119, 121, 134-135, 150).

Hermeneutics

The relativity of these seven approaches as to how the viewer sees and perceives, a represented image within the framework of a work of art, as distinct from that of reality, is by no means settled among critics of visual spectatordom. Nor should it be: the idea of a work of art as an "open system" for interpretation, engagement, perceptual theory and various methodologies, means that visual spectatordom itself must belong to that "open system" as well. In any case, the seven approaches outlined in the previous section are not exhaustive, nor would they apply to every work of art. Perhaps a number of them used in conjunction would yield more fruitful results, just as a comparative study of the influences which can be brought to the contextualization of a work of art might make its meaning more holistic.

The hermeneutic approach is but one of several others which have been put forward to account for how the viewer may interpret a work of art using the approaches toward visual spectatordom. I mention it by way of example in order to show that the approaches to perception mentioned in the last section are not without an extra-critical component as well, which may be either ideologically founded or a methodological point of view which is often superimposed onto perception itself.

Named after Hermes, the interpreter of the divine message to mankind (Gadamer 1976: 98), with its etymology rooted in Aristotle's concept of *peri hermeneias*, whose meta-allegorical concerns were with every meaningful discourse which sought to "interpret reality" (Ricoeur 1974: 4), hermeneutical inquiry seeks to disclose an understanding of textual utterances by means of the interpretative act of the interpreter (Rabinow & Sullivan 1979: 147; see also Hoy 1981: 92): the purpose of all interpretation being "to conquer the remoteness and distance between the past cultural epoch to which the text belongs and the interpretator himself[herself]." When an interpreter places himself/herself in the same semantic field as the one he/she is attempting to understand he/she has entered the "hermeneutic circle". Whether explicitly or implicitly, the hermeneutic situation forces self-understanding on the viewer by means of his/her understanding of others. By drawing the view-

er's [S2] consciousness outside itself, in front of itself, and toward a meaning in motion, hermeneutics acts as a catalyst for intersubjective communication. In overcoming the distance between the archaeological site of the work of art [O2] and making it his/her own [*Aneignung*], the viewer, as an exegete, makes himself/herself "contemporary" with the work of art he/she is studying by appropriating its meaning himself/herself, through his/her lingual powers about "a world which constitutes the reference of the text" (Rabinow & Sullivan 1979: 25, 98, 146).³

Since interpretation can be defined as the hinge between linguistics and non-linguistics, or language and lived experience, the weakness of the hermeneutic approach can also be said to be its strength, as it is the place where language comes into itself in a place where it says something, and takes itself beyond its connotative allegorical role into the sphere of inter-pretation (Ricoeur 1974:65-66; see article 1).

The dialogic imagination

The methodological apparatus of the hermeneutic operation is also dialogical by nature (Ricoeur 1979: 88; see also Bakhtin 1982: 351), the internal and external dialogism complement the viewer's intentionality. By pervading the work, the dialogic imagination guides

interpretation from the produced world to the one, it itself, produces (Hoy 1981: 93-94). In as much as the imagination of the artist plays its role in the creation of the work of art, as we have seen previously, the dialogic imagination of the viewer [S2] is as vitally important to the responding eye to whom the work is addressed. Bakhtin (1982: 275, 280-284, 314) believed that an interactive dialogical tension existed between the conscious relationship of normal language and a work [O2]. The latter was an internal dialogism, a living conversation orientated toward a future answer. His conception of the dialogical imagination is thus both complementary towards the hermeneutic approach to perceptual interpretation and to the aesthetic field in which visual spectatordom is included.

Conclusion

The recognition that great works of art exhibit an overdetermination of meaning, and thus tend to create multiple associations, has caused deconstructive criticism to be seen as a necessary moment within the hermeneutic circle since a single interpretation is simply not possible (Hoy 1981: 97; see also Suleiman & Crosman 1980: 38-39, 44). This has also called for the "poetics of an open work," mentioned earlier, as it encourages the "conscious act of freedom" within the dialogic imagination to build up a network of lim-

³ See also Ricoeur (1974: 16-17, 22, 55).

itless interrelations between the viewer and the work of art [O2-S2], and thus validate indeterminacy as the stepping-stone in the cognitive process, "striped of necessary and foreseeable conclusions" so that it can freely perform its function as part of the discontinuity process of interpretation (Eco 1983: 50, 58, 63).

Rather than lead the reader down pathways of further theories regarding visual spectatordom within the context of an open system, allow me to draw my conclusions from all three articles. To begin, I will reiterate by saying that there are a number of factors bound to perception. Without going into their details again I shall merely list them briefly: 1. Perception is language bound (there being a direct link between language and visual spectatordom) [see article 1]; 2. Perception is theory bound; 3. Perception is interpretation bound (either to theory, ideology or methodological ways of argument); and 4. Perception is bound to the dialogical imagination. One could add that perception is also bound to the aesthetic field; it is bound to visual communication; to tropes; to socio-cultural, religious and political factors; to historical changeability; to pedagogic tuition – and many other contextualizing factors.

The numerous points of view of the theorists I have described, however, can be "applied" to fig. 1, as though it were a "transparent map" that could allow perceptual theorists to be superim-

posed upon its construct. An interesting and a different "landscape" emerges, but one which "completes" and compliments the journey between article 1 and article 3 [see fig. 4] (Pg. 62) Each perceptual theory has come down from the mountain, so to speak, like Zarathustra after his vision, to specific places. Some concepts are perhaps better "accommodated", or are more "accommodating" than others, because my starting point in article 1 was language. However, as we can expect, the "agreement about the lie of the land" in fig. 4 is "rare, for each explorer within [this] heterogeneous company seems to be either armed with a different map or is reading the same map differently" (Freund 1987: 7). The broad spectrum of interests and disciplines which are gathered together here have each in their own way contributed to "make possible the enriched meaning" of the aesthetic field (Gilmour 1986: 152). With some reservation I might add that each point of view has added to our understanding of the aesthetic field, because to a greater or lesser degree, each has "influenced" our already affective, implied and private thinking eye (Fisher & Nodine 1979: 222). It is perhaps with some irony that "we can only perceive of the world what language allows us to say; what has no name slips through the net of perception" (Dufrenne 1983: 209), while what has not yet been put into theory is still part of the "merits of inexhaustibility" of the work of art (Bryson 1981: 4). This is because the structure of visual spectatordom, as defined by language,

is still based on the "rationalizing processes" which we have forced upon it, and which has been handed down to us since antiquity and the Renaissance. The latter's conception of the viewer, termed the "judgment of sense" [*iudicium sentiendi*], follows the contours of language rather closely, channeling us to accept its governing order controlled by visual rhetoric, perception, a perceptual theory and reason.

Part of our problem lies in the ambiguity of the word "sense". As Hegel pointed out, "sense" designates on the one hand, the origins of immediate apprehension, and on the other, it refers to meaning or ideas which we attach to the universal implications of the things we re-view (Küng 1981: 22-23). Our five senses thus merge with the mind in its immediate, intuitive and judgmental relations to things (Summers 1987: 118). Sense deals with the "inner nature" of the artist [S1] and the viewer [S2], as well as with the "immediately external" relationship which the artist [S1] or the viewer [S2] senses and believes to be the relationship between nature [O1] and the work of art [O2]. Yet, despite the many layers and theories which the centuries have offered as a solution for "sense," the word has not strayed far from Aristotle's definition of it in his *De anima* 424a:15-22: the five senses gather data about the world, but the inner nature of man is one of the only authoritative knowledge-sources that we have to evaluate particulars (Summers 1987: 55), the other being the perceptual theories of others

which can influence our own.

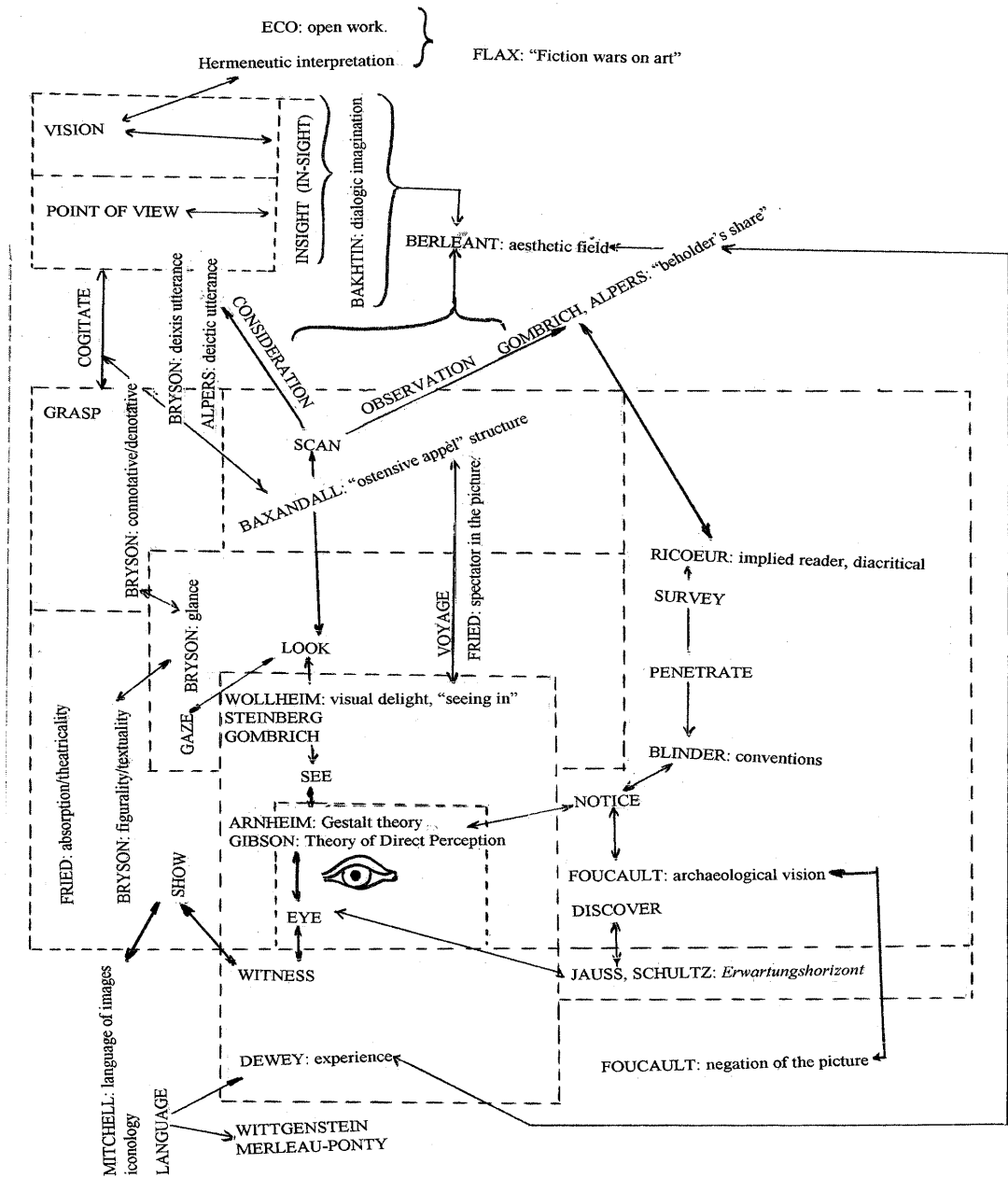
Our present tense [*modo presenti*] is perhaps better equipped to hold a reflective glance of the acts performed in previous times [*modo praeterito*] (Schultz 1962: 109, 214). Yet the "immanent structure and transcendental appearance" of art still awaits the "changing perspective of the time-bound beholder" (Kuspit 1983: 284). However the future may evolve, whatever its theories may be, or "languages" for perception, these too, may effect the role of the viewer. Perhaps they will be better suited to the task of evaluating our present situation more than any descriptive conclusion that I can give.

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Fig. 4



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Fig. 4 The positioning of perceptual theorists' views of visual spectatordom within the perceptual process. (Cf. fig. 1).

