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Asymmetries of Language and Sight
Introduction to a Philosophy of Art

0. The Basic Postulate

My basic postulate is: view, seeing and the seen in painting can be studied through indirect forms of representation. The mediation of sight points to the intentional nature of artificial optical and visual phenomena of art. Intentionality makes visual and linguistic effects comparable. Potential asymmetry of the sight scene and the language scene of art (painting) is the problem which I propose to elaborate.

1. Representation

Representation is a structural, epistemological, semantic and technical method of creating or producing a work of art, which visually and optically refers to a real or fictional object, being, situation or event. Note: (1) phenomena perceived by the sense of sight are termed visual, whereas (2) facts related to light, whose aspects are dependent upon physical laws of transmission of light and not the receptive faculties of the subject of perception are termed optical.

In a stricter theoretical sense a visual work is said to represent something if it is its reference (external to the work, what the work refers to in its appearance, structural relationships of elements and potential meanings). A reference can be a real reference (object from the real world) or a fictional reference (fictional object of fantasy, text, film, theatre, theory). A painting represents a real or fictional object, being, situation or event by showing, describing or signifying it.

A painting shows an object by being its visual analogy or representation of its visual appearance. The visual aspects of an object's appearance and its representation in a representational work of art are congruent. At least some of the visual aspects of object representation are congruent with the usual analogous object representation in culture, science, art, religion. The relationship between a painting and the object it visually depicts is asymmetrical, since the painting visually and optically depict the object but the object never

depicts the painting. It is necessary to distinguish between the similarity of two objects and the similarity of their appearance or the similarity of their features. One must distinguish the optical similarity from the visual, and the visual similarity from that of signification.

Any discursive representation of an object is a description, since one does not see the appearance of an object from significational effects of a linguistic language. Language states and explains its properties and appearance. Non-analogous linguistic signs or texts are ascribed to visual aspects. A painting describes an object not when it shows the appearance of the object by its symbolic aspects, but when it indirectly points to its properties.

A painting signifies: (1) by naming the object (by stating that a certain object is designated as X – the role of the title or inscription in a painting), (2) by defining the named object as a sign by which it represents the object in language or in visual and pictorial expression by creating a kind of an alphabet, and (3) by using the visual sign as a literal showing of an object (iconic and allusive sign), as a standardized language sign (sign in ideographic or phonetic alphabets) and as a basis for non-literal symbolic, metaphorical and allegorical representation. The abstract paintings of Barnett Newman (»The Stations of the Cross«, 1966) represent crucifixion by arbitrarily, but intentionally, signifying (suggesting) the state of crucifixion. The state is not literally seen, it is suggested by the relationship of pictorial meanings of the painting and the linguistic meanings of its title. If the idea of signification is radicalized, one may say that Newman's painting does not correspond (does not refer) to the historical state of crucifixion, but corresponds with the texts which represent Christ's crucifixion. The painting does not refer to reality, but to the textual production of meaning, sense and value. Reference is established as an exchange between the pictorial text of painting and the linguistic religious text.

The idea of representation is based on four semiotic-media levels of painting determination (its visual horizon): (1) group of beliefs and concepts (superdetermination, ideological or spiritual horizon, metatext of culture) which form the framework of signification and sense of a work of art, which is expected to represent something (e.g. the theory of mimesis in the Western tradition, the theories of Realism in the 19th century, the theories of mechanical reproduction in Modernism, the theories of mimesis of mimesis in Postmodernism), (2) group of techniques and media procedures by which a painting is created and by which, in a potential literal or non-literal way, the painting refers to the object represented (the mirroring principle, print, trace, visual similitude, index signs, fine art illusionism, linguistic-semantic reference, usage of forms of expression which serve for representation in a given

culture, visualization of textual representation), (3) appearance of the work which refers to the object of representation by its visual similitude (analogous iconic representation), its physical-phenomenal characteristics (the index character of representation) and on the basis of expressing rules, habits or agreements (symbolic level of representation), and (4) preparedness (habits, customs, rules, convictions) of the viewer to regard a painting as a representation and not a decoration, an abstract, expressive or fictional composition.

Two opposed conceptions of representation can be singled out: (A) essentialist and (B) relativist theory of representation.

The essentialist ontological theory of representation is based on the view that the notion of an artistic painting derives from the notion of mirroring image and reflection (*Abbild*). A surface is a painting if it represents something, if by its appearance (referentially) it refers to something in the world. It represents something because it is in an ontological relationship with the object of representation. This relationship is based on reflection (literal mediation of the observed). Reflection is recognized as a painting because between the painting and the object which it represents there is an optical or visual similitude, and frequently also the intention to achieve an illusionist visual congruity. A painting is a painting because it contains within itself (i.e. the ontological dimension) its archetype (*Urbild*) or at least some of its properties. Between the painting and the object, according to Hans Georg Gadamer, there is a relationship of mutual belonging, since in the painting only the being of the represented object appears. According to ontological essentialist theories, the development of painting and sculpture as art arises through the evolution and transformations of the basic mirroring image model (from reflection to an artistic painting). Western painting can be regarded as a multitude of transformational lines from objectual-optical necessity (reflection, invariant, literal visual information) to visual overdetermination (ideology, the theory and the practice of mimesis) and visual arbitrariness (significational interpretation by pictorial means).

As opposed to the ontological essentialist theories, the relativist theories are formulated around the interpretation of representation as a practice of signification, conventional reference and symbolization. The starting point is that representation is not based on the mirroring principle. The visual similitude between the painting and the object (the appearance of the painting and the object) represented is not sufficient in order to establish whether or not the painting represents something. Similitude is a symmetrical relationship, and visual similitude of the image and the object it represents is asymmetrical. The critique of the notion of similitude results in the attitude that recognition of the structure of paint blots on a surface represents shoes (Van Gogh),

a bouquet of flowers (Cézanne) and human figures (Picasso) depends on the rules (convictions, ideologies) of signification (representation) which a society accepts as their presentation of the world.

Nelson Goodman demonstrates that a painting depicts an object and that the pictorial form configurated in the painting is recognized as a depiction of the object by the rules of representation and the according convictions shared by the painter and the viewer of the painting. The ontological essentialist answer to the question »Why do we see an object in a painting?« is »Because the painting imitates the object« or »Because the painting imitates our experience of the object« or »Because the painting establishes an optical order which imitates the optical order of the sight«. The relativist answer would be »Because the painting belongs to a certain form of representation (symbolic and ideological expressions) which we are accustomed to read as pictorial representations of such-and-such an object.« Goodman does not interpret the recognition of an object in a painting by a literal connexion between the painting and the object, but by establishing an arbitrary classificational relationship. There is no such thing as an innocent eye which would perceive the thing itself independently of our system of classification (convictions, knowledge, values). The eye does not perceive the thing itself, the eye always perceives an object. The similitude between a painting and an object is not determined by a congruence of the visual properties of the painting's appearance and the properties of the object's appearance, but by a system of classification and nomenclature, i.e. artistic practice (or Artworld, according to Arthur Danto, or ideology, according to Althusser, Schefer, Rotar, Devade). According to Goodman: (1) every painting is more similar to any other painting throughout the history of art than to the external object it represents, and (2) art does not imitate nature, since nature (what is experienced, perceived, understood and presented as nature) is a product of art, science, religion and everyday customs. The relativist concept of a painting is founded upon conventions of fine art representation and the phenomenological arbitrariness (openess) of visual perception. It is on these grounds that Goodman rejects the notion of a painting as a copy of reality, maintaining a symbolic significational character of depiction or painting. Realistic representation is not based on the quantity of optical and visual information about the world, but on simplicity and availability, which depends on the observer's degree of being accustomed to certain forms of representation. The style of representation to which an observer is accustomed is regarded as more realistic, and such paintings are considered more similar to reality: »If representation is a matter of choice, regularity a matter of information, realism is a matter of habit.«[1] Charles Harrison and Fred Orton regard realism in paint-

ing as a methodological framework of representation and critique of modes of representation: »Realism is not a matter of correspondence, or even of conventions of correspondence. On this point Modernist theory has always been correct. It is a matter of how, on what basis, one goes about the process of criticism and correction of any representa tion.«[2] A painting can always be shown to be a form of conventional order. The pictorial order expresses the viewpoint of the artist or his culture. The correspondences between the painting and its reference (the object of representation) are not simply given to the eye in a mirroring manner; they are a consequence of public and tacit rules of the symbolic order of pictorial matter (language/pictorial games within painting as an art). A radicalization of such a position leads to the standpoint that a work of art does not represent an object, being, situation or event in a literal way, but represents how they are perceived, experienced, expressed, understood, interpreted and valued in the culture of its origin. A painting is not a trace of the perceived, on the contrary, the perceived is the effect (trace, result) not only of the painting's appearance, but also its pictorial and semiological meanings.

According to semiologists of painting such as Umberto Eco, Jean-Louis Schefer or Braco Rotar an iconic code (characteristic visual order of representation) has two aspects: (1) an iconic code is a system of iconic signs which result from a conceptualization of perception, and (2) an iconic code is a sign order realized upon graphic conventions which belong to the order of visual rhetoric. Schefer and Rotar in their semiologies of painting show the connexion between the empirical plane of the visual and the ideological overdetermination which transforms the visual into a text (system of meaning, effects of sense and potential values of communication, appreciation, knowledge and possession). Visuality is an empirical horizon or painting achieved by means of sensual articulation. The ideological articulation of art is built upon empirical articulation. An iconic code, i.e. the characteristic sign order which represents something by its visual similitude, is not a naive (mirroring, literal) effect of perception, but a speculative horizon of painting as an art and rhetorical pictorial idiom. The theory of mimesis is therefore not to be regarded solely as a model of creating a painting and a perception of the relationship between the painting and the world, but also as a form of ideological superstructure (superdetermination) by which perception (view, the

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[1] Nelson Goodman, »Reality Remade«, in Joseph Margolis, *Philosophy Looks at Art*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia 1987, p. 300.

[2] Charles Harrison, Fred Orton (eds.), *Modernism, Criticism, Realism – Alternative Context For Art*, Harper and Row, London 1984, p. xix.
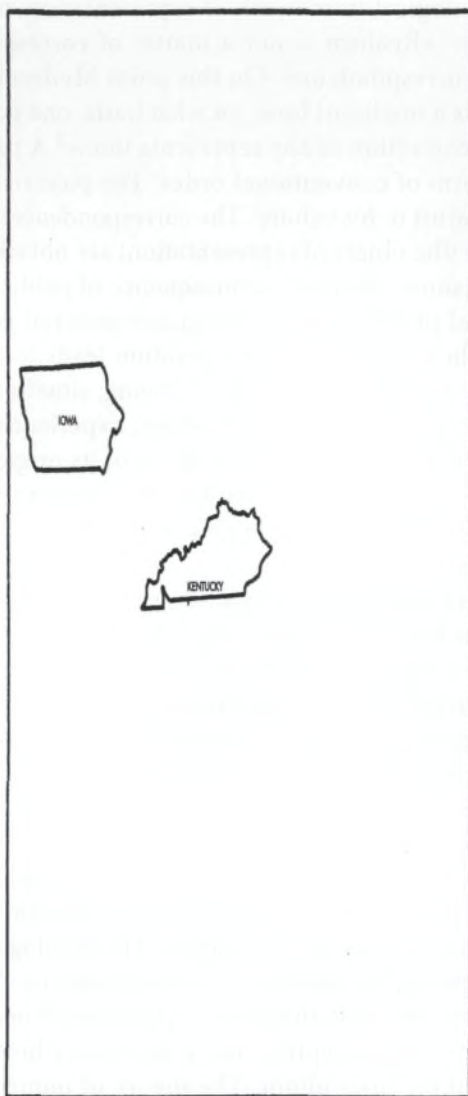
Map to not indicate: CANADA, JAMES BAY, ONTARIO, QUEBEC, ST. LAWRENCE RIVER, NEW BRUNSWICK, MANITOBA, AKIMISKI ISLAND, LAKE WINNIPEG, LAKE OF THE WOODS, LAKE NIPIGON, LAKE SUPERIOR, LAKE HURON, LAKE MICHIGAN, LAKE ONTARIO, LAKE ERIE, MAINE, NEW HAMPSHIRE, MASSACHUSETTS, VERMONT, CONNECTICUT, RHODE ISLAND, NEW YORK, NEW JERSEY, PENNSYLVANIA, DELAWARE, MARYLAND, WEST VIRGINIA, VIRGINIA, OHIO, MICHIGAN, WISCONSIN, MINNESOTA, EASTERN BORDERS OF NORTH DAKOTA, SOUTH DAKOTA, NEBRASKA, KANSAS, OKLAHOMA, TEXAS, MISSOURI, ILLINOIS, INDIANA, TENNESSEE, ARKANSAS, LOUISIANA, MISSISSIPPI, ALABAMA, GEORGIA, NORTH CAROLINA, SOUTH CAROLINA, FLORIDA, CUBA, BAHAMAS, ATLANTIC OCEAN, ANDROS ISLANDS, GULF OF MEXICO, STRAITS OF FLORIDA.

Art & Language (Terry Atkinson, Michael Baldwin), *Map* (1967)

perceived, experience) and understanding of a painting are limited and directed. A pictorial representation has a general epistemological value which can be described as an archeological structure of knowledge, in fact, it points to the proximity (interweaving, link) between the perceived and the linguistic in the constitution of knowledge.

Representational pictorial systems are determined by the following characteristics: (1) painting is a technique which aims to produce an effect for the eye (body, look, seeing, placing the perceived into a language), i.e. to produce itself as something entirely subordinate to the economy of visual production of effects, (2) the function of a representational painting is in covering up the material morphology of the pictorial: to mark the departure from the material literal appearance of the surface by simulation, to start the game of differences, to remove from it the literal nature of the significational identity of the surface, (3) one system of representation is read from other systems (the criterion of interpictoriality, analogous to intertextuality), in other words, it is impossible to read a system of a visual (pictorial) representation on its own basis. A painting does not represent by simply (optically) existing or by literally referring to the objects of the world, but by motivatedly or conventionally referring to the objects of the world pointing to other paintings and texts in the history of painting and culture (religious, ideological, sexual text).

2. *Visual Meta-Language*

There is no general system of visual and pictorial representation which could be described by the terms visual language or, in a narrower sense, pictorial language. There are certain analogies between visual (pictorial) systems and language (linguistic systems), there are mutual correspondences between appearance and signification, there is a presence of language (linguistic) material in structuring of the pictorial matter, there are similarities between language games (with linguistic and semiotic elements) and pictorial, visual and optical games. There is no painting which does not produce sense, meaning and value. But the production of sense, meaning and value is not achieved according to closed consistent models, but according to open, unstable and variable formulations (stylistic schemes, individual poetics, historical coding, arbitrary or motivated combinations or games). If visual (and pictorial) representation is analogous at least in some aspects to linguistic representation, then by visual (pictorial) structures one can represent the appearance of another work of art, i.e. its concept of constitution, appearance and functioning as a presentation, expression or construction.

Visual meta-language is the structural and significational order of a visual work of art by means of which other works of art are shown and represented, as well as aspects of Artworld, stylistic patterns, genre rules and schemes, ways of setting up meaning in a work of fine art, language-pictorial games, visual properties of a work of art, conceptual and ideological overdeterminations. A work of art or an aspect of Artworld which is shown or represented is a first degree work of art, and the work of art which represents it is a second degree work of art or visual, more strictly speaking pictorial, metalanguage.

Some examples of visual meta-language in painting are neo-Dadaistic and the early proto-Pop Art paintings of Jasper Johns such as »Flag« (1954-55), »By the Sea« (1961) or »Fool's House« (1962). The painting »Flag« is a meta-example of literal representation showing a cultural artefact (flag). The painting is realized in such a way that it covers the canvas from edge to edge, and is thus simultaneously a concrete flag and a painting (representation) of a flag. The painting »Fool's House« is an example of visual meta-language because it demonstrates language games in the relationships of the elements of the painting, objects and words. The idea of language game is taken from Ludwig Wittgenstein's philosophy of language. Roy Lichtenstein's Pop Art paintings based on representation of comic frames or comic-like paraphrases of Picasso's portraits and Leger's scenes are meta-visual examples. His idea of visual meta-language is interpictorial. It is based on a transfer of subject matter and iconographic solutions from one stylistic or cultural system of representation into another (from popular mass culture or French post-cubist modernism into American high modernism). With the painting »Whaam!« Lichtenstein shows how comic sequences are literally transferred from the
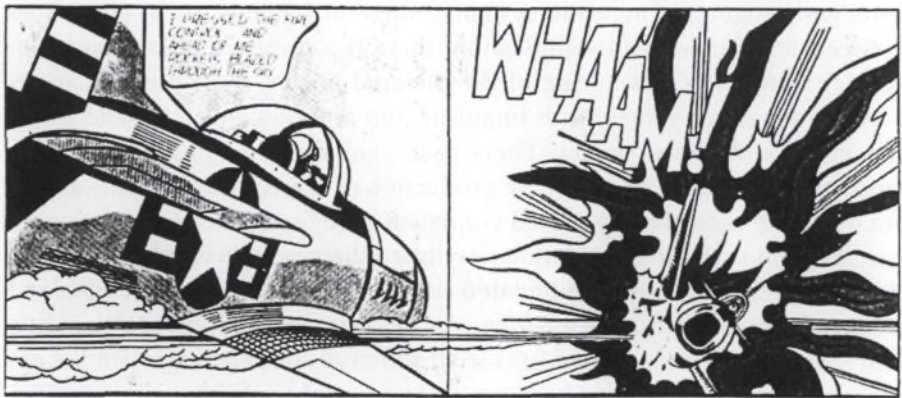
Roy Lichtenstein, *Whaam!* (1963)

world of popular culture into the world of high modernism. The representation of Picasso's portrait has a more complex function: (1) the post-cubist portrait is realised in the way of comic (transfer from the high art of modernism into the popular culture of the comic), and (2) the comic-like form is effected as an artistic painting, whereby the transfer from one context into another is reduced to a hermeneutical absurdity (by pictorial means high art is interpreted as an expression of popular culture, and an icon of popular culture is realized and exhibited as an example of high art).

In conceptual art the idea of visual meta-language is most often integrated with the effects of linguistic meta-language. For conceptual art any seeing means reading. For instance, in the work of the group Art & Language »Map to not indicate...« (1967) the visual scheme of the map is not there to represent the North American continent, but to represent an anomalous look of the map, i.e. the anomalous relationship between the text and the map. Visual elements are a support for meta-linguistic intentions of the artist to bring linguistic and visual language, paradoxically and anomalously, into the same plane of representation (semantic interchangeability). Let us consider another example. The concept of analytical proposition was introduced into art practice by Joseph Kosuth in his text »Art after Philosophy« (1969). According to Kosuth, works of art are analytical propositions because they do not supply information on facts, but show the artist's intention. A work of art understood as an analytical proposition does not describe the behaviour of physical or mental objects, but expresses formal definitions of art or formal consequences of that definition. Kosuth's work »One and Three Chairs« (1965) is an example of artistic work as an expression of an analytical proposition. To the proposition »chair« correspond: the visual expression (the photograph representing the chair), the expression of the chair as a three-dimensional object, and the linguistic expression (a dictionary definition of the term »chair«). The expression of proposition can be seen (photograph), utilized (object – chair) or read (text of the dictionary definition).

3. Mimesis of Mimesis

The mimesis of mimesis (representation of the represented) is a Postmodernist eclectical (postmetaphysical, posthistorical) conception of art. A painting does not represent reality, the original essence of art or the artist's direct emotion. A painting represents historical or current forms of representation of reality, fantasies or language games.

Mimesis is interpreted as the ideology and the art of imitation, emula-

tion and illusionist representation of appearance of real or fictional objects, situations, events and beings. The concept of mimesis has been exposed to criticism and destruction in modern art, from post-impressionism to minimal and conceptual art. In abstract constructivist, concretist and formalist art it is rejected as historically superfluous. In surrealism and fantastic painting the principle of mimesis is applied as a stylistic pattern, i.e. impossible, fantastic and fictional events, situations and beings are represented in the way the real world is represented in mimetic art. In hyperrealism the forms of imitation, emulation and illusionist representation are rhetorically perfected and supported by contemporary technological devices. The result of hyperrealism is not the realization of the ideas of traditional mimesis, since hyperrealist painting and sculpture are representations of photography. The works of hyperrealism are paradoxically a double mimesis: representations of the depicted object and representations of the effects of technical media by which the object was represented in the first instance and on whose basis the hyperrealist work was effected. Chuck Close's portraits are pictorial representations of photography with all the sharpness and non-sharpnessfound in photographic copies and blow-ups.

Neša Paripović, *Self-Portrait* (1989)

With the postmodernist revival of representation the idea (technique and ideology) of mimesis regained attention. Mimesis of mimesis can be interpreted as a visual deconstruction of pictorial metaphysics. Whereas philosophical deconstruction shows and disjoins the entire body of Western metaphysics (deconstruction of logocentrism in philosophy, literature, ideology), mimesis of mimesis is a citational-collage-montage production of a visual work of art which disjoins visual metaphysics (anomalous nodes of logocentrism – Derrida, ocularcentrism – Jay, euclydocentrism – Deleuze).

A Postmodernist painting is an ecstatic and obscene reflection and simulation of other works of art, symbolic scenes, aspects of Artworld, culture and society. According to Postmodernist theory every work in the history of art was created by representation (expression, transformation) of existing models of representation, but only the art and theory of Postmodernism set this principle as a poetic foundation of art production. In Postmodernist painting of the eighties, trans-avantgarde (Clemente), neoexpressionist (Kiefer), anachronistic (Mariani) or retrograde (Irwin) paintings are based on eclectic representation, citation, collage and montage of traces of scenes, expressions, iconographies and genre models of traditional European, antimodernist and modernist art. They are no longer meta-linguistic and not in the sense in which the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan claims that there is no meta-language! For instance, David Salle's painting »Doors with Light« (1989) has a seeming structure of visual meta-language since it simultaneously represents various forms of representation in high art and popular culture. However, it does not have the legitimacy of meta-language, since it introduces the schemes of visual meta-linguistic scenes into an expressively subjective and arbitrary (expressive, eroticized, entropic, non-motivated) painting. It is demonstrated that subjectivity (fragmentariness) and visual arbitrariness penetrate the objectivity of meta-language, transforming it into a reflection of reflection (mimesis of mimesis).

Neša Paripović, in his series of works completed between 1988 and 1993, represents a painting (painting on a wall, graffiti, drawing on paper, ambient-sculptural arrangement in front of a painting) by a photograph. The established method is the mimesis of mimesis (representation of the represented), whereby painting as representation of a manual expressive iconic trace is deconstructed to a luminous photographic print. The tactile direct expression of painting traces on the wall cools down to the luminous (alienated print). Paripović shows that a photograph represents the represented and expressed painting by becoming a visual and polysemantic interpretation of what cannot be subjected to discourse interpretation (pictorial signifier). By imposing a visual voice (the voice of photography) the manual character of

painting is reduced to the shown skeleton of a painting which is seductively and fatally immersed in the language of photography. His works are intervisual since they show how the objectual, the optical, the visual, the pictorial, the semiological and the linguistic confront each other (transfigure) institutionally (in media) by various forms of visual representation (the difference between the power of representation in painting and in photography). Transfiguration is a method of transferring one visual order with all its optical, visual and significational-ideological characteristics into another visual system. This involves a change of sensual effects, meanings, sense and values of the transferred material, as well as of the system into which the elements of another system are inserted (photography rhetorically masks the body of painting, whereas painting penetrates the semantic effects of photography).

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the scientists in the East as well as in the West.