Seeing-as, Seeing-in, Seeing-with: Looking through Images

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In the constitution of contemporary image theory, Ludwig Wittgenstein's philosophy has undoubtedly become a major conceptual reference. Rather than trying to establish what Wittgenstein's own image theory could possibly look like, this paper would like to critically assess some of the advantages as well as some of the quandaries that arise when using Wittgenstein's concept of 'seeing-as' for addressing the plural realities of images. While putting into evidence the tensions that come into play when applying what was initially a theory of the gaze to a theory of the image, the paper shall subsequently discuss three modes of iconic vision: the propositional *seeing-as*, the projective *seeing-in* and the medial *seeing-with*.

1. Seeing-as

Despite their disparities, most contemporary image theories seem to agree on the fact that the constitution of an image's meaning is fundamentally codetermined by the gaze directed toward it. Images thus do not have a single sense, but can have plural meanings, depending on the perspective from which one looks at them. To illustrate this fact, one image example has been frequently invoked: the rabbit-duck-picture of which Wittgenstein makes use in his later philosophy (Wittgenstein 1993, 204 sq., §§ 118 sq.). The ambiguous picture, taken from the Polish-American psychologist Joseph Jastrow's *Fact and Fable in Psychology* (Jastrow 1900), either shows a duck or a rabbit, but never both at once (see fig. 1, overleaf).
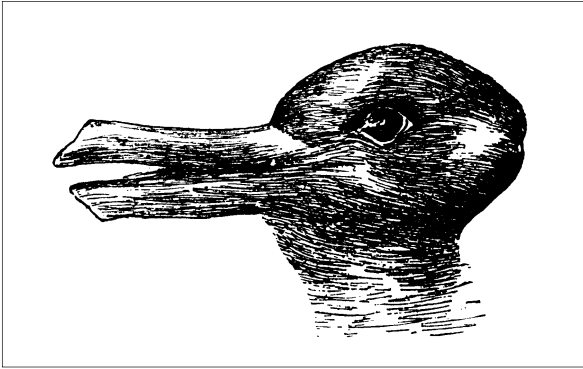
Fig. 1

Rabbit-duck-picture
Joseph Jastrow (1900)
(Originally published in
Fliegende Blätter, 1892.)

Now, what changes in the switch from one to another? Certainly not the lines on the paper. Rather (as Wittgenstein would say), their meaning, as we never just see lines, but organized lines which we see *as* objects. In a phenomenological vocabulary, the *as*-structure is made possible by the intentional structure: we do not simply have optic impressions on our retina, but perceive trees, houses, objects. Applied to Jastrow's ambiguous figure, this implies that we *either* see the drawing as the drawing of a duck or the drawing as the drawing of a rabbit. *Tertium non datur*. The ambiguity of the 'flip flop image' (*Kippbild*) can thus be literally brought back to *ambivalence*, insofar as it alternates between two (and only two) possible values.

While Wittgenstein used a pictorial example to exemplify a feature of perception—its intentional as-structure—, many image theorists, on the contrary, applied this feature of perception to images. For Virgil Aldrich, the possibility of an image rests on the capacity for aspect seeing (Aldrich 1958); for Gombrich, the question 'rabbit or duck?' is the 'key to the whole problem of image reading' (Gombrich 1960: 238); for Wollheim's *Art and Its Objects*, the structure of seeing-as is sufficient for understanding pictorial representation (Wollheim 1968). Or as Goodman puts it, rather than saying that the picture of Pickwick represents Pickwick, we should say that we see the picture as a *Pickwick-picture* (Goodman 1968, ch. 5). What is more, in pictures we do not simply see the represented subject as such, we see it under a certain aspect, e. g. we see *Pickwick-as-a-clown* (Goodman 1968, ch. 6). In the case of the photograph of Churchill taken at the age of ten (fig. 2), we recognize a number of his adult physical features, just as we note the characteristic

Fig. 2

Winston Churchill c. 1884.

bowler hat. Nevertheless, we cannot avoid seeing him as a child: the picture is a picture of *Churchill-as-a-child*. If we wanted to sum up the image conception common to those theories, we could formalize pictorial perception as follows: *we see images as an 'x' depicting a 'y'*.

Analytic aestheticians have widely discussed the aporias of such an approach, and Wollheim has revised his own position defended in the first edition of *Art and Its Objects* by replacing the concept of 'seeing-as' by the concept of 'seeing-in' (Wollheim 1980, Sönesson 1987), which shall be analyzed in the second part of the paper. While this discussion concerns mainly aesthetic issues, it nevertheless hints at a more general problem: the argumentative fallacy that consists in identifying *intentionality* and *propositionality*. John Searle's theory of intentionality is biased by this fallacy, when from a seeing-that, he concludes a *seeing-something*: 'From the point of view of Intentionality, all seeing is seeing *that*: whenever it is true to say that *x* sees *y* it must be true that *x* sees that such and such is the case' (Searle 1983: 40). Such an assumption leads to stating that every *seeing-something* (*p*) must be understood as *seeing-that-p*: every time I see a red ball, I see that the ball is red. In this respect, any perception will have a propositional content that can be expressed as the ascription of identity or as a predicate.

In many cases, it may be true that perception corresponds to a propositional perception of the type *seeing-that-p*. Such a description, however, ignores the fact that (a) there are intentional forms of seeing that cannot be immediately translated into an ascription of identity, and (b) that there are forms of seeing that do not have any intentional content at all (for a more detailed account of the following arguments, cf. Alloa 2011, 278–281).

(a) **Intentional, but non-propositional seeing**: In many cases, seeing is
directed to an object, although we would be incapable of unambiguously
telling the nature of the object. We might be aware of the fact that we are
in front of something without being able to name it; we acknowledge *that*
we see something without having the capacity to precisely say *what*. Very
often, this non-propositional seeing qualifies a lateral or marginal aware-
ness, or initial moments of an encounter. By a change of perspective, by
focusing on the object itself, its identity may become evident and we can
identify *x* as *y*. This change of perspectives is not possible however in im-
ages, which do not give us the possibility to vary our angle. Confronted
with certain portraits or caricatures, we might say that the face 'reminds'
or 'looks like' *x*, without enabling Searle's conclusion that every *seeing-that*
is a *seeing-that-p*. Or, in other terms: every *seeing-something* is not necessarily
a *seeing-something-as-something*.

(b) **Non-propositional seeing without an object**: Many types of vision,
such as peripheral vision, perception in a state of fatigue or perception
while in a specific mood, are not intentionally directed toward an object,
nor toward its recognition. In their incapacity of focalizing on the object,
they allow a particular attention to qualitative or atmospheric dimensions.
When in a certain atmosphere or mood, all perception receives a specific
inflexion, a peculiar coloration. In other terms: the absence of focal vision
is not the absence of vision *tout court*.

Many artists have delved into this kind of vision in their image instal-
lations, from the American Color Field Painters to James Turrell's site-
specific rooms or Olafur Eliasson's pavilion *Your Black Horizon* (2005)
where, in the middle of a fully darkened space, a thin, colored pulsating
horizon line slowly emerges. Such a visual experience in the immersive
space allows for a reflection on the visual process itself and to its per-
formative dimension. Rather than the *what*, it is the *how* that comes into
focus. The quality of vision—the 'how'—does not allow for any proposi-
tional or existential claim.

However, such non-propositional and non-object-oriented types of vision are
far from being unfathomable or mysterious: they rather correspond to modes
of distinction that attributive logics of the concept do not adequately ac-
count for. Or as Wittgenstein would say, the 'grammar' of the visual field, un-
like that of language, is not based on unambiguously discrete elements. *The
Big Typescript* is explicit in this respect: 'the visual field does clearly not consist

of discrete parts' (*Der Gesichtsraum besteht offenbar nicht aus diskreten Teilen*; Wittgenstein 2000, 2.243.4.1).

When referring to a nonconceptual gaze, classical aesthetics have often invoked the proverbial '*je-ne-sais-quoi*' or '*non so che*', the alleged ineffable nature of non-instrumental contemplation. This gaze, however, is not a farewell to intelligence, but the opening of another, of a *visual* intelligence, crucial in approaching images. Such an attention to the 'how' or—in other terms—to the *style* of the visually organized field is not, however, restricted to the gaze of the art critic or the *connoisseur*. Experiments with pigeons (i. e. birds with a high capacity of orientation in landscapes seen from above) have shown that through specific training, the pigeons are able to distinguish between cubist and impressionist paintings (Watanabe et al. 1995). It would be hard, however, to seriously attribute a notion of 'cubism' or 'impressionism' to the birds; and it is improbable that they recognize women, fruits or rags or the fact that their representation is twisted. Nevertheless, and very strikingly, the pigeon's identification of the *style* of painting is almost flawless. Drawing on similar experiments, Arthur Danto thus concluded in his essay 'Animals as Art Historians': 'Pictures as such are not like propositions, nor can we speak of a pictorial language, as Wittgenstein endeavored to do in his Tractatus, since animals demonstrably have pictorial competence while animal propositional —or sentential—competence remains undemonstrated' (Danto 1992: 20).

2. Seeing-in

The specific pictorial competence that can be acquired or trained is, however, different from the *seeing-as* insofar as it cannot be taught independently of the perceptive situation. While seeing-as can easily be translated into similar expressions devoid of any sensory dimension such as 'interpreting-as' or 'understanding-as', the situated visual discrimination can only be made in front of the object. As opposed to linguistically mediated learning of the propositional content of the 'as', the discrimination is made along lines within the artifact. Or as Danto formulates it, beings without propositional competence but with pictorial competence like pigeons are, though not capable of seeing-as, capable of *seeing-in* (Danto 1992: 28).

The category of 'seeing-in' has been introduced by Richard Wollheim in order to address the double problem that a) seeing-as is not specific to pictorial

perception and b) a general structure of perception has been wrongly applied to pictorial perception. A striking case of a flawed generalization of the rabbit-duck-example to pictorial vision as such is Ernst Gombrich's image theory. For Gombrich, the disjunctive structure of Jastrow's figure is that of images in general: we may *either* see what is represented or be attentive to the canvas, but we can never see both at the same time: 'To understand the battle horse is for a moment to disregard the plane surface. We cannot have it both ways' (Gombrich 1960: 279). This position has not remained uncriticized (Boehm 2007). Michael Polanyi contested Gombrich's disjunctive logic, inasmuch as he showed that the seeing-*what* and seeing-*in* do not operate on the same level but correspond to a 'focal' and to a 'subsidiary' or 'peripheral awareness' (Polanyi 1970: 153). Wollheim, in turn, not only contests the claim that 'we cannot have it both ways', he moreover maintains that images *require* 'simultaneous attention to what is seen and to the features of the medium' (Wollheim 1980: 212). Images are neither fully transparent with respect to their referential object nor totally opaque, exposing their material qualities of the medium: according to Wollheim, images always imply an attentional 'twofoldness' (a *trompe l'oeil* would thus not meet the requirements for being an image).

Fig. 3

Inkblot No. 5.
Hermann Rorschach (1921)

Hence, Wollheim's concept of *seeing-in* firstly aims at readjusting the conceptualist bias of the *seeing-as* logic, which focuses on the fleshed out 'recognitional' aspect, in order to rehabilitate a 'configurational aspect'. Secondly, it aims at rehabilitating the material, objective qualities of the image's medium, in which something is seen. This second point, although claimed by Wollheim, can be doubted, however. By insisting on the creational aspect of seeing-in, referring to our capacity to see dragons' heads in clouds and castles in a Rorschach inkblot (fig. 3), Wollheim reduces the 'recognitional' dimension intrin-

sic to seeing-as. But can we distinguish seeing-in from a seeing-into? In other words: can we distinguish the perception of a form emerging from a canvas and an arbitrary projection onto a surface, regardless of its configuration?

To avoid the impression of arbitrariness, Wollheim is required to introduce a further element: while in standard perception, we may virtually project everything into everything, pictorial seeing-in is only successful, when we see in the image what the artist wanted us to see in it (Wollheim 1980: 207). It is somewhat curious how Wollheim, who claims to advocate an 'object theory' of images, counterbalances the excessive subjectivity of the spectator's gaze with the subjectivity of an artist's intentional gaze. But a theory of the gaze does not yet provide us with a theory of the image. Once again, the co-constitutive function of the material medium of the image is eluded and rather than considering that the mediality of the image itself limits arbitrariness, Wollheim introduces the notion of the 'artist's intention' as a new standard of normativity. It is this normativity of intention which will then allow for a disambiguation of the multiple possible perceptions of an image.

While arguments can be brought forth questioning the possibility of such a disambiguation (Lopes 1996, ch. 8.3), one could raise a number of further questions: Why does the ambiguity of images have to be reduced to the twofoldness of denotation and medium? Isn't Wollheim's 'bivalence' theory yet another reduction to a static simultaneity of what is, phenomenologically speaking, constantly oscillating? Can we really exclude *trompe l'oeil* from the domain of images straight away, simply because they do not meet the requirements of the simultaneous perception of figure and medium? Isn't Wollheim's formalization of the structure of the image leading straight ahead to what Merleau-Ponty termed as 'bad ambiguity'? What remains to be answered is whether an image theory could be developed which would not think images in terms either of a disjunctive logic (like Gombrich) or of simultaneous twofoldness (like Wollheim), but rather in their very manifoldness.

3. Seeing-with

In *L'Œil et l'esprit*, Merleau-Ponty affirms that we 'do not look at [a painting] as one looks at a thing […] Rather than seeing it, I see according to, or with it' (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 126). This seeing-with underscored by Merleau-Ponty has long been underestimated in contemporary image theories, which

either excessively focus on images as mere things or, on the contrary, on the constitutive force of the gaze.

While Merleau-Ponty elsewhere criticizes the idea of images as 'second things' (*choses secondes*), devoid of any own efficacy, in this statement, he implicitly targets the dominance of a gaze theory of images, in particular that of Sartre. Sartre's *L'Imaginaire* is thoroughly based on a concept of consciousness that can be compared to that of Wittgenstein's 'change of aspects' (*Aspektwechsel*). In order to see an image, I need, according to Sartre, to 'deny' the materiality of the painting. We may either look at the material qualities of the image-object in a 'perceptive attitude' (*attitude perceptive*) or, by changing our consciousness state and negating the material world, we may have an image emerging in an 'imaging attitude' (*attitude imageante*) (Sartre 1943). For Merleau-Ponty on the contrary, an image does not emerge despite its material support, but thanks to it. In an unpublished manuscript, Merleau-Ponty notes: 'What is a *Bild*? It is manifest that we do not look at a *Bild* the way we look at an object. We look according to the *Bild* [selon le *Bild*]' (Fonds Merleau-Ponty, BNF, vol. VIII: 346). In other words, we do not only see *in* images, rather seldom *as* images, never *despite* them but always *with* them and *through* them.

Such observations are not by any means limited to artistic images. In Plato's slave scene in the *Meno* (82b–84c), the geometric schema drawn onto the ground is neither seen as the theorem of Pythagoras, nor is the theorem projected into the schema, rather, evidence emerges with and through the schema which will only later become a theorem. Accordingly, Wittgenstein's early technical drawings from the Manchester period for a novel type of aero-engine with propeller-blade tip-jets (fig. 4) exemplify the shortcomings of any theory of *seeing-as* or *seeing-in*. It is only progressively, through a familiarization with the picture and its constructive principles that we begin to see what could not be seen in any other way, not even in front of the real combustion engine, had it ever been built.

Indeed, it seems that very often images enable one to see what remains otherwise inaccessible, latent or unseen. With the invention of his chronophotographic dispositive, Eadweard Muybridge put a definitive halt in 1878 to the speculations about the positions of the horse legs while galloping, famously depicted in Géricaults *Derby d'Epsom* from 1821; today, scanning tunneling microscopy (STM) or magnetic resonance tomography (MRT) visualizes what remains otherwise unattainable to the human eye. When using such visualizing devices, the images in play are not mere telescopes onto reality, let alone
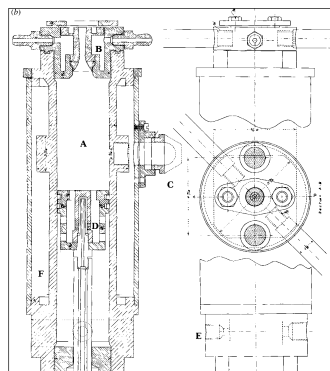
Fig. 4

Plans for an Aero-Engine.
View of the Upper Section of the
Combustion Chamber.
Ludwig Wittgenstein (1910)

transparent windows: as Wittgenstein says in another context, one thinks 'that one is retracing nature over and over again, and one is merely tracing round the form through which we see it' (Wittgenstein 1993, § 114, modified trans.). There is thus an intrinsic opacity in all images that nevertheless only allows for images to become spaces of operation (Krämer 2009). Images may become arguments in science not despite, but rather because of their relative intransitivity: the showing image becomes a demonstration because it shows what it, in fact, means. 'A picture tells me itself', says Wittgenstein, insofar as it communicates through 'its own structure, its own colors and forms' (Wittgenstein 1993: 57, § 523).

At this very point, and if we follow the idea that Wittgenstein developed two separate image theories—one in the Tractatus and one later on in the *Philosophical Investigations* (Gebauer 2010)—it seems that the latter comes very close to the former. Due to their finite character that forces the gaze to look on its very surface for what it gestures at, images have the character of 'synopticity' (*Übersichtlichkeit*) which, according to Wittgenstein, is so essential to understanding. Due to their capacity of condensation, images become 'catchy' (*einprägsam*), as Wittgenstein formulates it (Richtmeyer 2009). We must thus acknowledge that there is a paradoxical link between intransitivity and operativity that renders these two not mutually exclusive, but rather interdependent. In a general theory of use, which has often chosen Wittgenstein as its key reference, this intransitivity has been underestimated. Rather than deducing pictorial uses from a general theory of use, the contrary may prove to be productive (see also Mersch 2006).

Describing images as bringing about a certain kind of seeing that can be characterized as *seeing-with* means taking into account this resistance to transparency: it is because we cannot eliminate the picture's materiality that we have to see it along its own lines, use it according to its figural organization of the surface. Husserl for instance, who spends much effort describing processes of seeing-in, which he also calls 'perceptive imagination' (*perzeptive Imagination*), has to admit that we cannot have the appearing image object without the medial support which, rather than being a purely neutral projective surface, sometimes 'excites' (*erregt*) an image which the spectator hadn't imagined himself beforehand. And yet, even in the 'excited' image, the medial ground shines through, contrasts with the presented image and sometimes openly conflicts with it: 'the rough surface of the paper (China paper) of this copperplate engraving belongs to the physical image. This determination conflicts with the female form appearing on the surface' (Husserl 1980: 137, 2005: 153).

Stating that we see *with* images means that, rather than being neutral surfaces of the beholder's projection, images *generate* gazes that, although never ultimately fixed, are by no means arbitrary. The form of the image, its figural organization, its material ridges, dales and crests, open up a space for potential vision. Between the unambiguousness of a communicational message or an artist's intention inscribed into the object and the image as a space of free variation of consciousness, it appears that the density of images, their material stratification and their phenomenological overdetermination demands a specific time of contemplation.

Seeing with images then means that the evidence they provide resists generalization without further ado: iconic evidence is not a ladder that could be thrown away after we have climbed it, but remains inherently situation-dependent, case-sensitive and thus, ultimately, precarious. Images help drawing distinctions, but these distinctions do not exist beyond the material medium which they organize from inside. Images thus yield a potential, but neither in the sense of a mere indetermination (the *pura potentia* of matter), nor of a preexistent form or meaning which the gaze would have to reveal, akin to the understanding of the sculptor's practice as releasing the inherent form from within the marble. Rather, seeing with images entails following those veins in the marble of which Leibniz said that they signify a propensity inherent to matter towards certain unfoldings and individuations.

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Illustrations

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3 Hermann Rorschach, **Inkblot No. 5.** Taken from Hermann Rorschach 1921 *Psychodiagnostik. Methodik und Ergebnisse eines wahrnehmungsdiagnostischen Experiments* (*Deutenlassen von Zufallsformen*), Bern: Bircher.

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