

A World of Pictures, World Pictures and the World of the Picture

Not a thousand stories can replace that which I have seen with mine own eyes.

CHINESE PROVERB

1. See it for Yourself – about the Reality of the Picture and the Language

“But I saw it with my own eyes!” we say in order to give weight to an incident we have witnessed. But just as often we are met with the sceptical reply: “It’s all in the eye of the beholder.”

In other words, sometimes we regard the eyesight – our own, mostly – as an infallible source of truth, but at other times as an extremely unreliable sensory organ – especially as other people use it. A large part of our experiences, however, depend on what we see physically with our eyes as well as what we perceive in our mind’s eye. Even in our dreams pictures follow us or pursue us. To most people the impressions that our eyes receive, or which we perceive as visible, can be recalled more clearly than those we obtain through the other senses. Who is not able to retrieve a sight that has left its indelible mark on the retina? We know how much more difficult it is to recall a certain smell, the taste of something we once ate, the sound of a voice or the tone of a conversation we have had a long time ago.

It is not, however, the activity of the senses that has been most appreciated in European culture. On the contrary, much higher value has been accorded to the faculty of thinking and finding words for the thoughts – what has often been described as a cognitive process. Consequently the art of the word has had a higher status compared with visual art. Thus, rules and norms, developed within the former, have often been imposed on practitioners of the latter.

One may pose the question, then, whether this dependence of the picture on

the word is inevitable or even inherent in the nature of things, or whether it may not be due to our specific cultural heritage. Behind it one may glimpse the shadow of Greek philosophy and even more clearly the outline of Jewish tradition and Christian theology; hosts of wise and thoughtful philosophers, scribes and theologians, frightened by the attraction of the picture for themselves and even more by the power it held over others, seductive and dangerous like illusion or magic.

To Plato and his followers the language was the only means – though that, too, was imperfect – to capture and grasp the actual reality, whose existence is the abstract idea in contrast to the palpable and inconstant world.

With Christianity language became not only a human tool, but was identified with divine reason itself: God's word, *Logos*. As such the word was before all other things, as it is stated in the beginning of the Gospel of St John. Thus it became the source of all things: the word that creates what it names.

But as opposed to this idea of creation, in itself incomprehensible, there is another more down-to-earth creation myth. It is the account in the Old Testament of the clay, which was shaped by God's own hand, and into which He breathed life through His spirit. Here God appears as an artist; but immediately after, in the same book, the freedom of the human artist is curtailed by the introduction of the ban in the Mosaic law against any carved picture of the Creator or of His creation.

But whereas this ban was directed against the imitation of truth, the false thing, it may have been a very different danger that came under suspicion during the history of Christianity, namely the liberation of a different power of creation than the divine: man's own creative faculty and what, in the most literal sense, that might occasion. This fear on the part of the church has proved well-founded in so far as the world, the western world, has increasingly come to be a world of man-made things and pictures. It is a question, consequently, whether art can at all be considered from this viewpoint, a question we shall take up again later. To return now to the relation between the word and the picture, another problem is involved, perhaps the most insuperable one, but also inevitable in our cultural tradition. Since we are not content to let the work of art stand alone as the expression of the artist or as the impression it makes on us as beholders, we have to resort to language as our only means to communicate with each other about it. In that situation the dependence of the picture on the word may prove fatal as language frequently turns out to be inadequate. To put it differently, we can only deal cognitively with what we have words for, as the English art historian, Michael Baxandall, has also stressed.³ Furthermore, what

our words can be used to enunciate, depends on what cultural, social and other influences we are subject to as members of a specific society and as belonging to a certain period in time. The question is, however, whether we do not also, at the level of visual perception, experience and absorb the inexpressible shown to us by the picture.

In this way, then, we build up what is so to speak an extra-linguistic or pre-linguistic basic experience and a visual reservoir, which, it is true, can only be activated cognitively and made known to others the moment we find words for it. A number of so-called experts, art reviewers, art critics, art historians and art theorists have undertaken, or perhaps rather usurped, this running revision of the limits to what is linguistically formulable in relation to art, a task which they execute more or less systematically.

It may be objected, however, that this linguistic dependence does not pertain to art only, but that it applies to all phenomena, ideas or concepts of a non-linguistic nature, from mechanics over mathematics to music. On the other hand, there is hardly any field of activity which has made language so dependent on it as the visual area. This dependency ranges from the many associations to form and colour with which our daily language is interwoven, to the concrete images we resort to in order to make a difficult matter accessible or to visualize a problem, and, of course, to poetical imagery. The arrows and boxes on the blackboard belong under these forms of imagery as much as the comparison of the beloved to a rose. But also the personifications of qualities, virtues and vices, even of natural forces, so frequently used formerly, are expressive of this need to visualize things.

It may be regarded as an established fact, then, that since the beginning of time or at least as long as there has been a theory of art, i.e. through most of our cultural tradition, the picture and thus the eyesight has been subordinate to language and the field of language, not only in the capacity of language as a means of communication, but also by virtue of the leadership – self-appointed, it is tempting to say – of the language disciplines, literature, rhetoric etc. in theory formation. On the other hand, language – possibly aside from specific technical jargon – would be unthinkable or at least useless without its images. Language, of course, draws its raw material precisely from our daily lives, from what we are familiar with. We can talk about that in a much richer and subtler language than about subjects we have little knowledge of, or with which we are acquainted only at second hand, through the language of other people. It is no coincidence, therefore, that Arabic has at least some fifty words for *camel*, or that Greenlanders have a whole scale of terms for the colour *white*.

More and more often in our time and our world, languages from other areas than our own are penetrating into our daily lives and our language, as it happens especially through the electronic mass media. Through them a language with a usage and a semantic content is foisted on us that is different from the language we are helping to create. Thus we are turned into passive users rather than active contributors to the language; we experience a gap between language and reality.

It will probably be claimed that precisely the same thing is the case as far as the relation between picture and reality is concerned. In that area, too, we allow ourselves to be bombarded with a massive turnout of pictures from advertising, films and comics. It is a question, however, whether these pictures address us, not as pictures, but on behalf of the language, its formulae and formulations: announcing, narrating, persuading or just giving factual information.

But side by side with this media imagery, we continue to experience our close surroundings in an immediate and directly visual contact with them, and that is what makes up the vital element in our basic visual experience. In other words, in our linguistic communication we are confined to the language that is spoken and written around us, changeable as it is in a constant process of obsolescence or renewal, according to what occupies our minds at any particular moment. Yet, no matter how many or how few trees are shown on TV, no matter if a ban was issued on the use of the word *tree*, that would not change the sight of the big tree outside my window. It would change only with the process of growth and the course of the year, until one day perhaps it is cut down. This is where we touch on a fundamental difference between word and picture. The word is and will remain a sign for something else, and the language a system of signs. The picture, on the contrary, is a direct impress of this something else, of the reality seen. The fact that reality has been seen in different ways at different times, and that the picture of it has permitted of different sign meanings is another matter, which we shall return to in the following section. It is enough here to point out that the issue, when it comes to what is seen and what is visible, is not what is the truth, but what reality looks like. From the visual impression to the picture as a work of art, this reality moves another step closer. For the work of art does not only constitute a part of the existing reality, but due to the effort of the artist it turns into a new piece of reality taking on a palpable form.

At this point visual art, be it architecture or pictorial art, differs from the other forms of art: literature, theatre or music. While in the latter three art forms, the manuscript, the part for a play and the music score consist of signs which acquire reality only when the words are formed and the tones sound, that reality being therefore of a temporary nature, the work of art is present as a reali-

ty from the moment it is created on paper, on canvas, in stone or in clay. And this is so whether anybody is looking at it or not.

Furthermore, the fact that the works of visual art exist in a given material implies that unlike the other art forms they are not only bound by internal, conventional norms and codes such as language syntax or the cycle of fifths. In addition they must remain subordinate to external conditions, defined by the nature of these materials: the grain of the wood, the melting point of the metal or the binding power of the colours. Whereas it may often be part of an artist's effort to break or change the former, the internal framework, the boundaries set by the latter are generally speaking impassable.

Nonetheless it would be an error to conclude that change and renewal in visual art are bound up with material and technique, a view that was advocated in the pre-functionalist circles of the previous century, for example by the German architect, Gottfried Semper, and his followers.⁴ Hardly ever in the long history of art has the introduction of new materials and the invention of new techniques moved boundaries in themselves, but seem rather to have been necessary responses to the new assignments and challenges of a functional as well as aesthetic character, constantly facing art and its practitioners. As examples may be mentioned the beginning of Gothic glass mosaic, the development of the oil-painting technique or the utilization of modern materials such as steel, concrete and acrylic paint.

Similarly it may be maintained that it was hardly due to the inadequate technical capability of the past that Leonardo da Vinci's dreams of flying and his U-boat projects remained drafts. Realizing them would have disturbed the whole order of nature and the universe which not even he had the audacity to break though several of his drawings indicate a fascination with such a rupture, with chaos and disaster. Significantly, it was not until a couple of centuries later, on the threshold of the industrial age, that Leonardo's visions were revived, though in imagination to begin with, in Jules Verne's novels.

Even if material and technique are to be regarded only as artistic means, the artist must nevertheless master them with a craftsman's competence in a very literal sense, not figuratively as when the talk is of a writer knowing his craft. Through the ages the necessity for the artist to be able to handle tools and materials has on one hand been part of his artistic pride, but on the other it has contributed to pinning down visual art as akin to craftsmanship, even long after the other art forms had been acknowledged as so-called free arts, i.e. as having an independent position at the practical as well as the theoretical level (cf. also III: 6).

If, however, material and technique are inevitable prerequisites for the cre-



Fig. 1. When the green colour turns into leaves and grass: Detail of fig. 2.

ation of a work of art, the way they are utilized, on the other hand, depends entirely on the artist's ability to express himself and on his personal choices. This is the basis for the special form of reality that could be described as the visual reality of the work of art. It is visual because, unlike our surroundings in general, it has the sole or primary purpose of affecting the beholder's vision. This is done by means of elements that are detached or released from any other function but precisely that of appearing as lines, forms and colours. Or to clarify it further: because of various circumstances grass and leaves in the world of nature produce a visual impression of the colour green. But this is by no means their primary function. When, however, the artist applies his green colour strokes to the canvas, it becomes their function to make us see them as grass and leaves (fig. 1).

In this way the artist isolates our directly sensory confrontation with the surroundings as the vital element in our basic visual experience. But by isolating the very essence of it, the green colour, as an abstract expression, he makes us nevertheless perceive it concretely as grass and leaves.

It is the artist's task then to capture and maintain, for himself as well as for us, the beholders, the fleeting visual impression in a concentrated form as a sensed experience, an experience of extra-linguistic and pre-linguistic character.

But perhaps we are jeopardizing this mode of experience for ourselves as well as for a coming generation in favour of the form of experience based on picture as text, taught us by the mass media.

If that is to be avoided, a closer understanding and cultivation of the visual area is required, and above all an acceptance of it as something else and more than a province of language. Besides, such a new orientation will be essential as part of that revision of man's understanding of himself and his status in relation to the surrounding world which is necessitated by the development of western civilization with all its consequences.⁵ Here the visual art of the present and of the future may come to play an important role as the vehicle of a new visual experience and new ways of seeing. In that connection, however, it will be natural to include the artistic expressions, discovered by the visual experience through the ages, in a renewed debate and revision.

In its capacity as interpretation of reality on the premise of visibility, pictorial art will be able to shed light on the relationship between the visible and the real, which has left its mark on human culture at all times, and also on the changes which that relationship has undergone through the centuries. With that purpose in mind, it will be appropriate first to attempt to isolate those elements in the work of art that can be described as purely visual, a problem we shall return to in the following section. Subsequently we shall see them in their interplay with those elements of a different kind that are embedded in the work over time, whether they contribute to form, meaning or understanding. But let us begin at the beginning, the visual experience that precedes the creation of any work of art. That experience of the visible world is something we all know of, and it has always had a decisive impact, leading not only to further knowledge but also to a fuller understanding.

2. The Experience of Sight, the Visual Perception Models and the Work of Art as Visual Structure

If we go back to the very beginning of all experience and cognition, to the baby in the cradle, there is no doubt that in its tenderest years it sees what and only what is within its closest surroundings. To the baby they make up a sort of rough visual draft of simple forms and colours or colour differences, of static but especially moving objects. Through habit and constant stimulation, the impressions are then differentiated, the draft takes on more details and greater subtlety; and as the field of vision is gradually extended from what is within reach to what is within sight, the area of interest is widened in relation to what is seen, from

what is determined by the satisfaction of basic needs to what contributes only to satisfying curiosity.

In other words, the purposeful sight which may be said to be a result of basic feelings like joy and fear, rather than a cause of them, is replaced or rather supplemented by a goal-direction of sight with the one aim of arousing these feelings or others. But soon a third visual experience is added, namely that which stems from one's prior knowledge of what things should look like. This implies that one's sight is adapted according to this knowledge. A well-known thing in this connection is our spontaneous supplementation, for example of missing pickets in a fence or the walled-up window in the house front. Our knowledge, then, tends to make for a stereotype view of the surrounding world, so that we do not see things in their individuality, but with the previously known schema for them in our minds.

At the same time, however, these schemata allow us a certain free scope for the imagination. We can use our schemata for a kind of analogous conclusions, so that on the basis of a small number of common features we can make widely different things resemble each other: the sun or an apple may come to resemble a face, a constellation of stars may look like an animal, or the cloud masses a landscape. In this way forms unfamiliar to us may take on a degree of familiarity, thus becoming accessible to us. In contrast to the two previously mentioned forms of visual experience, which might be characterized as a search for the surroundings and an understanding of them respectively, the latter presents itself as mastery of the surrounding world. Now, the three ways of seeing should not be understood as three separate visual forms or as successive phases in a development. On the contrary, they work together incessantly, in a mutual exchange and interplay, not only in the child, but perhaps even more in the adult. It could also be said that our expectations of what we see, determine what we actually do see, or as the phrase goes, "one only sees what one wants to see."

Nor does the artist address the sight as such, the pure vision, when creating his work. On the contrary, he takes due note of the mechanisms governing the visual experience, those that are active in filling out the rough draft as mentioned above, those that aim at a curious understanding of the surrounding world as well as those that are determined by a prior knowledge of it. The means used by the artist are the visual elements which are a constituent part of the work of art: the colour strokes and linear markings or chisel traces and grinding surfaces that he makes into an incentive for the beholder to join in what could be called a visual cooperation with the work, either by maintaining them as visual elements, restoring their character as material, or by searching for their

similarity with things and phenomena known from elsewhere. Incidentally, the order of this enumeration indicates what separates the visual elements from what else we see around us. In the former case, the visual effect is the primary concern, what the artist works up and works out. In the latter case it is a secondary matter, as already shown by the example of the green colour (cf. p. 28).

It is a question now whether that innocence of the eye, that pure vision, which was considered by the Romanticists to be the prerequisite of the aesthetic experience,⁶ and which has since kept turning up both in the aesthetics of Modernism and in modern perception psychology, really exists at all. From the very beginning, as it has been seen, the act of seeing is anything but innocent and pure sense perception, discredited as such by the interests of a different nature that the child has in what it sees. Far from being an independent function, sight should rather be understood as a tool or means to promote these other interests.

On this background it is not possible either to give unqualified support to the German Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant's definition of the purpose of the aesthetic experience as the arousal in the beholder of a disinterested pleasure, a definition which in itself contains the idea of the innocence of the eye, or which – in other words – turns this experience into a unique moment disconnected from the totality of human life.⁷ But if the purity of vision is not where the aesthetic experience stems from, then, on the other hand, vision undergoes a purification through that experience.

The understanding of sight as a tool raises doubts, too, about some of the principles that have been regarded as fundamental in connection with aesthetics, and which have also, in our time, been accepted psychologically, so to speak. It has been argued at different times and on different grounds that elements like balance and symmetry, order and rhythm produce an immediate impression of beauty to the eye. However, in times past beauty was seen as a divine concept embodied in man as a mirror of the universal harmony, and thus as an objective entity. In recent times, though, beauty has been thought of as a subjective entity, as a biologically conditioned sense of pleasure at seeing man's own physical appearance reflected in what is seen. In both cases then the elements mentioned come to assume an absolute position; and sight will take the initiative to determine this position. But it is conceivable, of course, that we only have to do with relative positions in relation to a process, determined not by the act of seeing, but by the activity emanating from non-sensory interests such as man's survival instinct, his curiosity, and his urge to master the surrounding world through the exertion of his knowledge as well as his imagination, in other words by the

dynamic energy, which in the terminology of the French cultural philosopher, François Lyotard can be characterized as the pleasure principle.⁸ Balance and symmetry will not then be attractive in themselves, but only as expressive of the state that sets in at the release of a tension. Likewise, order and rhythm will not be the positive counterparts of chaos and accident, but will have their source there. If another fixed point than harmony is established, even disorder might achieve the status of beauty – in its capacity as initiator of the ordering activity.⁹

The two viewpoints, however, imply two widely different ideas of the character of the aesthetic principles as well as of the sense of beauty. In one case the former constitutes a system laid down in advance, in relation to which the latter will be a constant, inherent in the nature of man. In the other case, however, the establishment of the principles will depend on a common human agreement or convention, and the perception of something as beautiful will consequently be variable, determined by culture. But as so often, the truth is probably somewhere in between.

A case in point is the formula of proportion, known as the Golden Section, i.e. the proportion between one entity and another equals the proportion between the latter entity and the sum of both: $a/b = b/a+b$. This formula has sometimes been regarded as the design of the divine order itself, at other times as a dry academic rule; sometimes as an organic principle of growth inherent in nature, at other times as a mystical or esoteric formula (fig. 2). The modern age of the computer has led to a renewed preoccupation with “the Golden Section”, scientifically and aesthetically, since its proportion seems to constitute a basic element in the formation of fractal structure.¹⁰

Nevertheless the question must be asked whether a number of people’s preference for a rectangle constructed on the basis of “the Golden Section” for example rather than other rectangles, as shown by psychological experiments, is due to a natural biological disposition or an acquired cultural convention; in other words, whether the people in question react as “free” individuals, or whether they are collectively conditioned by their common culture. But if the latter is the case, what does this community of culture consist in?

To shed light on this we must turn from the act of seeing as an individual phenomenon of reception psychology to the visual mastery of the surrounding world as a collective mode of experience and part of a given cultural pattern.

Naturally the visual contact established between us and our surroundings is due in the first place to a physiological process. In all probability that process has been the same as long as *homo sapiens*, modern man, anthropologically speaking, has existed. It is therefore of little interest for us to follow this physiological



Fig. 2. In the classical French landscape painting the “Golden Section” was the preferred compositional figure:
Nicolas Poussin: *Orpheus and Eurydice in Landscape*, 1659, oil on canvas, Paris, Louvre.

constant in the visual experience since the beginning of time until today. Yet, the visual experience has not been the same for all people or at all times. Indeed, it is not always the same for the single individual, as it will be abundantly evident from one’s own experiences. It is precisely at the moment when the adaptation of the visual information sets in, when the visual impression becomes visual experience, that diversity begins to appear. It is the variations that occur at this point which make up the background of artistic creativity in all its diversity, under the conditions set by its historical environment.

The first stage of the adaptation is the arrangement in a recognisable pattern of the information data that are admitted to the retina via light. Only then is it possible to perceive clearly what is seen as forms and colours, objects and figures that are more or less familiar and identifiable. This transformation takes place so to speak instantaneously before our eyes, the more rapidly, the more certain our expectations are of what it is we see; with his practised eye the Amazon Indian will probably only need a quick glance to distinguish every detail in the tangled vegetation of the rain forest, while to our eyes it would dissolve into a confusion of flickering light and shadow. In return we would most likely find it easier than

that denizen of the rain forest to find our bearings in the straight lines and sharp angles of big city streets, crowded with vehicles and pedestrians.

But even apparently familiar phenomena may be perceived in highly different ways by different individuals or by the same individual at different times. You paint your fence yellow which seems to you a cheerful colour, but to the neighbour it looks gaudy. One day the tree outside your window appears cool and shady, but the next day it looks like a thick dark wall.

In all the cases mentioned a further adaptation of the visual impression has taken place, via the governing mechanisms described earlier, as well as on the intellectual and emotional level. Within the boundaries defined by historical and cultural affiliations, for example with regard to the symbolical or psychological meaning of the colour yellow, or to the sort of associations evoked by the sight of a tree, a certain amount of latitude is left for the mode of perception of smaller groups – delimited nationally, socially or otherwise – and even for the individual's temperament and momentary mood.

In general, however, the visual experience is determined above all by the manner in which the visible surroundings are understood as the actual world, and in turn how that world is perceived as reality. This plays a decisive role for the pattern in which the visual impulses received are ordered. Two things in particular are to be considered here: first, the utility value of the surroundings, and second, the meaning attached to them. The generation-long training of a people of hunters in watching out for game obviously develops a visual capacity different from that of the farmer, who needs to practise his ability to examine land and crops. This is not to say that the Nile peasant of ancient Egypt and the industrialized farmer of today are of a kind. The meaning each of them attributes to their surroundings is much too different. And possibilities in this respect are legion.

The thing and its meaning, the world and reality, may be identical: the predator is the actual danger. But a dimension of meaning may be added which reaches beyond the existence of the thing itself. The surrounding world thus enters into a reality transcending its physical-material boundaries: the flying bird is not the actual danger, but the omen of an imminent accident. Using some of the concepts we shall encounter later when dealing with the artistic expression, we might say that the bird does not – like the predator – represent danger, but symbolizes it.

Relating to our surroundings, their use and meaning, then, is anything but a personal matter. It is equally impossible to regard the ensuing differences in our visual perception of them as different spectacles or optic filters for the individual

to put on or lay aside as he sees fit. On the contrary, the way of seeing is a substantial part of man's cultural ballast or burden. The background is that it has always been an urgent impulse for man to find a connection between his living conditions, dependent on time and place, whether inherent in nature or created by man himself, and the universal conditions of life from birth to death. This is an enterprise which is not only important for the formation of man's consciousness but also contributes to shaping the spiritual and material development in generation after generation within entire societies and cultures.

The view of the world – the association to sight is appropriate – which thus takes shape, will at the same time inevitably come to function as the matrix or mould for the formation of that visual perception of the surroundings which characterizes the social entity or cultural epoch in question. The pattern on the basis of which the visual perception takes place, then, is to be understood as a film run across the retina, rather than as a lens to put before the eye. According to which qualities the film possesses, its resolving power, its graininess, or its colour temperature, to stick to film terminology, the visual impression achieves its particular form. Once the eye has accommodated to such a way of seeing or such a model for the visual perception – and that happens as soon as the child begins to “learn” to see – the visual perception does not easily allow itself to pursue a new course. In other words it is not quite so simple to “take a new look at the world”, at least not literally, as far as the actual visual experience is concerned. It is and will remain a product of the available matrix.¹¹

This matrix, in turn, is shaped through the encoded sum of experience and cognition which has been acquired at any given time and in any given context as generally accessible. This allows of the differentiation and classification of the surroundings seen which is characteristic of each individual model. Consequently each age has its model of perception or particular way of seeing, just as each model has its time.

When one model replaces another, it does not, as suggested already, happen according to a biological course of development, nor is their succession an arbitrary one. But they form a sequence with an inherent logic, corresponding to the always ongoing change in man's understanding of reality, sometimes progressing smoothly, sometimes happening by leaps. It is characteristic in this respect that the psychological factors which are part of, or are being involved in the experience and interpretation of the visual impression become increasingly numerous and increasingly complex as more and more new aspects of the human psyche are reflected in man's general consciousness. As a matter of course, they will subsequently make their contribution, each in their own way,

to the formation of the view of the surrounding world, both in a literal and a figurative sense. An example of this is the abandonment in the Renaissance of the more immediate model of perception, where all attention was focused on the single close object or on the interplay of objects seen as if they were placed in the vertical field of vision. Instead follows a model, based on the calculation of the mutual position of the objects on the horizontal level.¹² This requires a decidedly intellectual effort on the part of the beholder, in close accordance with the view at the time of man as a rational being. The added significance thus attributed to space, the empty space, in relation to the individual objects also requires a psychological mobilization of a hitherto unnoticed capacity for abstraction in order to be perceived.

The various perception models do not, however, appear one after the other, like pearls on a string. One model may often stay alive as a matrix of the general mode of perception even long after a new model has gained ground. Thus, even today the calculation of distance that constituted the Renaissance model is an important ingredient in the way we familiarize ourselves with our surroundings. So a model is not written off the moment it loses its actuality; on the contrary, what happens is a continuous accumulation of the models.

Obviously people of the past have not been able to transform their visual impressions into an experience of a complexity similar to ours. On the other hand, constituent elements in the perception models of the past become part of modern man's visual experience, but integrated now in a different context and mode of vision. In an attempt to trace the perception models of former times it ought to be possible then to distinguish one or more of these elements as representing this or that model. The fact of the matter, however, is that as far as these models are concerned it is not a question of mere optics, but of the understanding of reality, as it has been pointed out already. Consequently such separation of elements is not feasible in practice. One cannot step out of one's own age and its understanding of reality, and transport oneself in imagination to a different time in order briefly to observe its surroundings with its eyes. Another possibility, however, presents itself. It is possible for example to distinguish and determine analytically those elements that are embodied in today's mode of vision, and subsequently compare them with the testimonies of other ways of seeing and perceiving, handed down to us from times past. There are two categories of such testimonies. Within the first category one may by and large distinguish between two types. On one hand there is the multitude of writings in all genres, from philosophy to diary entries, which recount the way the writer has handled his reality. But even where a visual experience is directly described, nothing is

said about the matrix in which it was embedded. Nor is this to be expected for that matter, since this matrix usually operates on the subconscious level, as already mentioned. However, they provide an insight into the preconditions for any one model to have been able to take possession of the stage for a period of time.

The other type of writings is of a different kind. Their subject is visuality: the philosophical, scientific and psychological treatments of the theories of optics and perception that have arisen through the ages. On the face of it they seem to go straight to the heart of the matter. But the fact is that while they pretend to present the truth about the subject of the human eyesight, it is in reality only the possibility represented by the model prevailing at the moment that they raise to certainty. Not surprisingly, the theories are in fact replaced as the perception models change. With its doctrines and graphic representations this group of writings reveal, though in a rudimentary form, the specific character of the different models as we shall see later.

But if we only meet with the bare outline of the models in the optical theories and illustrations, they appear with a very different substance in the testimonies offered by the visual art, not as the direct imprint of the model, certainly, but in an adapted form, as its distillate, so to speak, the characteristics of the general matrix transformed into the sharp-edged form of the artistic interpretation. Thus that form model, as it might be called, is chrystallized which forms the very foundation of the existence of the work of art as a visual structure, whether this is that of an object or a picture, a spatial-perspectival structure or the dynamic structure of Modernism or, finally, the characteristic transparency of post-Modernism, letting the corresponding modes of vision pass in review. Through the agreement of the model with the existing mode of vision or perception model, a possibility is opened up for the beholder or the user of the work of art to establish a connection to its visual universe; and depending on the character of the model, that, too, acquires its particular quality, be it of surface texture, linear pattern, colour surface, plasticity, spatial limitation or freedom, and light/ darkness relations.¹³

The form model, however, is by no means an instrument that is at the artist's disposal for his own purposes. On the contrary, it comes about as a consequence of his more precise registration in relation to the universe of meaning and understanding that is common to him and his contemporaries. This process includes the artist's interpretative activity in relation to the given reality.

Due to the continuous creative work of the artist, the form model is subject to constant transformation; in this way the possibilities within the perception

model reflected by the form model are explored, without necessarily transgressing the boundaries of the model. Thus the interest for example in the individual object, which was characteristic of the way of seeing at a very early time, as it has already been mentioned, results in the exploration sometimes of textural effect and surface texture, sometimes of linear progress and contour marking, and finally sometimes of plastic form.

As the visual perception model is the tool with which man generally handles his visual surroundings, the form model may be said to function as the sensitive instrument, employed by the artist to help him visualize his efforts to capture the reality delimited by the perception model, giving it visual form in his work. But it may happen, especially in times when the understanding of reality is jolted, that the artist seeks a starting-point for his work in a new way to experience the visual impressions. He will not be easily understood then by his own time due to his transgression of the common frames of reference. Precisely in doing so, however, his artistic activity may promote the new departure that is on its way.

But like the two models of perception, two form models may also function side by side as expressive of the different views of reality of two different cultural traditions. This is the case for example in the early Renaissance, where the planar organization of the visual elements at the vertical level of the picture or the building is only very gradually replaced as a form model in favour of a spatial composition at the horizontal level, maintained in the linear-perspectival construction. At the same time, however, it is a fact that the upheavals in mode of thought and view of the world that have occasioned the most pronounced caesurae in the continuous stream of changes, have frequently occurred with the force of an avalanche. And equally often artists have been the first to capture the new tendencies, owing perhaps to their special sensitivity, their artistic intuition, if it is not simply due to the capacity of the visual sense, so preeminently mastered by artists, to quickly register and adapt itself to any change. It is a fact that new departures have often manifested themselves artistically, long before it became possible to express an opinion about them in other ways. It might also be said that art takes up the struggle as a spearhead against the sovereignty constantly sought by the cognitive activity, art having repeatedly held its ground in this struggle. Examples of such epoch-making occurrences might be the so-called Greek revolution in the 5th century B.C., the rebirth project of the Renaissance or the modern breakaway from Naturalism in the 19th century – all of them times of upheaval when it was the visual art that took pride of place.

In the following chapters we shall deal more closely with the attempts of dif-

ferent cultural periods to form their own specific picture of reality, and the way in which artists have sought to express it. Before that, however, it will be helpful for an overall view to determine the viewpoint for this discussion by characterizing the various perception models that have been prevalent at different times, or rather to identify that picture of them which the written sources and visual evidence seem to provide, though this is admittedly to anticipate events.

No doubt the very first thing that caught man's attention must have been the various animals, plants, stones etc. in the close surroundings, seen directly as delineated on the vertical plane. In other words, his was an *object centred* perception model. It turns out to have made up the basic visual matrix from the very earliest past, from the time of cave painting and up to the flowering of the ancient Mediterranean cultures. Not until they merge with the Hellenistic unitary culture during the 4th century B.C. does it finally decline. In the course of this long span of time, however, the model changes character several times. From concerning the palpable thing, what you can handle and feel, it becomes more and more a matter of sight, the thing as a plane in the visual field, whose outline can be traced with the eye, and later as plastic form, whose volume can be seen to show up. Furthermore, in the course of the 5th century the visual accent gradually shifts from the single object to the interplay with other objects, forming a whole on the vertical plane of the field of vision, now spread out like a carpet. Moreover, what is seen is now increasingly perceived, not as identical with the thing itself, but as a picture of it.

The transition to this *pictorial* way of seeing coincides with the general change in the structure of human thought, from thinking in terms of single phenomena and their mutual relation to apprehending an all-embracing universal totality: from the numerous (nature) deities, each representing a specific power, to the formation of the comprehensive philosophical-theological systems, as we know them first in Judaism and Platonism, and later in Christianity and Islam. In all of these, a fundamental feature is the belief in the world to come as the true reality and in a superior divine force as the creative and sustaining principle of the universe. The visible world must consequently be regarded as inferior in comparison, as a mere depiction, indeed as a deceitful illusion. But within this model, too, shades of difference can be traced. In its first phase it is obviously akin to the previous model in its final phase. But the plasticity of the individual objects now stands out as relief-like forms in the carpet pattern of the visual picture; and soon the relief effect is reduced to an ornamentation of lines and planes, whose configuration more and more assumes the character of abstract structure.

The pictorial perception model, which, incidentally, remained influential for more than one and a half millennia, found its basis in perception theory at a very early date, formulated in the *Optics* of the Hellenistic natural scientist, Euclid, which remained the generally acknowledged doctrine about sight right up to the end of the Middle Ages, in the Christian as well as the Islamic world.

It should be noticed, by the way, that variants of both the models, discussed so far, are traceable in comparable non-European cultures. But the 14th century sees the beginning of western culture choosing its own path. Gradually a completely new matrix is now formed for the perception of the visible surroundings. They are now encompassed in a three-dimensional space, precisely meted out and delimited, in which all objects appear as recordable phenomena which allow themselves to be subordinate to that space.

This was tantamount to nothing less than a visual revolution, since attention was shifted from the vertical field of vision in which the picture of the thing seen appeared, to the horizontal course of sight through this new-established space.

Such a change, however, was not possible while Euclid's optics were still the foundation of perception theory, since they almost exclusively dealt with the delineation of the objects in the vertical field of vision, whereas their place in the horizontal dimension could only be indicated with some uncertainty. Instead, attention was turned to Euclidean geometry in order to subject the act of seeing to the stringency of mathematics. Thus began the development of the specifically western perception model, whose point of departure is the perspectival mastery of space. Consequently it may be designated the *spatial-perspectival* model.¹⁴

This particular mode of vision is in perfect consonance with that rational relation with the surrounding world and with existence in general which was increasingly to leave its mark on European man. It involves a tendency to identify reality with what is rationally comprehensible, or even to reduce it to the sum of physical phenomena. This gave man a much greater capacity to command these phenomena as a beholder, by virtue of his visual mastery of the spatial dimension of the surrounding world. But while the emphasis on human rationality as a commanding and controlling authority implied a revolt against earlier metaphysical systems, a new system was developed based on analytical science. Within this system optics and perspective were, quite typically, to become a mathematical rather than an artistic concern. But just as this scientific approach along with rationality reached its peak in the 19th century, its very foundation began to collapse.

With the new natural sciences the concept of the physical reality was extend-

ed beyond the boundaries of what could be observed. The purpose of the analytical activity, will not any more, then, be primarily to systematize the results of observations, but to find the structuring principles beneath the surface of the phenomena. Therefore it was no longer possible to be content with a perception of one's surroundings as merely phenomena of sight, determined in a calculable, statically perspectival space.

Instead the focus was now on the actual human act of seeing as solely responsible for the ordering of the apparent chaos of the surrounding world into comprehensible entities. Through the visual activity of the beholder the surroundings then assume the character, not of fixed, definable forms in the extended space, but of a constantly changeable interplay of form, space or mass vacuum relations. It is no longer the things in themselves or in their mutual relations that count, but the ongoing process of the dynamic forces exercising their shaping influence on a fluid spatiality. In other words, the surrounding world is no longer subject to the precision of geometry as encompassed in the perspectival perception mode. Instead it is structured organically, but for all that not less rationally, since it is formed by the perceiving individual on the basis of what makes it most appropriate for him, but also on the basis of what is his biologically determined inclination to seek the "good *Gestalt*" in his visual impression. At least this is how the visual experience of the surrounding world should be understood according to the perception theory of modern *Gestalt* psychology.¹⁵ Let us therefore use the term *Gestalt-seeking* about this perception model. Since its development is coincidental with the epoch of Modernism, this term might be used about that period, too, with equal justification.

It is a mode of vision which may, strictly speaking, be traced as far back as the 18th century. But it was not until around 1900 that it reached its fully matured artistic form and found its expression in perception theory, and then in tune with and as a symptom of the general breakaway from tradition in nearly all areas of culture that typifies this time.

In spite of this, it is nonetheless the established spatial-perspectival model that we resort to in our daily confrontation with the surroundings, apparently as the tool that best enables us to handle them. It may be seen as an indication of how tenaciously a model may stay in power. Or perhaps it reflects our reluctance to let go of the strict control of the surroundings provided for us by the mathematically defined perspective of the Renaissance. All the same, towards the end of the 20th century, the *Gestalt-seeking* model has become increasingly visible, not only artistically, but also in a greater readiness to accept the non-perspectival visual impression or picture and the fluid spatiality as organized form that has

increasingly influenced our visual relations with the surrounding world. It is a change in our general visuality, reflected not least in developments in the field of advertising.

But there are indications that this modernistic perception model is disappearing from our field of vision again, even before it has in any real sense acquired a firm foothold as a universal matrix of the visual experience. In its place a different model seems to be taking shape. It is remarkable that it presupposes an understanding of perception different from the rationally analytic one which underlies the mode of vision of the Renaissance as well as Modernism. The change is already noticeable in the “modernization” of the classic perception psychology which sets in on several fronts in the last decades of the 20th century. The act of seeing is now understood more as a process during which there is an exchange between man and surroundings, between the observer and what is observed. According to recent American perception psychology the process may thus unfold directly when man is moving about in the surroundings while building up a network of always recognizable constants in the fluctuation of momentaneous visual impressions. Or the perception may be subject to reflection, as it happens when the beholder, in a state of rest, allows the changing visual impressions to pass by as pictures.¹⁶ The former visual mode is called the natural or ecological perception. The latter, however, has been designated the primitive or perspectival perception, perhaps a slightly confusing term, unless it has only been intended to refer to the models described above as valid in earlier periods, and thus to understand the change, defined historically here, as depending on an individual choice.

In the French philosopher, Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s version of the “modernization”, referred to above, the exchange between man and surroundings becomes an actual visual interaction between them.¹⁷ In this mutual reflection of the observer and what is observed the reality of the surrounding world as form and space seems to be nullified – in favour of movement and changing positions, perhaps more so than as far as the above-mentioned “ecological” mode of vision is concerned. Characteristically, to Merleau-Ponty the depth dimension becomes essential as the setting for this process. At the same time, however, in his case things are maintained as objects. So in the pulsating layer-on-layer structures which they form in their mutual shifts and place-changes, the visual sense together with the visual impression acquires a very different degree of presence, indeed of reality, to the individual than on the basis of the earlier models.

It is a moot point whether these attempts at a mode of vision oriented towards movement should be thought of as a corrective to the *Gestalt*-seeking

model of Modernism, since it is no longer just the movement of the eye, but the movement of the whole body that is in question, or whether it is a new model with new possibilities that is suggested. In the latter case, the surrounding world is being ordered neither geometrically for the perceiving individual nor organically by him. The world appears as an incessant stream of visual impulses, particles of light and waves with vibrations of different frequencies which one must choose from, or rather allow oneself to be overwhelmed by. As a beholder of the surrounding world one's role, then, will be different from that of master. It will be the role of participant, or perhaps even the role of fellow creator.

However, the creative activity thus involving the perceiving individual requires an entirely different form of visual disposition than earlier, a "new sensibility" in the phrase of the aesthetical debate of recent years.¹⁸ It is a capacity to seek synthesis, not on the terms of rationality or by analysis, but through total sense perception, the sense experience being further intensified into a kind of visual transillumination of what is perceived.

But the constant reflection and double reflection may also cause every presence to become blurred since that which is reflected has a tendency to sever itself from that which is seen so as to become flickering images with an inertia of their own. Here, then, the image must not be conceived of in the same straightforward meaning of the visual image subordinate to the object and, in comparison, inferior to it, such as it was in the pictorial mode of perception of the Middle Ages. It is an image that outbids the sight, so to speak, in its claim to possess intrinsic value.

In spite of their almost diametrical dissimilarity it might make sense to comprise these two modes of vision, emanating from Modernism, under the concept of *transparency* signifying the matrix in which this new perception model may be encompassed, which we shall return to in connection with an attempt at a closer aesthetic definition of the transparency concept in VI:3, 4 and 6.

Concerning the latter of the two variants it should be added already here, however, that even though the perception-psychological reorientation may be considered an argument for establishing a mode of vision like the one described here, the question must be asked whether, like the previous models, it has its origin in a given conception of reality, differing from that of Modernism, or if its transparency is actually a product of the image technology of the mass media and consequently comes to be a textually oriented pseudo-visibility (cf. also V:6 and VII:6).

What is common to the two types of the transparent mode of vision, however, is the greater importance attached to the phenomena of the surrounding

world in themselves. In a sense, it is true, the beholder is its creator by virtue of his act of seeing; but at the same time its phenomena act and interact in their own right as seeing or reflecting. With the post-Structuralist annulment of structure as a last principle to establish a difference and hence order and, in a visual sense, clarity through the binarity of contrasts, this tendency towards the independence of the surroundings has been strengthened. The surrounding world has become something which we may be said to create, but which we are nevertheless unable to perceive and grasp straight away. Symptomatic in this respect is the concept of otherness in deconstructive thinking and the conception in recent biology of organisms as mutually independent and in principle impenetrable processual systems, resulting possibly in a blurring of the transparency or ultimately its loss.

Looking back now over the range of perception models, it is obvious, as stated earlier, that modern man must have accumulated them all in his mode of vision. In certain situations we may borrow them for a time, not as matrices adequate for our visuality as such, but precisely when we want to isolate specific elements or attach special weight to particular aspects of the visual impression. The fact that we cling to the model of the Renaissance when it is a question of our general orientation in the surroundings is one example of this. In a similar manner, the single object, close to us, the effect of its material and its texture, may catch our attention for a while as the essential part of the visual experience. But we cannot forever transport ourselves to the sphere of vision of earlier models, no more than we can identify ourselves with the conception of reality of bygone times.

In any case, however, the visual perception model is an instrument, perhaps the most important one, for us to perceive and understand the surrounding world. The scientific character attributed to the models through the various optical theories is further evidence of the weight and validity that has been ascribed at any particular time to the then prevailing perception model as the true way of seeing.

Through the model the surrounding world is made easier to grasp in that a formula of familiarity is applied to its objects and phenomena. Thus it comes to be decisively important for the particular form of experience which we call aesthetic, and furthermore for the aesthetic criteria that apply to art. We shall return to the aesthetic concept repeatedly in our attempt to define it. However, we shall premise the remark here that it is a characteristic of the aesthetic experience, unlike the visual experience in general, that the beholder does not only undertake a psychological adaptation of the visual impression, but also, through

a more or less conscious process of evaluation, arrives at an appraisal of its value, founded not only on its utility or its meaning. This is the case with the experience of art or with the similar type of experience which the surrounding world may quite frequently have in store for us, and which then makes us grant it or deny it an aesthetic quality. It is a quality which is not immediately inherent in it, but which it can only be supplied with by the intervention of the experiencing I.

As we have already seen, beauty and the feeling of harmony and pleasure that it evokes, is a key point in this respect, but it is far from the only aesthetic criterion that may be posed. Nor must it be taken to mean that beauty can be equated with familiarity and even less that familiarity can be considered an absolute aesthetic norm. On the contrary, the very moment familiarity becomes normative, the aesthetic quality of the work of art must give way to triviality. And that is not what concerns us here, however interesting it may be in another context. Nonetheless it is exclusively with familiarity – not to be confused with recognizability – as a measure of value that the unknown, too, may be subjected to evaluation. Hence the visual perception model becomes the catalyst of the aesthetic process as it appears to the beholder experiencing it, just as it is to the artist by virtue of its visual structure which, by way of the form model, is embedded in his work. In this way the necessary basis has been brought about for that visualization of his artistic intention which is the very core of his work. But before dealing with this in closer detail, we must clarify the concept which is very often considered more or less synonymous with art itself, namely style.

3. Form and Style in the Melting Pot of the Mode of Vision

From the above one might be tempted to believe that it is the form model which, in its capacity of the artistic version of the perception model, must be regarded as identical with that ambiguous concept usually termed style.¹⁹ But not only is style a far more flexible thing than the model, and much more than that, it is susceptible to external historical conditions and changes in them as well as to attitudes and fashions in both society and the individual. Style manifests itself as a particular character imposed on a given artistic or at least man-made phenomenon in its external appearance. Thus style belongs on a different psychological level from that of form and form model, corresponding to a later phase in the acquisition of the visual impression than the mere visual arrangement of it. So it may be seen rather as the artistic counterpart to the question of taste which, similarly susceptible to external influences, also affects the attitudes