

Depiction and plastic perception. A critique of Husserl's theory of picture consciousness

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Abstract In this paper, I will present an argument against Husserl's analysis of picture consciousness. Husserl's analysis of picture consciousness (as it can be found primarily in the recently translated volume *Husserliana 23*) moves from a theory of depiction in general to a theory of perceptual imagination. Though, I think that Husserl's thesis that picture consciousness is different from depictive and linguistic consciousness is legitimate, and that Husserl's phenomenology avoids the errors of linguistic theories, such as Goodman's, I submit that his overall theory is unacceptable, especially when it is applied to works of art. Regarding art, the main problem of Husserl's theory is the assumption that pictures are constituted primarily as a conflict between perception/physical picture thing and imagination/picture object. Against this mentalist claim, I maintain, from a hermeneutic point of view, that pictures are the result of perceptual formations [*Bildungen*]. I then claim that Husserl's theory fails, since it does not take into account what I call "plastic perception" [*Bildliches Sehen*], which plays a prominent role not only within the German tradition of art education but also within German art itself. In this connection, "plastic thinking" [*Bildliches Denken*] was prominent especially in Klee, in Kandinsky, and in Beuys, as well as in the overall doctrine of the Bauhaus. Ultimately, I argue that Husserl's notion of picture consciousness and general perceptive imaginary consciousness must be replaced with a more dynamic model of the perception of pictures and art work that takes into account (a) the constructive and plastic moment, (b) the social dimension and (c) the genetic dimension of what it means to see something *in* something (Wollheim).

Keywords Edmund Husserl · Roland Barthes · Hans-Georg Gadamer · Richard Wollheim · Paul Klee · Phenomenology · Semiotics · Culturalism ·

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1 Introduction

In this paper, I present an argument against Husserl's analysis of picture consciousness. Following upon what John Brough has pointed out, namely that Husserl's analysis of picture consciousness (as it can be found primarily in Hua 23) moves from (a) a theory of depiction and genuine picture consciousness to, (b) a theory of perceptual imagination (Brough 1992). I argue that Husserl's theories should be rejected. For, although I think that Husserl's thesis that picture consciousness is different from depictive and linguistic consciousness is legitimate, and that Husserl's phenomenology avoids the errors of other theories, such as the linguistic theory of pictures,¹ I submit that his overall theory is unacceptable, especially when it is applied to works of art. The main problem with Husserl's theory is, as I see it, the assumption that pictures are constituted primarily as a negation of purely perceptual consciousness and as a conflict [*Widerstreit*] (Hua 23, 46, 493 [50, 588]) between perception and imagination. Against this ultimately mentalistic claim, I maintain the thesis that pictures are socially and materially constituted manifestations of plastic formations [*Bildungen*] and that Husserl fails to consider the fact that pictures are ultimately *made* by human beings, and that what we "see" in pictures is ultimately our own shaping power [*Bildungskraft*].

I should underline that I do not claim in this paper that Husserl's theory should be fully dismissed; rather, I claim that the strength of Husserl's theory of picture consciousness—in contrast to linguistic theories—is its focus on the representational and perceptual moment (=seeing-in). However, Husserl interprets this moment of "seeing-in" within a mentalist framework, against which I claim that "seeing-in" should be understood within a culturalist framework. This approach is located *between* the linguistic and perceptual theories, since I claim that the perceptual activity is ultimately a form of "shaping" the image as a cultural object. The act of seeing pictures is, hence, not a simple act of "seeing-in," but a process of forming (*bilden*) the image. Though, it is true that Husserl analyzes the constitution of cultural objects especially in his *Ideas II*, he does not conceive the interpretatory *activity* as constitutive for the image.

In order to establish this, I first show that Husserl's analysis is superior when compared to linguistic theories of picture consciousness, especially Barthes's and Goodman's thesis that picture consciousness can be analyzed in and reduced to symbolic structures (though, I believe that Barthes comes very close to my own position).² Here I will emphasize that Husserl's theory of pictures, which is based on what Wollheim called "seeing-in,"³ is superior to the linguistic model, since it takes *visual* representation into account, something that the linguistic communica-

¹ For an overview see Wiesing (2005).

² See Barthes (1985) and Goodman (1976).

³ Wollheim (1990), (1991).

tive theory cannot handle.⁴ I then claim, however, that Husserl's theory should be overcome by an approach to the constitution of pictures through what I call "plastic perception" [*Bildliches Sehen*], which plays a prominent role not only within the German tradition of art education but also within German art itself. In this vein, I argue that Husserl's notion of picture consciousness and general perceptive imaginary consciousness should be replaced by a more dynamic model of the perception of pictures and art work that takes into account (a) the constructive and plastic moment, (b) the social dimension, and (c) the genetic dimension of what it means to see something in something.

2 Overview of Husserl's theory of picture consciousness

Husserl's phenomenology of picture consciousness can be found (primarily) in his lecture on intuitive representations (1904/05). As should be taken into account, the lectures were given before Husserl's "transcendental turn," and as will later become clear, one main lack of these lectures seems to be the fact that Husserl does not deal with picture consciousness as a special form of *noematic* analysis; and that he instead remains on the level of act analysis, ending up with an unacceptable "act essentialism" regarding picture consciousness. In his later manuscripts on the same question Husserl tries to correct this problem, though unsuccessfully. His analysis is based on two central theses: (1) first, he claims that picture consciousness should not be confused with signifying consciousness, and (2) second, he claims that picture consciousness is based on a mixture of perceptual and imaginary elements that cannot be found in memory or phantasy. In this way, picture consciousness belongs to Husserl's general structural analysis of consciousness and, thus, is a certain type or class of act consciousness. In addition, claim (1) leads him to introduce what in contemporary aesthetic theory has been called "seeing-in", and claim (2) leads him to the further introduction of negativity into the analysis of consciousness. A brief clarification of these two points follows.⁵

(1) The difference between the constitution of a sign and the constitution of a picture is, according to Husserl, the simple fact that the material bearer that both forms of consciousness need, are related to their "meaning" in a different way. Whereas in sign consciousness the bearer (or signifier) is totally different from the signified and neither has to be similar to the signified nor be found *in* the signifier, pictures are constituted in a different way: for the picture as that which appears in addition to the material bearer is found *in* the bearer and cannot be disconnected from what lets the picture appear in our perceptual world. The following example should illustrate this point: the word "table" points as a signifying thing (the scribbles on paper or the sounds that we hear) away from itself, insofar as the "real" table cannot be seen in the word "table" (as it is perceived on paper or heard as

⁴ In this paper, I will not deal with the anthropological theory of pictures, though within the Anglo-American realm this theory has almost never been discussed and deserves more attention; see Jonas (1995); Belting (2001) and also Sartre (1988).

⁵ A longer, much more detailed overview can be found in Brough (1992); in addition see his overview of Husserl's theory in Brough (2005).

sounds). Similarly, the American flag only depicts the United States because it symbolically *stands for* the United States and hence *points to* something that cannot be found *in* the color-configuration of the flag. As Husserl puts it, what a sign represents or signifies is to be found *beyond* the signifying thing itself.

Dissimilarly, pictures, however, are constituted differently than signs, in as much as the picture as that which we *see* when we look at a picture must appear not only *with*, but also *within* the material object that displays the picture. For example, my passport photo does not simply signify me in the form of a sign (though it can *also* do that); rather, the representation of me—if it is a picture—appears *within* or on the paper that functions as the bearer of my picture. This explains why I can point at it and say to my wife “I look terrible;” whereas I am unable to point to the scribbles “Lotz” and say this. She would not understand me. Put simply, in pictures I see something *in* the bearer (in this case: paper), and thereby the signified need not point *beyond* the paper (Hua 23, 35–36 [38–39]). Consequently, Husserl differentiates between a physical “picture thing” [*Bildding*] (Hua 23, 489 [583]) and the actual “picture object” [*Bildobjekt*] (Hua 23, 489 [583]). In addition, Husserl introduces the “picture subject” [*sujet*] (Hua 23, 489 [583–584]), which is what the picture object is about. For example, when I look at a picture of Husserl, I perceive (a) a physical object (paper), (b) the picture object (appearing figure), and (c) Husserl himself. We should note that (c) is seen *in* (b) and that (b) is seen *in* (a) (see Hua 23, 474 [564]). Husserl calls this internal relation “seeing-in” or—more precisely—“looking into” [*Hineinsehen*] (Hua 23, 30 [31]), by which he not only means that one sees something in picture things, such as photo paper, but also that we “feel” ourselves *into* the picture object when we see it. Picture consciousness, accordingly, is unique, insofar as a perceptual consciousness of a bearer “depicts” and “pictures” [*verbildlicht*] (Hua 23, 26 [27]) something that is non-perceptual. The non-perceptual appearing picture is not, as Husserl underlines, a result of judgment or of reflection on the underlying perceptual physical object; rather, the picture object appears together *with* the underlying perceptual consciousness, which brings us to the next point.

(2) We should first note that it is not necessary for all physical picture objects to show the actual picture in them, though it *can* be the case that pictures are taken to be signs. For example, as Husserl points out, a catalogue with very small thumbnails of people can function as a trigger for memories or signs of something else. However, in this case the perceiver does not *see* anything in the thumbnails, but instead takes them to *stand for* something else. Consequently, for Husserl pictures are representations that have a special ontological status, since although they represent internally they are neither “in” our consciousness nor outside of it. Pictures, as Husserl formulates, do not exist in a “normal” way; rather, they are “nothing” and hence they are “ideal objects” (Hua 23, 538 [648]).⁶ As will soon become apparent, the ontologically “ideal” status of pictures *within* the perceptual world is the central feature that the symbolic or linguistic theory of pictures cannot handle. In (aesthetic) pictures, a whole world, as Husserl puts it, is posited (Hua 23, 465 [553–554]). Thereby, pictures, for Husserl, are ideal worlds within which we

⁶ For this, see Brough (2006).

can *visually* “move around” *before* we enter a semantic level, and it is precisely this point that makes Husserl’s theory superior to other theories, since it can explain how pictures create *their own* world and reference system, *in this way* forcing us into a certain form of their *presence*. In contrast, linguistic theories of pictures do not need the presence of both viewer and object. In this vein, Husserl further points out that pictures in this ideal form are constituted through a certain form of “conflicting double apperception” (Hua 23, 488, 511 [583, 612]), a “character of negativity [*Nichtigkeit*]” (Hua 23, 491, 516 [586, 617–618]), “inhibition” and “resistance” [*Hemmung*] (Hua 23, 511 [613]). Husserl makes this claim because the consciousness of pictures, though not as the consequence of reflection or judgment, is based on *both* the perceptual moment and the imaginary moment, such that, if we lost the conflict between the perceptual and the imaginary moment, we would fall back into either pure perceptual or pure illusional consciousness. For example, it can happen that children see a picture of a monster and run away. According to a famous story, viewers of one of the first motion pictures at the beginning of the 20th century ran out of the theater since they believed that the depicted train would run over them. Indeed, these viewers did not see *pictures*; rather, they saw trains. Put in Husserl’s words, the *position* of pictures and perceptions is different, insofar as pictures cannot lose the conflict between bearer and picture object.⁷ Consequently, Husserl finally speaks of pictures as “perceptual ficta” (Hua 23, 515 [616]), by which he means that pictures are “as-if perceptions”.⁸ In this way, the imaginary picture object coincides [*deckt sich*] (see Hua 23, 507 [608]) with and covers over the perception, the synthesis of which can be more or less harmonized, but never totally fulfilled. In sum, we always find the “picture thing” and the “picture object,” both of which are necessary for picture consciousness.⁹

In the next part of the paper, I briefly consider the opposite theory, as it is represented in the Anglo-American area by Nelson Goodman and in the European tradition by Roland Barthes (though the latter, as I mentioned earlier, comes much closer to my own position).

3 Differences between Husserl’s theory and the Linguistic theory of pictures (Barthes, Goodman)

As we have seen, one of Husserl’s main claims is about the “seeing-in” that occurs in picture consciousness, and, as mentioned above, we should take this moment as the real strength of representational theories à la Husserl, which is something that his theory has in common with Richard Wollheim’s theory of pictures. In brief,

⁷ Husserl is, of course, implicitly repeating the metaphysical thesis that art/pictures deal with the conflict between material and form. I cannot deal with this problem in this paper, since this would require a more subtle discussion of the metaphysics of images and art in Heidegger, Hegel and Adorno.

⁸ This analysis pushes Husserl beyond his early act analysis to a more noematically centered analysis of pictures, given that the consciousness of “negation” and “Widerstreit” are, as he claims in *Experience and Judgment* and in Edmund Husserl, *Analyses Concerning Passive and Active Synthesis: Lectures on Transcendental Logic*, trans., Anthony J. Steinbock (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2001), noematic modifications.

⁹ When I cut through my passport photo, no one will take this as an attempt to commit suicide.

theories of “seeing-in” and of the ideal character of pictures can catch the specificity of the visual nature and appearance in picture consciousness, which linguistic approaches to the problematic try to negate. For, according to linguistic theories, especially Goodman’s and partly Barthes’s theory, pictures are to be taken as a special class of symbols. These linguistic theories are based on two main assumptions: (1) pictures have their role within human communication and can be analyzed as *messages* (Barthes 1985, 27), and (2) pictures are denotations without resemblance (Goodman 1976, 5). I will turn my critical attention to Barthes theory first.

(1) Barthes’ position can be counted as a part of the linguistic turn within philosophy. Contrary to Husserl, Barthes does not believe that we can analyze our relations towards the world on a first level as pure intuitive acts. Perception, for Barthes, is dependent on linguistic and semantic formations that make perception possible. Images, as Barthes puts it, are “perceived only when verbalized” (Barthes 1985, 17). In linguistic terms: pictures are able to denote because they are rhetorically coded messages. Connotations, in other words, make reference possible, which leaves “pure” images as the limit and *negation* of linguistic structures. Accordingly, only because pictures are coded messages are we able to see *something* in pictures. The code can be syntactically defined, such as cropping, selection, and layout in the case of photographs, or it can be cognitively coded by knowledge that we have about the context and elements of pictures that we see. Barthes differentiates between the *denotation*, *connotation* and *message* of pictures: the denotation is that to which the picture refers in its representation, whereas the connotation of the picture is the level of its coding through a certain syntax, and the message is the final “aboutness” of a picture, which can either be literal or symbolic. “T[t]he image,” as Barthes puts it, “is crisscrossed by the system of meaning, exactly as man is articulated to his very depth in distinct languages” (Barthes 1985, 36). We should see immediately that Husserl’s position differs from Barthes’ point of view, inasmuch as Husserl’s eidetic analysis tries to bring out the basic intentional features of being conscious of pictures, whereas Barthes would deny such a “pure” idea of pictures.¹⁰ Instead, as Barthes states, “a picture is never anything but its own plural description” (Barthes 1985, 150). I will return to Barthes’ position later, and will turn presently, to a consideration of Goodman’s position, which I find less compelling than Barthes.

(2) Goodman’s theory of pictures is much more radical than Barthes’, especially since it totally denies pictures the status of being something visible and constituted through intuitive acts (Barthes’s theory only allows for the “image” as the “negative limit” of discourse). According to Goodman, the first and foremost feature of pictures is the fact that they do not resemble anything in the world. The signifier and the signified, in other words, are not only coded, as in Barthes; rather, they are totally disconnected and hence only established through symbolic processes. “Resemblance,” as Goodman puts it, is not “necessary for reference; almost anything may stand for almost anything” (Goodman 1976, 5). Goodman is in some sense correct in his claim, since it is indeed true that a picture *as* a picture

¹⁰ For this claim, see also Stiegler (2002).

does not have any similarities with what it depicts.¹¹ My passport photo is basically nothing else than colored paper, which has no similarity with me. The paper does not have a fleshly nose, does not have a German accent and does not walk on two feet. Goodman, in other words, conceives pictures as if they were *only* material signs, in this way radicalizing the sense in which, for instance, the word “table” has no similarity with real tables and hence has its signified outside of itself. However, Goodman’s thesis is not convincing, insofar as—spoken in Husserlian language—he reduces pictures to what Husserl calls “picture things,” and in so doing Goodman overlooks the phenomenon of “seeing-in” and therefore cannot account for the visuality in its own terms. A picture, according to Goodman, is “like a passage that describes” (Goodman 1976, 5), and functions in a semantic context. As in every language, seeing and “scanning” (Goodman 1976, 12) pictures are a result of learning and require the acquisition of skills (Goodman 1976, 14). Visuality, then, in Goodman’s approach, becomes *reduced* to a part of the descriptive dimension of pictures and loses its meaning altogether, the consequence of which is that from a phenomenological point of view, his account remains unsatisfactory. Others have raised similar objections against Goodman. For instance, in addition to Wollheim’s argument that seeing-in is prior to representation and meaning—since otherwise we would not know what the meaning is a meaning *of* (Wollheim 1991, 107, 144)—Robert Hopkins has pointed out that Goodman’s “hyper-symbolism” cannot explain how pictures can be carried out as illusions, such as what occurs in baroque ceiling paintings (Hopkins 2006, 156) or in wax figures from Duane Hanson. If we would be unable to see something in something, that something could not represent anything. Both Hopkins and Wollheim therefore agree with Husserl’s claim that pictures are only able to depict *because* they can be seen in the picture thing. This conclusion leaves us with Barthes’ culturalistic position as a possible alternative to Husserl’s (and Wollheim’s) approach to pictures.¹²

4 Critique of Husserl’s theory

Broadly speaking, the failure of Husserl’s approach is to neglect the cultural formation of the picture *in* the picture. Whereas the linguistic theory takes the cultural level as something *external* to the actually appearing picture, Husserl is unable to identify the cultural level on the level of the picture-forming [*Gestaltung*], which Wollheim calls the “configurational aspect” (Wollheim 1991, 132) of pictures, and which Gadamer—though in a different context—calls the “transformation into structure” (Gadamer 1960, 110). Husserl takes the picture to be mainly

¹¹ In addition, similarities between pictures and the referent are historically constituted and can change. For example, a painted tree might look like a tree simply because that is how trees are usually painted; for this, see Lopes (2006), 161.

¹² I should mention that Danto, though for other reasons, has turned away from Goodman and returned to an unconvincing realism regarding pictures and perception; for his claim that seeing (at least on the basic level of recognition) is culturally neutral, see Danto (2001a, b).

a synthesis of acts, without taking into account that on the noematic side pictures show up as organized formations, which ultimately force us to acknowledge their cultural and social constitution as essential. What I argue in the following is that because both the “picture thing” and the “picture object” should be conceived as *one* level of formation, Husserl’s analysis is rendered implausible. Thus, although Husserl is correct to claim that pictures cannot be reduced to symbols, he is wrong to claim that pictures are simply constituted by the difference between perception/picture thing and imagination/picture object. Husserl’s conception is ultimately (1) too abstract, (2) anti-cultural, and (3) subject-object centered. Indeed, this last feature is a *specific* cultural and social way of looking at pictures, namely, the modern way of looking at pictures, which is not the only way of participating in this activity. Before I come back to this point, I shall outline six critical aspects of Husserl’s phenomenology of pictures: (1) perception, (2) ontology, (3) picture types, (4) invisibility, (5) participation, and (6) materiality.

5 Perception—picture

As we have seen, Husserl claims that picture consciousness is a conflict between two acts, one of which is a perceptive act, the other of which is the imaginary picturing act (even if we should note that in later manuscripts Husserl tries to see both acts as moments of the same act (“perceptual *fiktum*”). However, this dualism is not convincing, since it fails to take into account that only *specific* objects count and can be taken as pictures. For example, simple acts of seeing-in, such as seeing faces in cloud-formations, presuppose the *cloud formation* on the side of the act-object; for the act of seeing faces would surely fail in front of a simple white screen. For this reason, the phenomenology of pictures is forced to overcome act descriptions and must take conditions on the side of the object into account. Put simply, there are no picture things without taking them to be *configurations*. Husserl, though not explicitly, seemed to have recognized this problem, in that he not only operates with the concept of a conflicting *consciousness* of pictured objects, but also with an *ontological* difference between *physical* things and *ideal* picture objects; however, instead of clarifying or fully introducing this differentiation, he takes it for granted, which brings me to my next critical point.

6 Physical—picture

The distinction that Husserl introduces on the ontological level is as doubtful as his act analysis, since at no does point he realize that the object of picture consciousness is not physical and that the act of picture consciousness is not merely perceptual-imaginary, but rather, socio-cultural. Husserl’s claim that we have to differentiate a physical picture thing from a picture object is especially unconvincing, for—as every perception of pictures will demonstrate—what we see when we are in the

presence of pictures are not causally determined three-dimensional “things” stripped of all non-natural properties, but rather, certain already formed and shaped things, such as canvas, photo paper, walls, or drawing paper, which in addition are framed, hanged, shown, and come with ink, lines, scratches, and so on. We should underline that “ink,” “lines” and “scratches” are also not mere physical appearances, but are socio-culturally shaped elements that belong to a cultural world and cannot be reduced to their pure physical properties without losing all meaning. Brush strokes are not, as Husserl somewhere in his lecture says, just color pigments taken as sensational data (Hua 23, 22, 26 [23, 28]); rather, they are *expressions*, *gestures*, and *bodily* movements. *Materiality* here means something totally different from “physicality.” On the side of the act, Husserl’s analysis is as unconvincing as his ontological assumptions, insofar as it is never the case that we simply perceive physical objects, within which we then see and recognize pictures. Alternatively, seeing pictures is a cultural activity that—at least historically—was shared in certain (religious) practices and which in the 19th century, was established as a practice of “looking” in the form of a looking subject and a single picture. Accordingly, what we should acknowledge is that the act consciousness that Husserl reduces to a simple act of perception is in reality a socially constituted *practical* act, which involves “looking” and “seeing” as a *specific* practice of *doing things*. Pictures, we might say, come with the *instruction* to be seen both on the side of the viewer and on the side of the seen, and are not just eidetically determined by the structure of consciousness, as Husserl wants us to believe.

From the two aforementioned points—the critique of Husserl’s act analysis and his ontological analysis—we must conclude that Husserl fails to see that pictures are *from the bottom up* socio-cultural formations that neither fit within a simple eidetic of consciousness nor within a simple ontological intuitionism.

7 Picture types—practices

In addition to this last claim, we should also underline that Husserl’s abstractions are unable to account for the different media that pictures manifest, such as drawings, photos, oil paintings, watercolors and digital images, which are all differentiated due to the fact that they are historically constituted socio-cultural ways of *doing pictures* and of *picturing*. They not only belong to different ways of perceiving them, but also to different worlds of how things can be made *for* perception. In other words, different picture-types are different *cultural* formations, which include different systems of how they are *to be seen*. Pictures, in brief, are trans-formed entities that create worlds *through* certain practices, such as drawing (which goes back to writing). Husserl’s mentalism shines through when he states, for example, (1) that the difference between photography and painting is partly a result of different “feeling intentions” (Hua 23, 52 [55]), and that [2] pictures depend upon a “instigator” [*Erreger*] for the picture representation (Hua 23, 123 [135]).

8 Invisibilities

A major aspect that Husserl's theory of picture consciousness does not recognize is that pictures are not only constituted by what we see, but at the same time by what we do *not* see. For example, a drawing is clearly not what I can *see*, instead it is constituted by a fine dialectic between what one can see *and* what one cannot see. In this vein, Gadamer pointed out that

“perception conceived as an adequate response to a stimulus would never be a mere mirroring of what is there. For it would never remain an understanding [*Auffassen*] of something as something. All understanding-as is an articulation of what is there, in that it looks-away-from, looks-at, sees-together-as. [...] Thus there is no doubt that, as an articulating reading of what is there, vision disregards much of what is there, so that for sight, it is simply not there anymore.” (Gadamer 1960, 90f./96).

The outline shape of a face, for example, might show a mouth with only one simple line, such as ☺ or ☹. What shows up, in other words, depends upon what we do *not* see, namely details of the face. In addition, as we know from Wittgenstein's meditations on the topic of “seeing-as,” seeing a picture is exclusive not characterized by a conflict of perception and imagination, but by a conflict and *Widerstreit* between two or more *possibilities* of seeing-in.

Husserl's static analysis of pictures also fails to handle the fact that from an empirical point of view, the consciousness of pictures is not an ability with which we are born; rather, it is *developed* within the first two to four years of life, which (again) point to the social factor of the constitution of pictures. In addition, as psychological research has shown and as Merleau-Ponty assumed, even blind children are able to *draw* simple pictures of things, which points to a *non-visual* element in all seeing and perception, and which in contemporary debates is discussed as the “outline shape” of pictures.¹³ The invisibility of touch and bodily constitution seem to be in play in every picture, even in the more technologically advanced practices, such as photography and digital images. In drawings, the bodily moment is most visible, as psychological research of the last decade has demonstrated.¹⁴

9 Participation and *Bildliches Sehen*

The claim that pictures are not “the repository of a system but the generation of systems” (Barthes 1985, 150), means that the picture and the act of perceiving it is not just seeing something in something, but also the act of seeing something in

¹³ Though, as should be noted, the contemporary debate *does not* take the outline shape to be a bodily moment, as a moment of “kinaesthetic outlining,” but (unfortunately) only as a pure visual element of recognizing pictures. See Hopkins (2006) and Lopez (2006).

¹⁴ See Kennedy (1993). Kennedy claims that the outline relief of pictures is double coded as both visual and tactile: “Blind people with no visual experience should recognize when a haptic line stands for a feature of relief” (Kennedy 1993, 45).

something is itself the opening of seeing *more than* what can be seen. The constitution of pictures is in principle not much different from how the viewer participates in theater plays. Hence, pictures form themselves throughout the performance of looking and interpreting them in an act of “participation” and “celebration” (Gadamer 1960, 123). Both picture and participant change through the picture experience, and dynamically constitute—by virtue of the activity of participating in the experience of pictures—the picture itself. As Gadamer pointed out, “seeing means articulation” (Gadamer 1960, 91). Here we can see that what Husserl does not take into account is that the process of seeing-in is itself not neutral; instead, it must be conceived as a *formative* and hence *dialectical* process, within which the act of seeing constitutes what is visible and what is visible constitutes what can be seen (for this see also Boehm 1995). Moreover, the act of seeing takes time, the consequence of which is that elements of the picture, such as lines, forms, motives, etc. have to be synthesized in accord with reproductive and anticipatory moments. Visibility, in other words, is not a given, but a dynamic coming-into-being of what we see. A *Gestalt* is not something static, but something that is forming itself throughout the experience of seeing it. The German word “*Gebilde*” expresses what both the term “picture” and the term “image” are unable to cover. The picture *realizes itself*, as Cezanne famously put it, and hence, participation *is* both the performance and the coming to be of the picture. The picture is not just there, static and part of what we naively call the reality; in contrast, it forms itself throughout the act of seeing it. Hence *Bildliches Sehen*—plastic perception—should be understood as analogous to listening to music, insofar as what is heard while listening to music is not an act of meaning *on top of* an act of perceiving noises; rather, the act of listening is an act of our shaping power that is analogous to an act of sculpting with our hands, by means of which an expressive *configuration* (in music temporally defined) is formed out of and shaped *into* a *Gestalt* (*ein-gebildet*). In music, the performance of both the players and the listening shape what is heard. The same occurs in pictures, namely, the performance of both the expressive elements and the seeing shape what is seen.

10 Materiality

Husserl favors a layered model of picture consciousness, which is to say, he thinks that the physical thing is primarily constituted and founds the picturing act as an act of seeing-in. However, if I am right with my claim that Husserl’s thesis about the “physicality” of the picture thing is the wrong move, then we should conclude that the “pure” materiality of the picture must be conceived as the *limit* of what we see in it. In one of his essays on Cy Twombly, Barthes introduces the idea of gestures as one of the limits of visibility. Gestures are differentiated from signs and messages since they produce a “surplus” to meaning: gestures are the “verge of vision” (Barthes 1985, 166), as he says. The *gestureness of pictures* make up the specific materiality of pictures, though—as we see in digital images and certain types of photography—the gestureness is there only in a privative mode, as the attempt to hide its materiality. Drawings are not, as one might assume, simply lines on paper,

as they include a whole rhetorical and bodily system of curves, shapes, tensions, relations, and, finally, a *ductus* (Barthes 1985, 164), by which is meant the very action and movement that implies a trajectory of the hand *and* the eye. As Barthes writes, “the line, however subtle, light, or uncertain it may be, always refers to a force, to a direction; it is an *energon*, a labor that reveals—which makes legible—the trace of its pulsion and its expenditure. The line is a visible action” (Barthes 1985, 170).

11 Klee’s theory of formation [*Gestaltungslehre*] as an example

In the preceding part of the paper, I outlined a critique of Husserl’s theory of pictures and hinted at some alternative ways of conceiving images. In the paper’s final section I intend to sketch an example of what I (roughly) outlined above, by reflecting on Klee’s theory of picture formation and a concrete example.¹⁵

As I proposed, perceiving pictures and art work should be conceived as a formative process, within which the *seen* and *perceived* is a dynamic result of a formation of the object in the act of participation in it. Both sides are not statically conceived, as they are taken in Husserl’s phenomenological analysis, but they are dialectically related: the act of seeing constitutes what is visible and what is visible constitutes what can be seen. The act of seeing pictures is, hence, not a simple act of “seeing-in,” but a complex network of articulating and forming (*bilden*) both seeing and seen. As Ernst Cassirer wrote, encountering a picture (or a work of art) implies “repeating and reconstructing the creative process by which it has come into being” (Cassirer 1944, 149). Pictures, conceived dialectically, are plastic in their nature. In his *Bauhaus* lectures Paul Klee worked out a theory of picture formation [*Gestaltungslehre*] that takes the plastic nature of picturing into account, and which ultimately conceives the whole culture—the living symbol of which is the *Bauhaus* itself—as a shaped plastic formation.¹⁶ According to Klee, to see a picture means to see the plastic organization of its main elements, as they organize themselves in their organic *Gestalt* through the perceptual articulation of the interpreter. The function of imaging, according to Klee, is to make this organization *visible* by explicitly imagining (*bilden*) and forming (*bilden*) it, the first level of which includes the use of shaping elements, such as line, point, and plane. Klee’s art is based on the idea that art makes visible the *forming process* rather than the form,

¹⁵ I am adding this section for a demonstration of what I have dealt with so far within the realm of abstract depiction. On a first glance it could be the case that Klee’s picture is linguistically constituted by signs, but as it turns out, the abstract patterns on the canvas are an image *because* these patterns can be seen as the image of an organic process. This interpretation is possible because Klee uses in his painting forms and “scribbles,” *in which* an organic process can be seen. Simple scribbles or simple patterns on a canvas certainly do not make this painting an image. In other words, Klee does not operate with *signs* of organic processes, which the viewer must interpret as *standing for* organic processes; rather, the way these patterns are carried out and “shaped” are the *form we see* organic processes in nature.

¹⁶ See Klee 1991. One can see this notion working in Husserl’s overall theory as well (see *Crisis*, 113; the term here is “Sinngelbilde”).

the idea of which is prominent in German Expressionism, too.¹⁷ Imaging and picturing are, as Klee states in his diaries, “a simile to the creation” (entry 1008). Since it is not the purpose of this paper to give a full interpretation of Klee’s theory, I shall demonstrate the formative process by referring to one of his later works, entitled “Feuerquelle” [*Spring of Fire*], which he created in 1938 [please check <http://www.kunst-edition.org/bilder/jpg/18123.jpg> for an online copy of Klee’s image].

The elements of this picture include (1) basic elements, such as colors between green red and brown, figurative lines, and light/dark shadings; (2) shapes, such as a black point, surrounded by blue, a black form (similar to a comma) with a green ring; (3) a black form (similar to a leaf); (4) a black form with two dots in a square field; and (5) a longer central form (similar to an oil lamp).

At first glance, we might come to the conclusion that Klee’s painting can be taken as a good example of Goodman’s theory; for one could think that the forms presented by Klee on the green-red background and held together by the frame, *stand for something else* than themselves and that all signifying elements taken together constitute the symbolic meaning of the painting. I contend that this approach is unconvincing, however, since a detailed interpretation can show how the elements—*before* we take them to be *signs*—are transformed into formations, and that the picture as something *in* the organization constitutes itself throughout the process of looking at and articulating it.

We should first take into account that Klee tried to present his theory of formation as an *organic* theory. His artistic elements are all taken from natural processes and transformed into what Barthes calls “gestures.” The forms and elements that we see all have a certain tension, they display kinesthetic movements, and they show especially the line as a dynamic element and as the main factor for the creation of difference and the configurational aspect of the picture. (a) The *line* separates and forms the organization through inscribing itself like a flash on the background; (b) The *point* is an element that is centered around itself, closed, without outward movement, but taken as the beginning of a movement; (c) the *comma* is, as the synthesis of *point* and *line*, the next step of the movement where the point goes out of itself and develops into a new form, namely a sprout; and (d) the leaf is the next step of the forming movement coming out of the sprout by differentiating itself into several sprouts. By scanning with our eyes over the longer black form and line we experience the picture coming into being, which represents Klee’s attempt to let us see the *process* of how something, here the organic *Gestalt*, comes into being as an *organism*. The articulated seeing is the very process that we should *see in* the picture. In this way, Klee’s painting is highly reflective, since it takes *itself* to be the picture object. What it ultimately tries to picture is the cosmic process of transforming elements into a dynamic occurrence, but it does not do this through signifying processes, but through the concrete “work” of the configurational aspects and elements of the painting. For Klee, every movement of point and line *is* a picture of the transformative and synthetic nature of the cosmos within

¹⁷ Heidegger was also interested in this aspect of Klee’s art, which he calls “Bildsamkeit von Welt” (Heidegger 1993, 10) [I do not know how one could possibly translate the word “Bildsamkeit”].

which we participate through our attempt to understand the painting.¹⁸ The painting, in short, is the *picture of a plant*, though this is not immediately visible, since the picture constitutes itself throughout the process of articulated seeing.

To sum up, I added this section in order to offer a demonstration of what I have dealt before within the realm of abstract depiction. At first glance, it could be suggested that Klee's picture is linguistically constituted by signs, but as it turns out, the abstract patterns on the canvas are an image *because* these patterns can be seen as the image of an organic process. This interpretation is possible, because Klee uses in his painting forms and "scribbles," *in which* an organic process can be seen. Simple scribbles or simple patterns on a canvas certainly do not make this painting an image. In other words, Klee does not operate with *signs* of organic processes, which the viewer must interpret as *standing for* organic processes; rather, the way these patterns are carried out and "shaped" are the *form* in which we *see* organic processes.

12 Conclusion

In sum, speculatively formulated, pictures establish themselves through our *own* shaping power and faculty of formation, which we must find *in* the object. What we see in the formations of pictures is ultimately a formative power, and it is as such that we are able to understand pictures as something that is not natural, but, rather, *of ourselves*. The fact that Husserl never considered a dynamic model of plastic picture perception and that he falls outside of the German tradition of thinking about formations [*Bildungen*] and *Kunstgestaltung* (see Bunge 1996), is probably due to his roots in Positivism, rather than in German Idealism and Romanticism.

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¹⁸ For Klee's conceptions of nature that went into the painting see Harlan (1981).

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