

# Phänomenologische Forschungen

Phenomenological Studies  
Recherches Phénoménologiques

Im Auftrag der  
Deutschen Gesellschaft für phänomenologische Forschung  
herausgegeben von

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Jahrgang 2009

FELIX MEINER VERLAG  
HAMBURG

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Christian Lotz

# The Historicity of the Eye. A Phenomenological Defense of the Culturalist Conception of Perception

## Abstract

Against a stream of culturally oriented scholars some scholars in aesthetics, such as Arthur Danto and Noel Carroll, have maintained that there is a sense of "seeing" and visual recognition that does not depend upon historical and cultural practices. This essay shows that Danto's assumption of a difference between a "core" and an "extended" form of perception and visual recognition should be rejected. The underlying argument of my considerations in this essay is the following: the distinction between a "pure" and an "extended" perception or visual perception is untenable, since, as a phenomenological reflection can reveal, our normal mode of perception is always extended. In this vein, it is argued here that there is, after all, only one mode of perception and that Danto's position is based on abstractions from the real phenomenon. Consequently, whereas Danto maintains that it makes sense to talk about a "natural" form of seeing, this essay argues that "seeing" is itself a culturally defined way of comportment, and that assumptions about naturalistically defined perceptual core processes turn out to be idealized constructions.

## I. Introduction

The overall question of how we should understand the nature of works of art is in philosophical aesthetics usually intermingled with certain positions regarding the acts that constitute the relation between the spectator and the object. These acts include the acts of perception, seeing, and interpretation. Culturalists in the Hegelian and in the hermeneutic tradition display a tendency to understand aesthetics and art perceptions as being culturally defined. Though Hegel himself never hold the position that perceptions are relative, culturalists, such as Jonathan Crary<sup>1</sup> and historical materialists, such as Norman Bryson<sup>2</sup> and Marx Wartofsky<sup>3</sup>, claimed that perception itself as well as the way we see depend upon and is influenced by social and historical processes.

<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Crary: *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the 19th Century* (October Books), Cambridge 1992.

<sup>2</sup> Norman Bryson: *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze*, New Haven 1983.

<sup>3</sup> Marx Wartofsky: *The Paradox of Painting: Pictorial Representation and the Dimensionality of Visual Space*. In: *Social Research*, 51 (1984), 863-883.

Against this stream of culturally oriented scholars (who are mainly not analytically oriented) some scholars in aesthetics, such as Arthur Danto and Noel Carroll, have recently maintained that there is a sense of "seeing" and perception that is not influenced, transformed, defined or part of *any* historical and cultural practice. Indeed, Danto maintains that there is a "core" form of seeing, a core form of visual recognition and a core form of perception on the most basic level, that is neither cultural nor historical, which is separate from a second – "extended" – form of perception, the latter of which he defines as a form of symbolic perception. The question of how to understand perception in general, and of how to understand the nature of depictive consciousness and seeing in particular, is of course intertwined with questions about art, the relation of which I will not discuss in this essay.

I take Danto's and Carroll's position as outlined in their essays, *Seeing and Showing*<sup>4</sup> and *Modernity and the Plasticity of Perception*<sup>5</sup> as good examples of a non-culturalist position regarding seeing and perception, inasmuch as they both claim that there is a "natural" way of seeing and a pictorial depiction of that is independent from any cultural and historical process. With their claims they are returning, it seems to me, not only to a "layer-model" of perception that was favored by some phenomenologists (such as Husserl)<sup>6</sup> at the beginning of the last century, but also to a form of naïve naturalism that tries to establish the subject as essentially outside of and independent from what it apprehends. In contrast to the layer-model of perception, prominently found in Danto and Carroll, I will maintain in this essay that their position regarding perception should be rejected both on phenomenological and dialectical grounds.

More specifically, I will argue against Danto and Carroll first by pointing out that the way they set up the distinction between a "core" and an "extended" way of visual perception is not convincing, since they miss the true nature of visual perception, which is, as I will maintain by exploiting some of Heidegger's, Gadamer's and Merleau-Ponty's insights, *in itself* hermeneutical and historical.

<sup>4</sup> Arthur Danto: *Seeing and Showing*. In: *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 59/1 (2001), 1-9.

<sup>5</sup> Noel Carroll: *The Plasticity of Perception*. In: *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 59/1 (2001), 11-17.

<sup>6</sup> Husserl's case is more complicated since Husserl defends a theory of perception and vision that is not reducible to a core-theory of perception, such as Danto's theory. In the *Analyses of Passive Synthesis*, for example, he presents a rather complex analysis of perception. Nevertheless, Husserl also defends a theory of foundational acts. Theoretical acts are the basis for non-theoretical acts, such as willing, desiring, and valuing. Both Cassirer and Heidegger reject this foundational model (see Heidegger: *Being and Time* (1927), San Francisco 1962, section 15, especially p. 96; also see Ernst Cassirer: *The Logic of the Cultural Sciences*. Tr. S.G. Lofts. New Haven 2000. 61-77).

In this connection, I will show that the distinction that Danto introduces between a "pure" and a "symbolic" form of vision is itself derived from a third concept of perception that is presupposed for the two modes of seeing that Danto and Carroll have in mind.

## II. *Outline of Danto's Approach*

I would like to briefly outline Danto's considerations before I proceed with my critique of them. In his essay from 2001, entitled "Seeing and Showing," as well as in his answer to commentators entitled "The Pigeon Within Us All," Danto tries to establish a difference between what he calls a "core" and an "extended" conception of visual experience. His attempt to establish this distinction has a main focus, namely, to reject a certain form of culturalism and historical materialism, the theories of which claim, according to Danto, that human vision is itself an artifact.<sup>7</sup> Put differently, Danto is rejecting the idea that human vision is historically dependent on certain practices of pictorial representation. Accordingly, Danto claims that the ability to identify certain denotations in pictorial representations is universally possible and not dependent on pictorial practices of *showing* pictures. This leads him to posit a difference between pictures and symbols, for example, horse-pictures, and horse-symbols.<sup>8</sup> Whereas *pictures* of horses, especially because of their resemblance to what they represent, are universally identifiable and based on "nonassociative learning",<sup>9</sup> the *symbolic meanings* that might be connected to the pictures, are *established* and constituted in a historical manner. What then changes over time and what is historically defined, are our practices of showing what we see in paintings, drawings, and photos. For example, a horse painted by Marc, compared with a horse painted by Klee, are certainly based on different styles of showing, but from this we should not infer that they saw different horses in their real lives, according to Danto. "I have no doubt," as he puts it, "that Giotto and his contemporaries saw the world – trees, sky, mountains – precisely the way we do."<sup>10</sup> Put differently, the act of seeing that establishes the picture-relation must be presupposed for all the modes of artistic showing, so that when two painters paint the same motif, though they might show what they both see in a different way, they both not only see essentially the same object before they begin with their work, but also can identify the same object after their work is done. Giotto would be able to

<sup>7</sup> Danto: *Seeing and Showing*, 1.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

see the same in Klee's painting as Marc. Indeed, after the work is finished, both artists would "identify the shapes"<sup>11</sup> as horses even though the way in which the horses are shown might differ substantially: The identification of shapes "has something to do with the eye, as the organ of visual information," as Danto puts it, "but it has nothing to do with the eye as historical."<sup>12</sup> Danto's claim is mainly backed up by Fodor's theory of a supposed "cognitive impenetrability of perception."<sup>13</sup> Danto's reference to Fodor comes with the background of a tradition that separates the process of vision from the inferential process. For example, in his response to Churchland Fodor claims that "you read (spot automobiles) by making educated inferences from properties of things that your visual system was evolved to detect; shape, form, color, sequence and the like [...] educating the inferences [does not, C.L.] alter[s] the perceptual apparatus."<sup>14</sup> Accordingly, Fodor assumes two layers in a perceptual process: (1) the core visual information (impenetrable) becomes combined with (2) logical and conceptual activities, the model of which Danto presupposes for his claims. According to this model, perception itself cannot be trained and changed. It is rather the conceptual apparatus and the inferences drawn that can historically change.

In this way, practices of showing, in Danto's approach, are sharply distinguished from acts of seeing. Cultural decisions are made about picturing, but not about seeing.<sup>15</sup> Returning to a Cartesian model of thought, Danto claims that the hand but not the eye belongs to culture.<sup>16</sup> He further explains his thesis by referring to the animal world of pigeons, claiming that pigeons see the same world we see, and that, as such, both the pigeon and the human see something identical when they look at a work of art. When my pigeon-friend looks at a Giotto fresco, my feathered friend "sees" something that I see as well, though my vision, in addition to its natural core, seems also to be "embedded" in a cultural network of beliefs and opinions that is not shared by the pigeon: "In us, however, the minimal visual experience is only the hard core of *extended* visual experience. It is embedded in a dense network of beliefs, associations, and attitudes we have acquired in a course of life."<sup>17</sup> Moreover, "the pigeon," as Danto

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 3.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Jerry A. Fodor: A Reply to Churchland's 'Perceptual Plasticity and Theoretical Neutrality'. In: *Philosophy of Science*, 55/2 (1988), 188-198; 188.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 194.

<sup>15</sup> Danto: *Seeing and Showing*, 5.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. 6.

<sup>17</sup> Arthur Danto: *The Pigeon Within Us All*. In: *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 59/1 (2001), 39-44; 42.

puts it, "perceives something invariant between a work of art and something that looks exactly like a work of art but is not."<sup>18</sup>

### III. *The Failure of Danto's Theory*

Before I briefly outline my critique of Danto's and Carroll's<sup>19</sup> model of perception, let me first note that I am neither interested in this essay in their rejection of the claim that depictions can change the way we see the world; rather, in what follows I would like to focus on the model of perception that both Danto and Carroll use in their reflections so that I can show that this model is inappropriate as a description of the nature of perception and visual recognition. What I have called the "layer-theory" of perception is based on a dualistic and naturalistic view of the human perceptive situation, which is generated by an abstraction from the real phenomenon of perception. Eye versus hand, shape versus symbol, picture versus culture, seeing versus showing, vision versus inference, are only some of those dualisms introduced by those authors on the conceptual level. I do not find this account of how to understand perception in general, and visual perception in particular, very convincing, especially since it is ultimately based on a "scanner" theory of perception, which is connected to a certain type of psychologism and intellectualism. According to this view, the human eye scans the world and takes in "pure" visual information, before secondary intellectual processes select and transform this information through processes, such as attention, judgment and interpretation. Though my critique should for phenomenologists come at no surprise, it seems to me nevertheless necessary to start a critical dialogue with theories mentioned above, even if the gap between cognitive theories of and phenomenological approaches to perception seem to be unbridgeable.

The underlying argument of my considerations is the following: the distinction between a "pure" and an "extended" perception or visual perception is untenable, for, as a phenomenological reflection can reveal, our normal mode of

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 43. - We can already at this point see how difficult it is to even *describe* the pigeon's vision, for how is it possible that the pigeon sees something *like* a work of art if it has not any conceptual or interpretatory context available?

<sup>19</sup> Following Danto's basic claims, Carroll takes up Danto's distinctions, by arguing against culturalists such as Benjamin, that we should draw a distinction between *seeing* and *noticing*. "Seeing," he claims, is the culturally independent mode of perception, whereas "noticing" is influenced by art and cultural processes (Carroll: *The Plasticity of Perception*, 15). Drawing a distinction between the act of perception ("perception") and what is perceived in those acts ("perceptions"), he claims that perceptions can change (we see different things in different times), whereas perception itself does not change (ibid. 13).

perception is *always* extended. There is ultimately only *one* mode of perception, the *phenomenon*, which is presupposed for any abstraction à la Fodor and Danto. Thus, the assumption of a "pure" form of perception in general and a pure form of depiction in particular is a conceptual and idealized *construction*. Consequently, Danto's theory does not shed light on the perceptual process itself.

### 1. Seeing and Perception

Whereas Danto maintains that it makes sense to talk about a "pure" form of seeing, I argue that "seeing" is itself a culturally defined way of comportment. The talk of a "core perception" in distinction from an "extended perception" is itself only meaningful, if understood as an artificial distinction that has its genesis in a form of perception that is neither pure nor extended.

We should first note that in our everyday life and everyday compartments we usually do not specifically perform acts of seeing, if we mean by "seeing" a purely visual process. While we are concerned with our lives, and our projects, and while we are dispersed in our various tasks, vision *as* vision is not present. For example, while I am writing this essay I am directed towards the meaning of my words. The black and white of the ink is not "there" for me while I am typing. I am interested neither in the colors, nor in the font, nor in the specific form of my monitor. I *overlook* these aspects of my world. I do not see shapes while I am typing, nor do I see the white space in between the words. In this way, my perception transcends the black and white formations and makes them disappear. In a certain sense, seeing is a form of blindness. From time to time I can indeed become aware of specific letters, their forms, or their shapes, but we should underline that I do not "see" them, even if I pay attention to them *as* shapes; rather, I see them *as* shaped letters, as configured words, as gestalt formations, as something to correct, as strange, etc. This just means that things are around us in our world of practices, and that things have their place and our worlds are structured in accordance with the significance that things have in relation to the overall concern of our situations. If I am the cleaning person cleaning the office I will not see words, or something to be read; rather, I will see something to be cleaned. What the cleaning person *sees* when entering my office space is not the same world that I see when I enter my office. The cleaning person does not see philosophical masterworks, such as Hegel's *Phenomenology*, but rather, something to be dusted. Both I and the cleaning person perceive things around us as significant parts of our perceptive situations, which is to say, that the things we perceive are *seen out of* the worlds to which they belong,

which Heidegger characterized as the environmental mode of perception.<sup>20</sup> According to Heidegger's analysis, a non-circumspensive way of dealing with my environment would not really "see" anything, for it would remain unclear *what* exactly could be seen *as* what in such a case.

Accordingly, I do not first see certain things as disconnected from my environment and *then* bestow them with meaning and significance; I do not first see colors and shapes that I synthesize in my mind and then on the basis of conceptual processes transform them into seeable things. When I enter my office every morning, I do not have to make sense of shapes and forms; rather, the situation *already* makes sense to me because I *already* understand everything that I *could* see as being part of the concerns that make up my situation. Everything I *could* see in my office is understood out of my life as being determined through the institution of the university, the task of education, and working in my office. Vision and visual perception are usually not, in themselves, part of those concerns; only in exceptional situations do I begin to pay attention to things in my environment as having specific visual properties. For example, when I look for a book on my bookshelves and I am unable to find it, I begin to look for something that is red. In this case, I will indeed look for a "reddish" book. However, while this significantly reconfigures the perceptual situation of being in my office, even in this case I do not see "pure" shapes or "pure" colors, as Danto seems to suggest. I would never find my book if I were looking only for colors. The color here is not present in a pure visual mode; rather, the color is perceived as a form of significance and expressiveness, namely, as being "bookish" and as being there for me as something that will help me to find the book for which I am searching. Color is from the start on *meaningful* and receives its significance by the mode within which it is apprehended as belonging to a certain perceptual configuration. "Yellow" is not the same for an artist who wants to paint like Albers as it is for me, when I wear a "yellow" shirt during my vacation in Hawaii. "Yellow" is *perceptually* different for me and the artist, as it is impossible to see "yellow" as purely and without meaning. It is rather impossible to perform a pure act of visual perception, since everything I *could* focus on in a visual mode, such as colors and shapes, are *always-already part of* an environment and *apprehended* as a moment of the whole that I have understood prior to any focus on visual properties of things *in* that world.<sup>21</sup> Both Fodor and Danto, do not include the temporality of perception in their conceptions; rather, they construct

<sup>20</sup> Martin Heidegger: *The History of the Concept of Time* (1925). Bloomington 1992. §§ 18-23.

<sup>21</sup> Accordingly, Fodor's assumption of a core process of vision (seeing yellow) is the result of theoretical fiction: he *imagines* how it would be like to see something without inclusion of the "hermeneutical *as*."

perception as something that occurs in an absolute presence, which ultimately leads to their inability of taking the future moment of perception into account.

I have to bring myself – through a different practice of seeing – into an artificial position, if I really want to see “shapes,” for there are no shapes in normal perception. Accordingly, Danto’s claim “that we interpret what we sense” is incorrect.<sup>22</sup> It is, rather, the other way around: We are able to sense, because, in some meaningful way and in advance we have understood significance and meaning. “Pure vision,” as Danto’s has it, only appears as a possibility for philosophical reflection if we *abstract from* the cultural *unity* of perception and thereby focus on a “universal” core.

In addition, it seems to be impossible to strip my perceptual experiences of the other elements that determine them; thus, for example, the claim that we can perform a pure act of seeing presupposes that we are able to forget our hearing, our touching, our feelings, moods, memories, anticipations, expectations, our motor intentionality, and our life, each of which are moments of our perceptive situations. If we are allowed to speak of a pure act of seeing and visual perception, as Danto does, then we should be precise about its nature: a pure act of seeing (as other pure acts of sensible modes of experience) can never be experienced as such, since our talking about them presupposes (1.) an *abstraction* from our usual experience, (2.) an *idealization of this act*, and (3.) a transformation into an essential structure. To be sure, no one ever has “seen” properties that we usually connect to visual perception, such as light, color, or shapes, given that what we see is always already significant and meaningful. In this vein, even colors are moments of gestalt configurations, which are themselves determined by fore- or background configurations. We should rather claim that we do not recognize visual “properties” at all since drawing a distinction between “properties” and the thing to which those properties belong presupposes a *specific* relation towards what we have *already* perceived in a different mode.<sup>23</sup> In other words, making this distinction presupposes a *specific* visual practice of looking. Danto is not aware of the *genesis* of the concepts he uses for his claims. Only because of his genetic blindness is he able to claim an *immediacy* of vision.

At this point in our reflection, we are able to come to a first conclusion, namely that we *never experience* what Danto claims we do, namely having “core” perceptions. Even with the greatest attention and visual concentration, we always see “books,” “cars,” “paintings,” “frames,” “a friend,” “a face,” etc. One could argue that despite the fact that it might be true that we are usually

<sup>22</sup> Danto: Seeing and Showing, 8.

<sup>23</sup> We could at this point refer to Husserl’s attempt to reconstruct the genesis of certain disjunctions, such as thing and property, in *Experience and Judgment*.

not performing pure acts of seeing and visual recognition, it still may be that through a reflective analysis we must come to the conclusion that we have to *presuppose* a pure act of seeing as being part of the overall perceptive situation. The claim that we have to presuppose a pure act of seeing, which is itself not present in my usual perceptive situations would be identical with the claim that the pure act of visual recognition is *unconscious*. This would be an interesting claim, for it would mean that the act of seeing would not be aware of itself while performed and “embedded” in extended perception. However, the claim that there is a seeing without the awareness of seeing equals the claim that there is pain without having pain. If seeing and perception would not have an inner transparency, which we might understand in the Heideggerian sense as understanding or in the Sartrean sense as pre-reflective, then it would not be seeing at all, for an unconscious seeing could not be recognized by the perceiver *while* he or she is perceiving. As Heidegger puts it in *Being and Time*, “when we talk in an ontically figurative way of the *lumen naturale* in man, we have in mind nothing other than the existential-ontological structure of this entity; that it is in such a way as to be its ‘there.’ To say that it is ‘illuminated’ means that *as* Being-in-the-world it is cleared in itself, not through any other entity, but in such a way that it is itself the clearing.”<sup>24</sup>

In the phenomenological sense of a *significant* sensible world, it becomes clear that within every perceptive situation there is a historical and cultural situation, that is dependent on the concrete concerns and tasks that determines the perceptive situation of agents. Seeing, as Heidegger puts it, is not meaning put onto physical things; rather, seeing is always *seeing as*.<sup>25</sup> Both cannot, as Danto suggests, be separated from each other. We always-already have interpreted and understood our world as one within which we live and one within which we circumspetively configure our perceptual alignments. World is the condition of the possibility for reference; rather than the other way around. Accordingly, we should be rather skeptical about the distinction that Danto introduces, since if it would make sense to speak of a distinction between a core act of visual perception and an extended act of perception, it should be possible to perform such an act. If it is not possible, as I tried to argue, then the pure act becomes an intellectualistic construction and hence, it is no longer an act of perception. What Danto has in mind are natural conditions of perceptions, for as he states: “visual processes are cognitively impenetrable. How we see at the basic level relevant to adaption is unaffected by what we know, or what we believe, as much so as cell

<sup>24</sup> Heidegger: Being and Time, 171.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* §§ 30.-33.

division.<sup>26</sup> Yet, it is highly questionable whether it makes sense to speak of *visual* processes, if those processes are defined in a natural or biological way since biological processes are unable to see anything. Eyes and the retina, as such, do not see anything; for seeing requires an inner transparency for the eye and a disappearance of the eye to make one able to see. The claim that we must have an eye if we want to be able to see does not tell us anything about the act of seeing itself. As a consequence, Danto is unable to outline *what* we would see if we *imagined* that we *would* live in a world of pure vision, for visual "processes" are wordless.

## 2. Seeing and Practices

Danto not only makes the claim about the distinction between core and extended perception; he also applies this distinction to *specific* forms of perceptions, such as the visual recognition of/in pictures. For he seems to hold the thesis that pictures are connected to visual recognition since they are about what one sees. However, in this essay I am not concerned with the nature of pictorial perception<sup>27</sup>; rather, I would like to show how Danto's account of visual recognition mistakenly allows him to introduce a non-cultural level of visual recognition only because he presents an idealized account of visual recognition that does not take into account that we *never* see pictures "as such," but that we take them to be cultural and historical. In what follows, I shall establish how this happens.

It is highly questionable whether Danto's use of "the" mode of visual recognition makes sense. Similar to Husserl's mentalist phenomenology, Danto takes all forms of visual recognition to be one form of non-cultural visuality. However, we never see *mere* pictures, and we are instead always confronted with certain *practices of picturing*, such as paintings, comics, photography, movies, icons, children-drawings, etc.. Accordingly, the reference to "the" picture presupposes an essentialist move and is unwarranted, given that we do not *first* see some shapes and *then* infer that those are specific forms of showing; rather, it is the other way around. For *before* we are able to say anything about color in a painting, or the line in a children's-drawing, we must have *taken it to be* a product of one of those practices, which means that we must have taken it to be a certain bodily or technical practice. Without a prior understanding of such practices, we would be unable to recognize anything in those pictorial modes, as the example

<sup>26</sup> Danto: Seeing and Showing, 8.

<sup>27</sup> I have outlined my position in: Christian Lotz: Depiction and Plastic Perception. A Critique of Husserl's Theory of Picture Consciousness. In: Continental Philosophy Review, (2/2007), 171-185.

of children, shows who are unable to identify pictures as pictures up to a certain point in their intellectual development.<sup>28</sup> The understanding to which practice the picture-object belongs is part of the very constitution of the picture-object. Pictures are defined by a conflict between the material picture-thing and what is seen in the picture thing, which is the picture-object, as both Wollheim<sup>29</sup> and Husserl<sup>30</sup> have shown. If the conflict between the picture-thing and the picture-object disappears, the awareness of pictures breaks down. For example, if I am no longer aware in the movie theater that the picture-object is projected onto a screen, then I will switch from a picture-consciousness into a normal visual consciousness. Accordingly, seeing a picture includes seeing the picture-thing, which is (and this point is not reflected in Wollheim and Husserl) both *materially* and *practically* defined, in accordance with one of the aforementioned forms, which carries with it specific historically defined ways of "doing" pictures. As Wittgenstein points out in his *Philosophical Investigations*, "seeing" depends upon specific ways of doing and specific attitudes of seeing, in which doing and seeing are intertwined. For example, we do not see the same if we take something to be a painting or if we take it to be an instructional drawing [*Werkzeichnung*].<sup>31</sup>

We must therefore conclude that an a-historically defined visual recognition is an impossibility, since human practices in general and human picture practices in particular are cultural processes. For, indeed, visual recognition is *conceptually* defined as being historical, cultural, and social. Accordingly, simply because pictures *as* pictures are material and hence cultural, we must insist on our thesis that Danto's model of a visual recognition which maintains that we can see pictures non-culturally – i.e. purely naturally – is a construction. Even if we admit that both Giotto and Marc would see a horse in Klee's painting, the fact that they must *take this to belong to a picturing practice* establishes visual recognition as historically determined. Accordingly, only because Giotto, Klee, and Marc belong to a general history of this practice, are they able to recognize similar things.

<sup>28</sup> See John M. Kennedy: Drawing and the Blind. Pictures to Touch. New Haven 1993.

<sup>29</sup> Richard Wollheim: Painting as an Art. Princeton 1990.

<sup>30</sup> Edmund Husserl: Phantasy, Image Consciousness, and Memory (1898-1925). Collected Works Vol. 11. Boston 2005.

<sup>31</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein: Werkausgabe Bd. 1: Tractatus logico-philosophicus. Tagebücher 1914-1916. Philosophische Untersuchungen. Frankfurt a.M 1984, 538.

### 3. Idealization and Intersubjectivity

I would like to add a final point to the argument that I have outlined so far. Danto not only idealizes perception and visual depictions; he also idealizes the natural constitution of the eye, inasmuch as he does not take into account that normal and a-normal make-ups of the eye rule our average perceptive situations.

In this connection, every perceptive situation is ruled by what Husserl called the "average optimality" of perception, by which he meant that a perception can not be addressed as "the" perception, and that it must be conceived as an intersubjectively constituted process, which is ruled by certain pragmatic elements of perceptive situations, such as an average distance to visual objects, or an average bodily posture and positioning towards an object. For example, while there is an average distance for seeing paintings in a museum and an average distance and position for hearing a symphony, these averages are not defined in a naturalistic or an objective way. Seeing is never just seeing of something or recognition of something, but it is always seeing and recognition in certain circumstances, beginning with the bodily situation of oneself. We all know that when we come to close with our eyes to the canvas of a Rembrandt self-portrait we no longer recognize anything. The nearer we come to the painting the less we see the portrait. Visual recognition, accordingly, is only thinkable as a form of bodily positioning and cannot be separated, as Danto maintains. A "cognitively impenetrable" vision is no longer vision and visual recognition. If the lighting in the gallery is too dark, then we will see something totally different. What it *means* to see something on paper or canvas, consequently, is constituted through moments that are not "pure," impenetrable or "physical." Moreover, perception and seeing, in other words, are never static, but always temporally defined. Everything we perceive in our environment has a certain culturally and anthropologically determined average way of "optimal" seeing and perception. In addition, factors, such as near-sightedness and fore-sightedness, do not allow us to speak of *the* "natural" mode of the eye. What Danto calls the "core" of visual recognition is itself never *the* core of such processes, but a core that is itself cultural and hence "normal."

I wonder what Danto would do if someone would go with him without her glasses to the Stedelijk museum in Amsterdam and would explain to him Rembrandt's "Nightwatch" as a painting of blurred Abstract Expressionism, for that is probably what that person would see if she would not wear her glasses. Interestingly, the so called "natural" condition of her eye is not itself part of my seeing and my visual recognition of Rembrandt's "Nightwatch;" rather, what shows itself in this attempt at seeing something is the *non-sameness* of our worlds

and of our perception. Pictorial identification and any form of perception is never a pure natural or first-person visual process (whatever this might mean); in contrast, such acts are processes that are intersubjectively constituted. Similarly, we cannot just *in abstracto* claim that the Chinese person and the Western person would see the same thing when confronted with a cow painted by a Chinese painter and a cow painted by a Western painter; for, alternatively, the process of visual recognition is essentially an intersubjective constitution, during which we try to *make sure* that the other "sees" what we see. We cannot simply assume that we see, identify and know; rather, we only "identify" certain things if we enter a certain social practice of identifying. Otherwise we cannot explain why the Chinese and the Western painter would even begin to entertain a dialogue about their paintings and ask each other whether they actually see the same object. The exchange, accordingly, does not start at the level of "showing;" rather, seeing itself is an "exchange" of perspectives. As Husserl has it, *the* object of perception is intersubjectively constituted, for "the" object is identical with the ideal point of a shared intentionality, i.e. the ideal point of all perspectives.

In this way, identification is itself a public act. This thesis becomes even more prominent when we think about our museum and exhibition practice, by means of which we try to *establish* a shared view of the objects that we "see" in the galleries. Seeing, in other words, is *always already* social and cultural insofar as we see objects *as* being seen by others. We see *with* others. To put it in a Hegelian language: it is "we" who sees. There are no objects in this world that are "only" there for "me." However, this should not lead us – as Danto maintains – to the conclusion that seeing is in some naturally defined way universal. Everything that is for me is there for me as being there for others in a cultural way: books, walls, tables, chairs, cars, lawns, forests, oceans, etc. As there is no private language, there are no private perceptions. Finally, Danto's whole way of thinking about this issue and his *conception* of perception is a perfect example of a *historical* view of seeing and visual perception, given that it is based on the modern conception of seeing as *precision*, which is influenced by a certain form of a naturalistic theory of the mind. Let me underline that the point that I try to make is conceptual. I believe that we should say that seeing *is* cultural, instead of saying that seeing is *part of* or causally determined by a culture.

Accordingly, we should dismiss Danto's claim about a pure form of seeing that is a-historical and non-cultural. Indeed, Danto's claim that "there must be an impenetrable core of perceptual processing so universally distributed that we all live in the same world"<sup>32</sup> should be rejected because the "sameness" of our worlds is not a *natural property* of these worlds, nor is it rooted in the natural

<sup>32</sup> Danto: *The Pigeon Within Us* All. 40.

constitution of the eye; rather, it is *established* intersubjectively through historical developments and cultural activities. Importantly, however, this does not mean that seeing is "relative," which is a concern that seems to rule the anti-culturalist theory of vision.<sup>33</sup> In this connection, Wollheim (with Danto) claims that the ability to see something in pictures is an invariant in all cultures and hence cannot be relative. But this is not really the point. For I am not arguing against the possibility of a possible invariant in seeing and visual recognition. My point is conceptual: the answer to the question of what it means to see something or to see something in pictures cannot be found *without* reference to intersubjective practices. In this vein, one could argue that psychological examples easily show that seeing is cultural invariant. For example, as Fodor claims, the fact that human beings see lines with different length in the famous Muller-Lyer illusion shows that vision is invariant.<sup>34</sup> However, Fodor and Danto overlook that seeing in this psychological example is a very specific – highly cultural – *way* of looking at things, and thus by no means is it a natural mode. The spectator has to bring him- or herself in a very specific relation towards the world, which depends upon a *comparison* between a possible objective world and the world of vision. This comparative mode of seeing is itself one *specific* practice of looking at objects. That we "see" two lines, one above the other in Muller-Lyer illusion is *already* a cultural process, for below and above, left and right, and the difference between one and two is by no means natural. Finally, we should note that there is no vision without a body schema, which is not only a system of certain anatomical possibilities, but is also defined by gestured movements. Gestured movements are bodily movements within certain spaces that are already culturally formed: places, houses, forests, cradles, and the simple gestures of mothers and fathers when they hold their babies. "Holding," carrying around, etc, are *formed* and *gestured* movements that do not allow us to speak of an "impenetrability" of vision, as exemplified in the Muller-Lyer experiment. Seeing two lines as different or as similar presupposes a body schema, which has been developed. If my body schema would be disturbed by an accident and my style of body movements would change, I would not see the sameness of two lines, but something that escapes my spatial world. Given these two points, it is impossible to take examples, such as the Muller-Lyer illusion, as evidence for an impenetrated core vision; rather, they are, we might say with Merleau-Ponty, expressions of a domesticated and scientifically dominated world.

<sup>33</sup> Richard Wollheim: *What the Spectator Sees*. In: Bryson, Norman (eds.): *Visual Theory. Painting and Interpretation*. New York 1991. 101-150; 114.

<sup>34</sup> Jerry A. Fodor: *Observation Reconsidered*. In: *Philosophy of Science*, 51/1 (1984). 23-43; 32-35.

#### 4. Seeing and Noticing

Before closing, I would like to add a few considerations about Carroll's extension of Danto's thesis. As mentioned above, Carroll is concerned with Danto's thesis within the context of modernity, and particularly Benjamin's claim that modern cultural techniques changed the way that we perceive the world. At a decisive point in his article, Carroll writes: "Seeing, in this context, refers to what the faculty of visual perception does automatically; 'noticing' refers to the way in which we can organize what we see, often as the result of learning. 'Noticing' for my purposes, is a matter of focusing on details of what we see, of finding certain objects or structures salient."<sup>35</sup>

The distinction that Carroll draws between seeing and noticing fails for reasons that are similar to the reasons for the failure of Danto's distinction, for – as I have argued – in our usual perceptive situations we never distinguish between two such levels, one of which scans the environment, the other of which makes a selection from what was scanned. In contrast, the visible world is always given in certain configurations that change *as a whole* when we "notice" certain aspects in it. In Carroll's model of perception, the act of noticing is taking something out of what is somehow "there." It is, as he puts it, a "focusing on details." However, nothing is "there" for us, unless it is given from the beginning on in some organized or arranged configuration and organization. There is always a background-foreground-structure, as well as light and differentiations through motor-intentionality. We would not see anything if the whole world would be only blue. I never see just the white of the wall; rather I see it in shades and in relation to that which is differentiated from the wall. In his *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty argued at length against what he calls "intellectualism," rejecting the thesis that attention and noticing usually operate with a passive taking in of sensual data or information ("seeing" in Carroll's approach) while an active, but *noncreative* act of attentive directedness ("noticing" in Carroll) is added *on top* of what was seen.<sup>36</sup> Against this model, Merleau-Ponty points out that both levels are really, so long as we consider attention to be a configuration of the *whole* perceptual situation. For noticing (or attention) is not, as Carroll claims, a *taking out* and an act of selection; rather, noticing is the ongoing *reconfiguration* of the whole perceptual field.<sup>37</sup> When I notice that the car in front of me is a BMW, and not a Ford, then I not only select and "focus" on a property that was unconsciously present before I became aware of it. I give

<sup>35</sup> Carroll: *The Plasticity of Perception*. 15.

<sup>36</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty: *The Phenomenology of Perception* (1945). New York 1992. 30-38.

<sup>37</sup> For this thesis see also: Wittgenstein: *Werkausgabe* Bd. 1. 537.

a new meaning to what I see as a whole. All relations of the perceptual situation change with my noticing that there is a BMW in front of me: the driver becomes a BMW driver, the design looks German, and the noise of the car motor suddenly appears to have the "BMW motor sound." Noticing, in other words, is not a form of taking out, but rather the process by which the whole perception changes. If I suddenly notice the beautiful orange in De Kooning's paintings from the 50s, then I not only "focus" on the orange part of the painting, the canvas as a whole changes its character. The relations between the orange, its fleshly-character, and the contrast to the other colors in the paintings, receive new meaning through this reconfiguration. "To pay attention," as Merleau-Poncy puts it, "is not merely further to elucidate pre-existing data, it is to bring about a new articulation of them by taking them as *figures*."<sup>38</sup>

In addition, seeing and noticing are not really differentiated, since even if we would assume that there is something like a "neutral" seeing and taking in, the act of taking in impossibly can take *everything* in, given that it excludes what was just seen and what can be seen soon, as well as what is behind my back, under the car, and outside the house. Due to this temporal and spatial "framing," if such a thing would be possible, seeing as *sach* is partly blind and includes a not-seeing. As Husserl and others have shown, perceptive consciousness already includes absences and invisible parts, such as the backside of things as seen from a specific perspective. Consequently, the distinction that Carroll introduces for clarifying Danto's conceptual framework fails, too.

#### IV. Conclusion

I have argued that Danto's and Carroll's claims about the a-historicity of the eye fails for four reasons: (1.) Our normal way of perceiving is not based on a layer model of perception, according to which we sense first and then interpret. As such, Danto's model of perception is phenomenologically inappropriate. (2.) Visual recognition includes the material aspect of pictures, which is itself based on certain cultural practices of picture-production. Hence visual recognition requires a historical moment. (3.) Visual recognition is based on the intersubjectivity of seeing, and, finally, (4.) the difference between seeing and noticing fails for similar reasons as Danto's main distinction. Seeing and noticing should not be understood as two separate acts. Therefore Danto's and Carroll's layer-model of perception and visual recognition is wrongheaded.

<sup>38</sup> Merleau-Poncy: The Phenomenology of Perception, 35.

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