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Illusion in Painting

An Attempt at Philosophical Interpretation

Erreur ne fait pas compte.

Introduction

One of the postcards on a slightly erotic subject popular in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century shows the following scene: in a turn of the century (Art Nouveau) interior, is a young lady, who flirtatiously points with her finger at her cheek to be kissed; she evidently does so thinking about the man standing behind her, who however, caresses a naturalistic marble female bust placed between him and the woman. An inscription underneath the scene says, *Erreur ne fait pas compte*. Let us leave aside – as indeed will be done throughout the book – the psychoanalytic interpretation of the man's behaviour and illusion. Let us rather highlight the fact that due to the composition – both figures as it were, squeeze the statue between themselves – the marble bust blends with the live model: the boundaries between the image and the original fade. This impression is enhanced by the draped pedestal, which blends with the woman's dress, just like her hand, which looks as if it belonged to the statue (although if it did the arm would be very out of place).

We see all this because we look at the scene sideways, like the photographer who immortalized it. The inscription on the postcard leads us to believe that the man himself can also take our place and look at his illusion. But what does he see when he is lovingly looking at, and touching the marble bust? What would we see if we looked at the scene through his eyes (assuming that his gesture is an expression of a genuine desire, and not a conventional gesture helping him to flirt with the living girl)? The first answer that comes to mind is that we would certainly see the statue which conceals the woman emerging from behind it, and which is so naturalistic, and also so "dressed" as to deceive the infatuated lover. But is it so?

At this point, the distinction proposed by Scheler appears useful, who phenomenologically distinguished between an error and an illusion: an error is a question of inference, and an illusion arises from what is directly presented in perception.

> *In illusion there is, first of all, a certain content, namely, that which I think that I see, sense, or feel. It makes no difference whether I make this or that judgment about this content. If I do judge, a proposition results which is false as regards the actual case, but can be true as regards the illusory phantasm; but I need not to make any judgment at all. However, there is still another element in illusion apart from this content. The mere appearance of the broken stick is certainly not yet an illusion. Illusion consists rather in my taking the state of affairs of the stick's being broken, which is there before me in the appearance, for a real property of the actual stick.*[1]

In short, an illusion is a phenomenon that claims to be something other that it is; it is a lie, which the object is the source of, and to which man is subordinate. What appears to man always appears as it is, man has no influence on it: what he perceives, always objectively exists in some way, namely as the content of what

appears to him. The phenomenon presented in the illusion *is always a fact and as such it is incontestable and unassailable*. Only when man recognizes that what appears before him is real, i.e. that it is something more than just a certain phenomenon, does he become the victim of illusion. As long as he limits himself to the phenomenon, however, there can be no question of illusion.

> Naturally, illusion does not consist in the content of this fact but only in my assignment of this actual content to a level of being other than its own. In the case of error, I can assert a state of affairs which in no sense exists or subsists. This is impossible in the case of illusion, in which that which is „meant" or „intended" always „subsists" in some way or another.[2]

Now, answering the above question, we can say that what the man sees, that is what appears to him, is simply a woman, or rather: the prototype of the statue. This is a fact. Even if he probably feels the marble under his touch, this does not change a thing – following Scheler, we might ask, why should touch be more reliable than the sight?

A man falls into an illusion, when he thinks that that which appears before him is a real property of what he is looking at, i.e. when he acknowledges (it is obviously not about any kind of inference) that all the properties which appear to him, and make him kiss and embrace *de facto* a piece of marble, are real properties of the statue. In short, the man's illusion lies in the fact that he behaves towards the likeness as if it were its model. However, at the moment when he kisses it, he can not be aware of his illusion – he is not aware of the difference between the thing that appears to him and its real properties. To realize this, that is to realize his illusion, he must change perspective and look at himself from the side.

The described postcard is cited here as a good illustration because it seems to epitomize very well the topic of the book.

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It should be mentioned at the onset that the aim of this book – as its title might suggest – is not to write the history of illusionistic painting, but to show a particular way of thinking about painting through the example of a specific tradition, which to some extent has dominated the early modern view on the issues of art. A tradition, which on the one hand is derived from antiquity and on the other, has survived, at least in a residual form, the avant-garde revolution of the early twentieth century. The proper object of the book is therefore, as Berger said, *a way of seeing,* shared at some time by both artists and viewers, which materialized in various ways in *trompe-l'oeil* painting. This *way of seeing* – lasting approximately from the fifteenth to the eighteenth century – obviously consists of permanent elements (*ergon*) and variable ones (*parergon*). In this book we will focus on motifs that have constantly recurred in the reflection on art and have helped to create – to

use here the terminology of Danto – a large, often internally contradictory pre-modernist narrative based on the paradigm of *mimesis*.[3]

Nor is the purpose of this book – despite what may be indicated by its subtitle –to describe the nature of *illusion in painting* understood as illusionism of (figurative) painting. The object of reflection will be certain conventions of perception, a specific although typical for the period "critical-artistic" rhetoric, which reflects as much as co-creates what it advances. It is therefore not about the essence of painting as such, but about what was considered as its essence in a particular period of time.

In other words, the main and most general purpose of this book is to describe what can be called *the myth of the illusionistic image* – a myth according to which it is possible to create an image identical to what it represents that at the same time preserves its own pictorial identity. The proposed reconstruction of the myth in the book is the result of identifying a number of motifs, often woven into a context with which they have nothing in common. The myth arises when – following the example of ancient masters, who in striving to create perfect beauty extracted from individual objects the specific elements recognized by them as the most beautiful – these motifs are being compared. Among these should be included the following questions: what is the essence of an image (painting), of an imitation; what is the relation of art to nature, of artist to God; what is truth in art, and what is illusion, and is the latter essential to art?[4]*

As we can see from this brief outline of the main issues, one of the key elements of such an undertaking will be to describe the functioning of the mechanisms of the illusionistic painting, which seem to have a circular structure.[5] This description at the same time will attempt to translate – to use Marin's expression[6] – the *depth of visibility* (*profondeur de la visibilité*) into the *laterality of legibility* (*latéralité de la lisibilité*).

In the circular structure of an illusionistic image, the beholder occupies a place that does not allow him to see this circularity. He occupies a position in relation to which the poles of this circular movement overlap (illusion – leaving the illusion; painting seen as an object – painting seen as the image of an object). Occupying this position allows (and even requires) him to participate in the "structure" of the illusionistic painting (being mainly the result of the superposition of these poles), but not to describe it. It can only be possible when he looks at the structure from the side, which means that he is excluded from it, but simultaneously can see the distinctly opposite poles, which this time, do not merge. Thus the aim of the book is to create a specific *ekphrasis*, understood as verbal description of visual representation.[7] According to Mitchell, *ekphrasis* involves converting the visible into the verbal by means of the author's pen, and reconverting the verbal into the

visual by the reception of the reader (incidentally, *ekphrasis* also expresses the desire to own and praise a visual object, making it a gift to the reader[8]).

The myth of the illusionistic image will be primarily illustrated through texts: art treatises, philosophical dissertations "of the period," and – when discussing such categories as play, irony, metaphor or model – by other theoretical works. Such heterogeneous instrumentarium seems necessary, because only with its help can we outline the framework in which these issues should be considered.

The examined myth is part of what Rorty calls the *Plato-Kant canon*, i.e. the perception of the world through the prism of the dichotomy reality-appearance. Of course it was Plato who first proposed such a vision, at least from the point of view of the discussed tradition.[9] *Trompe-l'oeil* functions in a world which is divided according to Platonic dichotomy into image and model, in such a way that in the end we can always tell which is image and which is model. At the same time *trompe-l'oeil* belongs to a tradition that undertakes a kind of "reversal" of Plato's thought. While for him the phenomenon was in obvious and irreducible opposition to form, and as such was considered a deceptive appearance, the early modern "Platonism," while keeping the distinctiveness of phenomenon from form, recognizes that the path to understanding form leads precisely through phenomena.[10]

The two main motifs of *the myth of the illusionistic image* are reflected in philosophical texts. The first motif is defined by the "desire" of the work of art to be indistinguishable from what is being represented in it, which on philosophical grounds is an issue tackled by Leibniz.[11] The second theme is delineated by the question related to indiscernibility, i.e. that the work of art, identical with what it represents, ceases to be recognized as a work of art – a problem in turn taken up by Descartes in *Dioptrics,* explaining the mechanism of sight.[12]* The fact that *the myth of the illusionistic image* shares some elements with epistemological issues should not be surprising given its Platonic roots, which, although negatively, closely relate art to knowledge. In this perspective, the category that proves very helpful in linking these two fields is the category of *epistemological metaphor.* As *epistemological metaphor,* the work of art belongs to philosophical discourse. A painting – in this case principally an illusionistic painting – expresses in its own way particular philosophical problems: it can be their illustration, an attempt to solve them, or it may raise them. An image as *epistemological metaphor* seems to escape the purely historical perspective – on the one hand it refers to historically defined philosophical issues, yet their transhistorical character, as it were, affects it. The perspective proposed in this book tries to combine both points of view. The status of the illusionistic image adopted below is best characterized by Hauser, who writes that:

The work of art is at once form and content, an affirmation and a deception, play and revelation, natural and artificial, purposeful and purposeless, within history and out-side of history, personal and superpersonal.[13]

From a historical point of view, the illusionistic painting is *trompe-l'oeil* (from French, "deceive the eye"). The term was coined around 1800[14] to describe the illusionistic still lifes seen by the public in the mid-18th century salons or in the open air in the vicinity of Pont-Neuf in Paris – as one of the forms of popular entertainment.[15] Today, it also describes and designates – although opinions as to the validity of understanding it in this way are divided[16] – much earlier produced still lifes which were given an illusionistic form, and artificial objects imitating real objects (e.g. life-sized porcelain or wooden fruits). Many scholars, however, incorporate in the term *trompe-l'oeil* all types of illusionistic painting, including wall painting.[17] The hyperrealist character of *trompe-l'oeil* is akin to photography (incidentally, one of the first photographs shows a still life), as evidenced by the photographs imitating *trompe-l'oeil*.[18] Some scholars even suggested that sculpture or architecture be considered as such.[19]

An apt illustration of this ambiguity is Marin's article on the subject of *trompe-l'oeil*, which gives two dictionary definitions of the term – it is: 1) a painting, a still life, where objects are depicted in order to produce an illusion (deception); 2) any painting which produces an illusion of reality if viewed from a distance.[20] These definitions are not separate (their lack of separateness will often be made apparent in the subsequent analysis), as the first mentions a specific genre of painting, a particular type of still life; while the second includes both the still life from the first definition (which can also only deceive from a distance), and illusionistic wall painting. The entry quoted by Marin seems to combine two different painting traditions, which in order to achieve the same effect (deception or illusion – we will later discuss these terms in more details) use different methods, and behind which, moreover, are different theoretical assumptions.

Indubitably, still life *en trompe-l'oeil* and illusionistic wall decoration, as we know them from Baroque churches and palaces, are related by their illusionistic character. Already at first glance, however, we can see that they have more differences than similarities – the scale, the type of depicted objects and the content they carry, the place where they are viewed, the function and the technological background. For this reason, it seems justified to consider both genres separately (obviously there is still a continuity between them, not only stylistic, but also historical – wall decorations *en grisaille* contributed to the flourishing of *trompe-l'oeil*, understood as easel still life[21]), and to examine it *toutes proportions gardées* from the point of view of two different (although advancing in the same direction) pictorial paradigms. The wall mural (fresco) is inextricably linked to the question of perspective (illusionistic frescoes were called *prospettive* or *architetture finte*),

and anamorphosis, which came out of it, is in turn associated with the rationalistic way of thinking about the world.[22] *Trompe-l'oeil,* on the other hand due to its close relation to the Dutch still life, appears to grow out of the same paradigm, or, as was pointed out by Alpers, from the standpoint of the empirically oriented philosophy, related to the *camera obscura* and the particular mythology generated around it.[23]

To support this rather idealised opposition of the two traditions, which otherwise have many points in common, particularly in the context of their illusionistic dimension, the following evidence can be found in literature:

> *(...) there is no reason to recognize in northern paintings a greater love for the Creation, but certainly there is a more immediate and direct conception of what painting can reproduce. The Italian aesthetics, however, since Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventure, saw in the works of art spiritual metaphors that could allude to the supernatural world only by virtue of their formal perfection, according to a substantial distinction between the represented thing and its model, that harks back to the Platonic tradition.*[24]

> *The trompe-l'oeil of the Italian masters, whose ancestry can be traced back to the type of "the painter's studio" as still life,* [the so-called 'corners of a study', with the accumulated painting equipment – M.S.] *many times undertaken by the Flemish Cornelis Norbertus Gijsbrecht, is part of a radically different concept, whose motto could be: it is not reality that is beautiful but its elaboration through art.*[25]

This contrast is also made in terms of the structure of the painting:

> *The classical concept posits a pictorial space that opens behind this "membrane"* [the surface of the picture – M.S.]. *When this pictorial space is plausibly related in scale and motif to the actual space of the viewer, a spatial illusion is created. Such illusions are most often articulated architectonically, and are frequently categorized as* trompe-l'oeil. (…) *At its point of origin*, trompe-l'oeil *painting in a narrow sense is exactly the opposite of the idea of a "picture window," and as consequence one emerged simultaneously with the other: the cross section of the visual pyramid is conceived as a fixed, impenetrable surface.*[26]

The difference between these two genres of painting is also underlined by scholars who are interested in the processes of perception of a work of art: the illusionistic still life does not require an active attitude from the viewer (or if so a much weaker one), but the illusionistic fresco does.[27] Admittedly one of the basic disparities is that the Italian art accentuates its pictorial character, and consequently the distance separating art from nature, while northern art strives to minimize this gap, but it is impossible not to notice the aforementioned common features.[28]* First of all the picture considered as one of the earliest examples of *trompe-l'oeil* was created in Italy (J. de' Barbari, *Still-Life with Partridges,* 1504), and its sources are to be found in the Italian intarsia decorations of the fifteenth-century *studiolos,* as well as in German watercolour studies from nature.[29] The common elements

of these traditions – we should also add the paintings showing objects placed in a niche (incidentally, at the origin of the still life genre[30]) – prompt us to apprehend *trompe-l'oeil* in a way that combines both traditions.

In this book, the term *trompe-l'oeil* will be used in a broad sense, to describe every illusionistic painting that, true to its name, aims above all to deceive the eye, and not the mind. Yet the narrower sense of the term will not disappear from the horizon of our considerations. The term *trompe-l'oeil* in the narrower sense will define illusionistic still life related to the paradigm of the *camera obscura*, as opposed to frescoes related to the paradigm of the perspective, whereas in the wider sense it will include both types of painting as a singular *coincidentia oppositorum*. As a result, this ambiguity will affect the title of the book: *Illusion in Painting* will on the one hand indicate illusion understood as a kind of deception, the intention of only some of the paintings; and on the other, the illusive character of figurative painting in general.

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The present book is divided into five chapters. The first chapter, of introductory character, is devoted to the discussion of Gombrich's theses intended to clarify the terminology, especially his methods of use of the word *illusion*. What is more the crucial distinction between illusionistic painting and non-illusionistic painting is put forward. In the second chapter, we outline firstly *the myth of the illusionistic image* and the categories defining it: appearance *vs* reality, the visual character of the latter, the problem of *mimesis,* conventions of treating objects in pictures "as alive"; and secondly, *trompe-l'oeil* is presented as a particular genre and its status within the history of art and philosophy is discussed. The third chapter is an interpretation of the themes in Plato's philosophy, which relate to art: by elucidating the basis of modern "Platonism," it aims to provide the framework for further reflection. The fourth chapter is an attempt to analyse the differences between illusionistic and non-illusionistic paintings, with the help of such categories as *mimesis, diegesis*, description and hypotyposis. It also aims to describe the mechanisms of functioning of the illusionistic painting, which in this approach acquire the character of an ironic, paradoxical game. The fifth chapter is devoted to the cognitive aspirations of *trompe-l'oeil* discussed as a type of metaphor, model or scientific illustration. The chapters are divided into sub-chapters, which do not form a consistent sequence, but rather are, or should be, the consecutive stages of a central issue presented every time from a slightly different perspective, and examined in the fragments of source texts quoted in the endnotes (endnotes which contain quotes are additionally marked with *). These fragments are not arranged in a chronological order, but in groups of texts on the same topic (the point is not so much to show the evolution of particular motifs, but the variations of the

constant themes, during the period in which the discussed type of painting devel-
oped). The purpose of citations – which vary in length and degree of abstraction
of the given theme from the whole text – is not only to offer the illustration of the
discussed topic, but to introduce fragments which gave rise to the interpretation
developed in the text.