11 Wittgenstein and the Politics of Vision[1]

Adam Chmielewski

A Non-Political Man

Political issues played a negligible role in Ludwig Wittgenstein's personal life. He volunteered for military service during the First World War with no political agenda. His abortive attempt to move to the Soviet Union was not inspired by a political ideology but by a Tolstoyan view of the intrinsic worth of manual labour. No more relevant were political problems in his thought. Though for several years he was tutored by Piero Sraffa in Antonio Gramsci's "'anthropological way' of seeing philosophical problems,"[2] the political dimension of Gramsci's thought, or indeed Sraffa's, left a little mark on his work. A quote from a French politician who believed that in sentences of the French language words occur in the sequence in which one thinks them is one of few explicit references to politics in his *oeuvre*.[3] Despite this "meagre and enigmatic fare,"[4] Wittgenstein's work became relevant to the philosophy of politics in many ways. Affinities between his conception of philosophy as therapy and Marx's conception of the end of politics, suggested by Hanna F. Pitkin,[5] inspired many interpretations, from conservative,[6] through communitarian,[7] to emancipatory ones.[8]

Taking a clue from some of the existing interpretations, I intend here to demonstrate the relevance of Wittgenstein's ideas not so much to the theory of politics but to political aesthetics. Although Wittgenstein's references to aesthetics permeate all his philosophical writings, in this chapter, I do not attempt to decipher the enigmaticity of his view of aesthetics. Instead, I wish to demonstrate how some of his ideas may serve as an inspiration for political aesthetics alternative to existing ones. I also intend to show how some of his ideas may be taken as a ground for understanding democratic politics.

The argument is based on a view of aesthetics not as a philosophy of the arts but as a philosophy of perception. This understanding of aesthetics is in line with the ancient Greek usage of the term αϊσθησις which stands for perception and Alexander Baumgarten's view of aesthetics as a philosophy

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of sensual cognition.[9] Aesthetics as a philosophy of perception is presently developed by numerous thinkers.[10] By politics, I mean an activity of enacting rules of a desired order in all spheres of human life, an activity which permeates all socially constituted spaces.[11] Finally, political aesthetics is understood here as a discipline whose scope is not confined to the investigation of the role of the arts in politics or the influence of politics upon the arts[12] but addresses the issue of mutual determinations between perception and beliefs, cultural patterns, and political ideologies sustained by, and sustaining for, various social groupings.[13]

In Part I, I trace the debate on perception from Wittgenstein's discussion of the problem of *seeing-as*, through Gombrich's *seeing-into*, Wollheim's *seeing-in*, to Alloa's *seeing-with*. In Part II, I criticize Alloa's concept of *seeing-with* for a crucial omission of the cultural, social, and political determinations of perception, as well as for his attribution of agency to perceived objects. I also outline an alternative concept of *seeing-with-others*, and argue that while the sense of sight is a natural human endowment, the ability to see, like other abilities, needs to be learned, and that mastering the art of seeing, as mastering other arts, is a rule-governed social practice, which necessarily involves a democratic dimension. For this reason, seeing and perceiving should not be understood as disinterested, impartial, or unbiased, affording direct access to reality. This is not only because individual perceptive abilities are exposed to extraneous influences responsible for visual frictions, which disturb the truth supposedly given in perception.[14] It is rather because those influences, or frictions, play a constitutive role in the emergence and development of those abilities in the first place. By introducing the concept of regimes of perception, I argue that such regimes may be interpreted as democratic in the sense that they are enactively co-constituted through interaction between subjects who display their individuality and agency and vie for the recognition of their views and themselves.

The conception of political aesthetics outlined here is faithful to the spirit of Wittgenstein's philosophy in the sense that it is based on a "private perception" argument, analogous to Wittgenstein's "private language" argument. At the same time, however, it transcends Wittgenstein's perspective in two ways. First, it problematizes the delimitation of his conception of perception to propositionality, and second, more importantly, it involves a claim that a more complete view of perception has to account for the social and political determinants constitutive of perception, i.e., issues which remained outside the scope of his interests. In other words, Wittgenstein's views are treated here the way he wished for: as a ladder that has to be thrown away after one has climbed up it.

Part I

Immediacy of Perception

Empiricist epistemology was based upon an assumption of unhampered cognitive access to reality by means of senses. Among philosophers adopting one or another version of such belief was Bertrand Russell. Having distinguished between knowledge by description and knowledge by acquaintance, he defined the latter in the following way:

> I say that I am acquainted with an object when I have a direct cognitive relation to that object, i.e. when I am directly aware of the object itself. When I speak of a cognitive relation here, I do not mean the sort of relation which constitutes judgment, but the sort which constitutes presentation.[15]

In other words, knowledge by acquaintance provides the subject with a direct, non-judgemental, and non-conceptual awareness of an object of knowledge and differs from intentional and representational knowledge by description.

Akin views were adopted by members of the logical empiricist movement. Inspired by Wittgenstein's "Thesis" according to which "the sense of a proposition is the method of its verification," they set to work on a verificationist doctrine of confirmation of general statements by means of *Protokolsätze*. Though the wording of the Thesis came from Friedrich Waismann ("der Sinn eines Satzes ist die Methode seiner Verifikation"),[16] it was inspired by Wittgenstein's statements, published later on in his *Philosophical Remarks*. He wrote, among others: "The verification is not one token of the truth, it is the sense of the proposition," and "In order to determine the sense of a proposition, I should have to know a very specific procedure for when to count the proposition as verified."[17] The conception behind these remarks was explained in *Philosophical Grammar*, where he stated that he "vaguely" had in mind

> something like the definition that Russell had given for the definite article, and I used to think that in a similar way *one would be able to use visual impression*s etc. to define the concept say of a sphere, and thus exhibit once for all misunderstandings.[18]

The above theory was grounded in a specifically understood relationship between an object and the knowledge about it; Wittgenstein thought that a proposition is a picture of reality.[19] As he stated, "To the configuration of the simple signs in the propositional sign corresponds the configuration of

the objects in the situation. In a proposition a name is the representative of an object."[20]

The naïve empiricist approach has been undermined by numerous writers. In opposition to the logical positivist conception of scientific knowledge, which assumed dependence of theory on observation, Karl Popper argued for the dependence of observation on theory. In his critique of the belief in unbiased perception, he pointed out that observation is always an intentional and directed activity. An instruction to observe, addressed by him to his pupils, confused them, and their response to such an injunction was, quite properly, to ask *what* they were supposed to observe.[21] His criticism of empiricism inspired other philosophers of science, among them Paul Feyerabend, Imre Lakatos, and Thomas S. Kuhn, to stress the theory-ladenness of observation, i.e., its dependence on the theory adopted. The intentionality of perception was also stressed by Anscombe though, following Wittgenstein, she confined herself to stressing the grammatical aspects of the expressions of intentions embedded in perceptual statements.[22]

The concepts of undistorted and unbiased perception, and the possibility of direct access to reality, have become objects of various well-grounded criticisms. Despite that, the very concept, together with the phenomenological idea of immediacy of knowledge afforded by perception, persists not only as a normative ideal of accurate perception but also as a positive point of reference for contemporary theories of depiction.[23]

Seeing-As

A critique of the empiricist belief in the immediacy and unbiasedness of perception was developed by Wittgenstein in his later work. In *Philosophical Investigations*, he used a simplified version of the duck-rabbit figure drawn by the Polish-American psychologist Joseph Jastrow to convey the idea of *Aspektsehen*.[24] Depending on the attitude of a person, the assembly of lines which compose the picture may be seen as a rabbit or a duck. In opposition to his earlier, now repudiated views, Wittgenstein argued that the meaning of the perceived image cannot be unambiguously ascertained, and it does not make itself immediately apparent. It is dependent upon the way of looking at the image: "There are certain things which fall equally under the concept 'picture-rabbit' and under the concept 'picture-duck'. And a picture, a drawing, is such a thing. But the impression is not simultaneously of a picture-duck and a picture-rabbit."[25] Thus, taking an image as a picture of something, from a certain point of view, always already implies a form of interpretation.[26]

Wittgenstein investigated the phenomenon of ambiguous pictures to discover the intricacies of the grammar of the word "seeing," believing that

"it would tell us something about the nature of language."[27] His analysis of "seeing" was intended not so much to contribute to a theory of perception but rather to investigate a "structure of propositionality" pertaining to the use of the concept of seeing.[28] This nature of his investigation of aspect perception is conveyed by one of his conclusions; as he wrote, in the case of aspect perception:

> we are in enormous danger of wanting to make fine distinctions. – It is the same when one tries to define the concept of a material object in terms of "what is really seen". – What we have rather to do is to accept the everyday language-game, and to note false accounts of the matter as false. The primitive language-game which children are taught needs no justification; attempts at justification need to be rejected.[29]

Seeing-Into

The ambiguity of images became a topic of paramount importance for Ernest Gombrich's theory of depiction developed in his *Art and Illusion*.[30] Though his book was published seven years after Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, it would be historically inadequate to claim that Gombrich's work was inspired by Wittgenstein. Though Gombrich referred to Wittgenstein's discussion of ambiguous figures in his book, he did so just once and only cursorily[31] and throughout a long book never discussed Wittgenstein's views. As was stressed (in private correspondence with the present author) by Joseph Agassi and Richard Gombrich, Ernest's son, one has to remember that *Art and Illusion* was written when Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* did not yet attract so much attention in philosophical debates as it did later on. It would be thus more adequate to say that Wittgenstein's discussion of "seeing-as" became important for aesthetics, indeed more important than his cryptic remark that "Ethics and aesthetics are one and the same"[32] thanks to Gombrich's work rather than to claim that Wittgenstein inspired Gombrich in any way.

Gombrich claimed that "Ambiguity – rabbit or duck? – is clearly the key to the whole problem of image reading."[33] He also asserted that the ambiguity of vision and interpretation of images makes itself felt when viewing any picture. By exploiting the phenomenon of ambiguity of perception, Gombrich intended to undermine the naturalistic conception of pictorial representation. He stressed aspect perception to demonstrate the essentially Kantian claim that the "beholder's share" plays a crucial role in perception. As he argued, "no two-dimensional image can be interpreted as a spatial arrangement without such a constructive contribution of our spatial imagination."[34] In defining the beholder's share, he claimed that in viewing pictures, we project into an image something that it does not contain.

"It is without any support from the structure that the beholder must mobilize his memory of the visible world and project it into the mosaic of strokes and dabs on the canvas before him."[35] Perception is thus to a significant extent a projection.[36] In answering the question of what is being projected into the seen pictures, he repeatedly stressed, no less significantly, the role of memory in perception:

> To read the artist's picture is to mobilize our memories and our experience of the visible world and to test his image through tentative projections. To read the visible world as art we must do the opposite. We must mobilize our memories and experience of pictures we have seen and test the motif again by projecting them tentatively onto a framed view. (…) The conclusion seems to me inescapable that the memory that performs this miracle is very much a memory of pictures seen.[37]

Accordingly, he believed that the change of aspect in picture perception functions in the following way. When viewing a painting, one can attend to the image depicted on the surface of a painting, or to the structure of the painting, i.e., strokes of brush or colours, but *not* to both aspects of the painting at the same time. He supported this claim by recounting Kenneth Clark's experience recorded while viewing Velázquez's "Las Meninas." Clark wanted to observe what went on when the brush strokes and dabs of pigment on the canvas transformed themselves into a vision of transfigured reality as he stepped back. "But try as he might, stepping backward and forward, he could never hold both visions at the same time, and therefore the answer to his problem of how it was done always seemed to elude him."[38] From this, Gombrich concluded that "issues of aesthetics and of psychology are subtly intertwined."[39]

Gombrich's employment of ambiguous figures is decisively different from Wittgenstein's approach, which was focused on the grammar of the word "seeing." Expressly objecting against such considerations, Gombrich believed that pictures are non-propositional: an understanding of pictures cannot be brought closer to home by a grammar modelled on verbal language: "a picture can no more be true or false than a statement can be blue or green."[40] Gombrich's view is supported by a belief in the importance of the evolutionary considerations for the theory of perception, something which does not play any significant role in Wittgenstein.

Seeing-In

Gombrich's theory of depiction and perception was contested by Richard Wollheim who claimed that the structure of *seeing-as* is insufficient for understanding pictorial representation. He argued that Gombrich's account

"postulates two alternating perceptions, Now canvas, Now nature, conceived of on the misleading analogy of Now duck, Now rabbit."[41] He challenged the belief that pictorial projection takes place within the strict boundaries of the material object of a picture. While we may be able analytically to distinguish the awareness of the markings on a surface from the awareness of the content of the picture, these two aspects are not separated in our experience. Instead, Wollheim argued that we are capable of two simultaneous perceptions: the one of the pictorial surface, and the other of what it represents.

The belief in the simultaneous perception of both the material structure of a picture and its depicted content Wollheim called "the twofold thesis." The thesis asserts that "my visual attention must be distributed between two things though of course it need not be equally distributed."[42] The insistence on the twofoldness or "conjunctivism" of picture perception distinguishes his view from Gombrich's disjunctivism, which led him to believe that we may only see either what is represented or the canvas, but we can never see both at the same time.[43] Against this, Wollheim stressed the projection part of Gombrich's conception, and alluding to Wittgenstein's "seeing-as," he called it "seeing-in." As he argued, while looking at Vermeer's "View of Delft," the perceptual experience cannot be reduced to the perception of the object depicted and to the perception of the canvas upon which it is painted. Such a reduction is unwarranted: apart from seeing the canvas, and the depicted view of Delft on it, we see also the city of Delft itself.

The above-mentioned Gombrich's position was referred to above as "seeing-into" to stress that Wollheim's "seeing-in" is akin to Gombrich's projectionism: Gombrich, like Wollheim, believed that what we see is projected into the image from the deposit of our memory of what we have seen before. The difference between them is rather that, for Wollheim, while looking at a picture, we see not two but three things: (i) the canvas, (ii) the image composed of the physical lines on canvas, which generates a visual image in the viewer (the image of Delft), and (iii) the object depicted by the artist (the city of Delft itself). This has been noticed by Bence Nanay, Wollheim's student, who pointed out that the "twofoldness" claim should rather be replaced by "threefoldness."[44] Also, against Gombrich, Nanay claims that aesthetic perception involves not only focused attention but also distributed attention thanks to which one can view various aspects of the same object at the same time.[45]

Seeing-With

Emmanuel Alloa's *seeing-with* is developed in a debate with several alternative views. In his study of the developments in the theory of depiction, he traces the above-sketched evolution from *seeing-as* through *seeing-into* and

seeing-in to propose an alternative approach encapsulated in the concept of *seeing-with*. He claims that contemporary image theories focus either on images as mere things or passive objects, or on the constitutive force of the gaze, and finds both approaches wanting. Alloa is not satisfied with Gombrich's disjunctivist approach to vision and Wollheim's twofoldness, just as he rejects Nanay's concept of distributed attention. Among doctrines he contests is also Richard Hopkins's conception of inflection in the perception of works of art, which suggests that "our experience of pictures is sometimes 'inflected' by our awareness of properties of the picture's surface."[46] He claims that images cannot be thought of as straightforward representations of things, nor they should be viewed as passive slates for mental projections. Adopting the idea of manifoldness of perception, he questions the concept of passivity attributed to images and instead argues in favour of their agency, or operativity. He contends that images do not passively await perception but actively contribute to the way they are perceived by viewers.[47] They should be understood as "agents that contribute to inflect and displace what we see."[48] These claims form a background to his conception of "seeing-with" for which he takes inspiration from Maurice Merleau-Ponty who believed that one does not look at a painting as one looks at a thing. "Rather than seeing it, I see according to, or with it."[49]

This approach allows Alloa not only to dispose of the traditional view of the passivity of the picture but also to undermine the constitutive role of the gaze usually assumed in theories of perception. His argument is directed also against Jean-Paul Sartre who introduced a distinction between perceptive attitude and imaginative attitude and claimed that it is only the latter that allows one to see what is depicted in a picture. This attitude is possible because it is based upon a denial of the materiality and agency of a picture. As Alloa stressed, Merleau-Ponty argues precisely against this purported denial, for we are able to perceive the meaning of an image, i.e., the object the image purports to represent, not despite its materiality and its tangible constitution, but thanks to it. "It is manifest that we do not look at a *Bild* the way we look at an object. We look according to the *Bild*."[50]

Part II

Seeing-with-Others

The idea of "seeing-with" is presented by Alloa as an alternative to theories of perception, which focus either on the properties of the image or on the mechanisms of the gaze. By rejecting Wittgenstein's propositional attitude and by ascribing agency not only to the active gaze but to the viewed images, Alloa wishes to step outside the confines of the subject-object dialectics in the theory of perception. The attribution of agency to images allows

him to overcome the one-sidedness of the existing approaches. It needs to be stressed, however, that attribution of agency to seen images was precisely the point contested by Wittgenstein in his discussion of seeing-in the *Philosophical Investigations*. He objected to the belief that "What I really see must surely be what is produced in me by the influence of the object."[51] The image itself does not dictate the way we see it.

It cannot be denied that an experience of an object affects the viewer far beyond its conscious and verbalizable perceptions. This is known from a variety of experiences, not only from the visual perception of an image, always worth a thousand words, and no less deceitful, or aural perception of sounds, but also from the effects of such objects as architectural constructions, which affect their viewers and even more so their users. They may be inviting, enticing, awe-inspiring, overwhelming, repulsing, or paralysing, as in the case of agoraphobic or claustrophobic experiences. However, by opening a way towards a more comprehensive theory of depiction and visual experience by endowing the objects of perception with an agency, Alloa's approach misses a crucially important dimension, which plays an important role in image perception, a dimension frequently neglected and underestimated in other theories of perception as well.

In explaining it, some issues Wittgenstein raised in his discussion of *Aspektsehen* will be helpful. In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein wrote: "If someone sees a smile and does not know it for a smile, does not understand it as such, does he see it differently from someone who understands it?"[52] Reflecting upon the grammar of the sentence he asked: "Are we perhaps over-hasty in our assumption that the smile of an unweaned infant is not pretence? – And on what experience is our assumption based? (Lying is a language-game that needs to be learned like any other one)."[53]

The example of a smile is interesting. It is believed that while the ability to smile occurs in the earliest hours and days in newborn human babies, they can produce their first social smile after the first four to six weeks of their life. This suggests that their early ability to smile, even in the prenatal state, is only reflexive and that their ability to communicate with their mother by means of a smile, thus to recognize a smile for a smile, is something they learn.[54] Be it as it may, Wittgenstein's example suggests that the human ability to recognize a smile as a common facial mode of human exchange is something we learn in the process of socialization and that some of us may fail to master the art of recognizing it. By stressing the possibility of someone not being able to understand some images the way other people understand them, Wittgenstein opened, or rather re-opened, a field of investigation into how humans acquire their ability to perceive, recognize, and understand what they perceive. I submit that the problems of the social production of vision belong to the field of aesthetics and its branch of political aesthetics.

Pictures, like literary or musical productions and other works of art, are unavoidably understood through a network of subjective and intersubjective associations based on formerly memorized perceptions. It is a common experience that some people are unable to see some images the way they are being seen by others. The way a "visual phenomenon actually is seen is a matter of custom, upbringing, or everyday experience."[55] For example, if someone never saw a rabbit, they would be unable to see a rabbit in the duck-rabbit.

The phenomenon may be illustrated by means of the widely discussed experiment involving an aspect-dawning picture consisting of seemingly irregular black and white patches. In the case of most viewers, the picture generates the perception of a Dalmatian dog. The discussion of such pictures is focused on the phenomenological mechanisms of the dawning.[56] Nanay stresses the key role of mental connecting the patches into the contours of the Dalmatian: once the viewer draws mental lines between the apparently random black patches, the lines which are not in the picture, they cannot unsee them, and the changes that took place in the experience are changes in their non-phenomenological experience.[57] The change may involve something like Bill Brewer's classificatory engagement.[58]

However, for the present purposes, a more interesting question is the origin of the ability to draw mental lines between random shapes, or the origin of mental patterning involved in perception. Recreation of the experiment involving the aspect-dawning picture in question, conducted by the present author, brought a result interestingly discrepant from the dominant experience. A group of selected subjects, upon being shown this picture, unanimously detected the image not of a Dalmatian but of a horse grazing the grass. To explain this anomalous result, it needs to be added that the subjects of the experiment did not suffer from any visual impairment. The specificity of the group was that its members had no attachment to dogs of any race. The only Dalmatian they were in any way familiar with was Marshall, one of the protagonists of the kids' series "Paw Patrol." More importantly, the subjects were under an overwhelming fascination with horses. The equestrian passion was associated with extensive and detailed knowledge of equine races and coat colours. Finally, and crucially, the favourite coat colour among the subjects was the horse known as Knabstrupper, which is white with numerous irregular black spots, quite similar to the Dalmatian. A conclusion suggests itself that uniformity in the perception of an image should be attributed to other things rather than to the properties of the image, and that, against Alloa, "seeing-with" such aspect-dawning pictures may lead, as in the experiment, different viewers to divergent non-phenomenological results.

The above experiment seems to confirm Lycan's and Gombrich's claim on the importance of the deposit of memory of past images in understanding

presently viewed ones. Viewing an image unavoidably takes place against the background of memorized images seen prior to the present experience. The presently viewed picture catalyses images stored in the memory and, by evoking them, brings them from the recesses of the mind in a way which often, or usually, is beyond the full control of the viewer. It also seems that among the images evoked most readily will be those most deeply engraved in one's memory by being repeatedly viewed in the past, or those most vivid and thus captivating, or emotionally charged for a viewer. While the vividness of an image may be largely, though not wholly, attributed to the features of the image itself, its repeated views and its emotional quality are also dependent on the situation and the condition of the viewer, like being frequently exposed to it, or is due to their specific interest, which directs attention to it more often than to other images, or viewer's emotional associations with a given image. This would explain why in the above experiment the aspect-dawning picture evoked in its subjects the image of their favourite horse instead of a dog. Due to their passionate interest in equine matters, they frequently directed their attention to images of horses, and they were unable to see the Dalmatian in the picture because its image was not a part of their interest and thus was not ingrained in their memories.

Forms of Life as Regimes of Perception

The phenomenon of aspect dawning played an essential part in Wittgenstein's discussion of aspect perception and led him to formulate the idea of the form of life as an ontological ground upon which language grows and which is cultivated by the tools of language. Wittgenstein stated:

> Could I say what a picture must be like to produce this effect? No. There are, for example, styles of painting which do not convey anything to me in this immediate way but do to other people. I think custom and upbringing have a hand in this.[59]

The concept of forms of life is amenable to a variety of interpretations. Wittgenstein used this concept only several times and seemed to have had reservations about it.[60] But it seems uncontroversial to say that in the sentence just quoted, he acknowledged the power exerted by forms of life on human perception. Pluralism of forms of life not only accounts for the differences between the ways people speak of the world, i.e., a plurality of languages, but also, obviously, implies that their abilities to see are acquired and informed in diverse ways through practical interaction with others inhabiting a given form of life.

In what follows, I employ the concepts "cognitive regime" and "perceptual regime" to convey the idea that cognition is not something that

happens to a passive subject but is an active practice, which, as all practices, is organized by rules that regulate the ways we acquaint ourselves with the world. In doing so, I am fully aware of the difficulties affecting concepts such as "regimes," "epistemes," "epistemological orders," and akin ones.[61] Nevertheless, I believe that at least some of those problems may be dispelled with the help of contemporary psychological and aesthetic theories of vision.

In all practices, the key role is played by sets of rules that regulate how we participate in them. Cognitive practices are no different in this respect. Accordingly, by cognitive regimes, I understand sets of epistemological rules that organize the way of acquiring knowledge. An essential part of the cognitive regimes are distinct perceptual practices, which, along with linguistic ones, are constituted by, and constitutive for, all forms of life. The thus, communally entrenched and regulated perceptual practices I call perceptual regimes, or sensory orders.

Just as we learn to speak from others and with others within forms of life, so we learn to see from others and with others. Learning to see images, as learning to speak a language, is a collective process, and is about organizing the perceptually received stimuli into an ordered perceptual experience. It is a process in which linguistic competence plays an essential role. This claim is supported by clinical research, which indicates that mastering visual and linguistic capabilities enhance each other. Visible information that complements the auditory signals enhances the intelligibility and precision of the speech, and listeners, both adults and children, identify more effectively speech sounds when receiving redundant visual and auditory cues, and vice versa, verbal impairment is likely to be associated with visual impairment.[62]

The above-described experiment suggests that its subjects differ from most people by not being trained in the dominant modes of perceiving the way other people are. The seemingly anomalous result suggests that people not only like in herds, as in fashion, but they also see in herds. People are endowed with the ability to see objects from the point of view of others: the perspective of another viewer can stand in for one's own sensory input during perceptual decision-making. In other words, people literarily share their perspectives,[63] which may be seen as a basis for the emergence of the intersubjectively shared perspective, or "we-perspective,"[64] or the attitude of the generalized other,[65] as different from the first-person perspective.

Parallel to Wittgenstein's "private language" argument, the "private vision" argument outlined here suggests that seeing images is not to understand them directly and instantaneously. It has to be learned. To see images, we have to master the art of seeing. We have to learn to understand images just as we have to learn to understand the meaning of gestures, letters, words, numbers, rules of grammar and arithmetic, and many other

things. We learn to see from others, and with others, by being a part of what John Dewey called "the community of experience."[66]

Perceptual Hysteresis and the Grammar of Perception

The natural origin of the sense of sight, readily acknowledged within the theory of depiction,[67] does not mean that what we see and how we see can only be distorted by social, cultural, and political determinations. Wittgenstein claimed that the sense in which a physical thing can be said to have given properties is different from the sense in which a sensation or appearance can be said to have such properties.[68] The rules of perception and interpretation of images are dependent on the social environment in which they emerge. The claim that different groups of people learn to perceive the world in different ways cannot be disentangled from the claim that the terms of description they use to express their perceptions are contingent upon how they learned to perceive: linguistic relativism cannot be fully accounted for in abstraction from perceptual relativism.

Stressing the role of the socially established perceptual regimes in mastering the art of seeing is not to claim that natural human perceptual abilities are socialized or "intersubjectively constituted all the way down."[69] Human minds are not blank slates nor, though similar, identical to each other. Thus, obviously, the perceptual regimes, as human creations, are not only informing but are also informed by the unique contributions of individual minds. For this reason, the perceptual regimes, though powerful, are not completely overpowering or stable. They are dynamic, evolving, contingently permanent compromises.[70] But they are sufficiently stable and powerful to justify a claim that human perception is constituted not only by the biological organization of senses and objects of the gaze but also by the community of fellow gazers who teach each other how to employ their natural perceptive abilities. Through participation in the communally established regimes of perception, our perceptivity is permeated by normativity inscribed in them, and constantly evolves within groups in which we learn to look and to see. Through these informative and normative influences, our sense of sight is inscribed in the social, cultural, and political patterns, i.e., perceptual regimes produced by, and embedded in, forms of life.

A crucial aspect of seeing-with-others may be expressed with the help of Wittgenstein's observation in *Philosophical Remarks* in which he criticized the image of language professed by himself at the early stage: "A picture held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably."[71] His private language argument is aimed against the conception of language, deeply ingrained in the philosophical tradition, according to which it is possible to establish

referential relations between private inner sensations, like pain, and its linguistic expressions. Against this Wittgenstein argued that just because we do refer to pain by means of the substantive "pain," it does not mean that there is "a something" to which this word refers,[72] nor there is anything intrinsic in the sign "pain" that ties it with the phenomenon of being in pain. His argument aims to formulate a conception of language as a practice regulated by publicly emergent and observed rules rather than a system of signs endowed with meaning by virtue of their inner properties.

Instead of dwelling on this much-rehearsed issue, I shall focus on the problem of the ability of pictures to hold their viewers captive. Interpreting literally the concept of captivity, I would like to claim that what holds us captive in images is their embeddedness in communally established modes of perception, beliefs, and actions which we learn to emulate, imitate, reproduce, share, and thus sustain. By analogy to Wittgenstein's view of language, I propose to interpret image perception as a rule-regulated practical activity. Image perception has to be mastered through training, which takes place within, and makes an essential part of, specific forms of life. The ability to see and recognize such ordinary objects like tables and mugs; animals like cats, dogs, or horses; as well as abstract things like substances, numbers, and geometrical figures, involves practical training which takes place within a dynamic system of relationships with other viewers and speakers who share a given form of life. This may not be immediately obvious because we tend to forget that we have been instructed to perceive and recognize such mundane objects by being subjected to such training at the early stages of our lives, assisted in it by gradually mastered and constantly evolving linguistic abilities. The extent to which perception does involve training may be conveyed more vividly and convincingly by invoking more refined perceptual practices, like the practice of viewing works of visual arts, appreciation of music, *belles lettres*, or wine. Some images are unperceivable to us without prior experience and training. As Michael Polanyi argued, X-ray images, scanned in vain by the inexperienced eyes of the patients amateurishly seeking malfunction in their organisms depicted on them, are meaningful only to those who have been trained in reading them.[73] People differ in the level of mastery in perceiving them; most of us are more or less successful in mastering the rules of perception, whereas some, thanks to their sophistication in such practices, achieve the level of connoisseurship.

We are captive to some images and their interpretations because we are captive to the regimes of perception which are a part of cognitive regimes established in the communities of experience we belong to. The contents of the perceptual regime function more like subconsciously held aliefs rather than conscious beliefs.[74] Just as there is a grammar of a language, there is also a "grammar" of perception consisting of rules, which establish a

perceptual order underlying available ways of seeing things while inhibiting or excluding other ones. Among the elements of perceptual grammar is the scale of objects depicted: their colours; their relative size; the shade which serves to convey the depth of the represented object; superimposition which enables one to understand the relative position of depicted objects; facial features; the identity of the objects; and their movement.[75] These are things we learn to perceive in the pictures, and mastering the meanings of these cues enables us to understand them.

According to Gombrich, memory plays a significant role in the process of learning to read images. The phenomenon of perceptual hysteresis may help to understand some of the workings of memory. According to Liaci et al.,[76] perceptual hysteresis is responsible for the recurrence or repetitiveness of memories of past perceptions. Hysteresis, however, works not only on an individual but on a social level as well. The social hysteresis may tentatively be explained as a set of rules encoded in the customs, i.e., the collective memory of members of a given group. Those rules permeate individual viewing, conceptualizing, and recollecting the images through "osmosis."[77] As a cluster of rules enacted and fixed in a given culture, the social hysteresis cannot be reduced to an inert and passive memory. Past images are evoked in an iterative manner from memory by the images presently seen, but the agency detectable in this process is to be attributed not to the seen images, or at least not only to them but to the mind of the viewer, which in turn is informed by other viewers who follow established patterns of perception. The iterative appearance of images establishes rules between them and the memories they evoke. The regularities encourage some associations and interpretations and repress others. In this way, they make the images visible only in certain ways while excluding certain other ones. In virtue of being followed by members of the group, the rules exert continuous pressure on all its members. As the ambiguity of some pictures suggests, it is not the image but the regime of perception that is endowed with the agency that affects the perceptual experience of the viewer. Regimes of perception function in collectives thanks to collective perceptual hysteresis, which retains past images and their meanings in collective memory and, when catalysed by seen images, brings them back through a mechanism of recollection and association, thus providing for the relative stability of the rules of perception. For this reason, the inertial nature of the regime of perception, or its social hysteresis, makes it a fundamental part of *habitus* as defined by Pierre Bourdieu.[78]

Perceptual regimes are foundational vantage points, which carry enormous normative weight. Despite that, they usually remain invisible to people living under their spell, until they clash with alternative ones. A study of the history of arts is particularly relevant for understanding the historical dimension of perceptual regimes. By reproducing them, the arts play

an essential role in sustaining the existing modes of perception and are themselves sustained by them. Throughout their work, Gombrich, and in a different vein Jacques Rancière,[79] cite overwhelming evidence that testifies to the historicity of depiction and perception, which has been a topic of philosophical interest since ancient times. The historicity of perception is a result of the continuous exposure to ever-new images incessantly produced by the culture of visuality; the currently pervasive patterns of imagery are replaced by new ones, which drive them into obsolescence before becoming obsolete themselves. The meaning of images has to be continuously learned in order to function in the constantly evolving society.

The historicity or the contingency of perceptual regimes means that they are not only embedded in human communities but also are human products. As such, they are both entrenched and lasting, but also transient and ephemeral. For example, Allport and Pettigrew used the concept of the "carpentered world" to explain the difference between the perception of the world as dominant in Western culture and non-Western ones.[80] The Western perceptual regime induces people to see the world as constructed in accordance with vertical and horizontal lines, rectangular shapes, and regular angles, something which is unnatural and alien in other cultures. Some native Canadians fail to perceive the rectilinear illusions, while the Zulus are repulsed by rectilinear pictures and structures since their environment is naturally composed of round and oval shapes, and, in distinction to Western culture, they build their dwellings in accordance with this norm. Many such conventions in perception are documented by Mangan,[81] and Shapiro and Todorović.[82] Culturally differing categorizations apply not only to sensory abilities but also to sensory impairments.[83] In more philosophical terms, one may say that Western perception is organized by a Cartesian "scopic regime," which is "geometrically isotropic, rectilinear, abstract, and uniform."[84]

Democracy and Perception

It is a central claim of Jacques Rancière's political aesthetics that "politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it."[85] In this sense, political aesthetics cannot be reduced to the problems of the "'aestheticization of politics' specific to the age of the masses."[86] Aesthetics is thus relevant to politics in a much more fundamental way: it is constitutive of it. In this section, I wish to argue that the above-outlined conception of perceptual regime may help to demonstrate the relevance of Wittgenstein's philosophy to the idea of democratic politics.

Politics is a continuous struggle for recognition of the viewers and speakers, for their points of view and their judgements. It is a struggle against perceptual injustice not only in the sense of a struggle of the excluded

agents to be acknowledged and recognized: they demand recognition for themselves as well as for their beliefs and the ways they see things. Politics affects perception in a variety of ways. It does so, for example, through the mechanisms of conformity of the individual and collective human perception to group pressure. An individual's desire to win the approval of a group may induce the subjects to see things in the same way even when they differ, or they see things when there is nothing to see, but also do not see things that are out there to see. The incorrigibility of their first-person perceptual data becomes corrigible when they turn out incongruous with the human desire to belong, be accepted, be recognized, or at least not be seen as less worthy by a group.[87] Some interpretations of images are accepted by the compliance of individuals to figures of authority.[88] The politics of perception expresses itself especially and ominously through mechanisms of moral exoticism, i.e., the inability to perceive the humanity of people of colour, women, or non-heteronormative persons. The political aspect of perception cannot be dismissed as irrelevant to the theory of vision.

Democracy as a political ideal is understood as an inclusive political arrangement, which affords recognition to each member of a given community by opening a space to their agency, and their discursive and perceptual abilities on an equal basis. In contrast, the very idea of the *regime* of perception seems to suggest that it is irremediably repressive, authoritarian, and thus non-democratic. Since it imposes constraints on individual streams of sense data, it would appear *prima facie* irreconcilable with the idea of democracy erected upon the idea of cognitive egalitarianism.[89]

Against this, it should be stressed that although perceptual regimes do indeed regulate the way we perceive things, it would be a misconception to understand them as something entirely external to individual perceptual abilities, imposed upon them from without, and commanding blind obedience to their rules. Though the perceptual regimes do inform the way individuals perceive objects, they are not something ready-made and enforced on an individual's sense data from above by some supra-individual agency, extraneous to the interacting community of individuals. They are rather co-constituted in the process of interaction in which each individual displays their agency by actively participating in bestowing the images with their meanings. In this sense, the "we-perspective" emerging through social interaction is established, though only temporarily, in a process which can be interpreted as democratic in which all cognitive subjects involved participate, though to a varying degree. In this sense, the social and political interaction through which the regimes of perception emerge is also a democratic, though non-consensual, process.

The democratic dimension of the constitution of perceptual regimes may be explained by reference to the enactivist solution of Wittgenstein's

paradox of rule-following.[90] In Saul A. Kripke's interpretation, there are two solutions to the paradox. According to the internalist view, the rules establishing the meanings of words are constituted by the intentions of the speakers.[91] The externalist solution claims that those rules are constituted by non-mental behavioural dispositions.[92] Kripke himself settled for a sceptical approach to the problem. In opposition to this, the enactivist approach to the problem of the constitution of meaning enables one to escape both horns of the dilemma without falling into scepticism. Enactivism overcomes the opposition between internalism and externalism by ascribing autonomy and sense-making ability to cognitive subjects.[93] As De Jaegher and Di Paolo argued,

> Organisms do not passively receive information from their environments, which they then translate into internal representations whose significant value is to be added later. Natural cognitive systems are simply not in the business of accessing their world in order to build accurate pictures of it. They actively participate in the generation of meaning in what matters to them; they enact a world.[94]

Enactivism thus understood enables one to view the opposition between internalism and externalism in the theory of perception in a new light. Accordingly, Gombrich's and Wollheim's views, which stressed the role of memory in understanding an image, may be interpreted as internalist, while Alloa's approach, and Merleau-Ponty's, which attribute agency to images, may be interpreted as externalist. In opposition to those views, the conception of perceptual regimes as co-constituted and in this sense democratic enables one to overcome their one-sidedness: the meanings of images do not reside in the objects viewed nor in the eye of their beholders, but are constituted through interaction between autonomous and autopoietic subjects who vie with each other to have their views confirmed, acknowledged, recognized, and accepted.

In more concrete terms, the connection between perception and democracy may be conveyed by stressing ways in which the individuals contribute to enacting, sustaining, and undermining perceptual regimes. One should begin by dispelling a misconception which tends to associate itself with the concept of the regime. The very concept of regime implies control, domination, and repression. What is overlooked is that the thus-defined meaning of the concept of the regime necessarily implies discontent, disagreement, rejection, and rebellion. In other words, while regimes may be overpowering and resistant to change, which is the point of their being established, their very existence demonstrates that individuals are not helpless or powerless: the very purpose of regimes testifies to human individuality and agency which the regimes are meant to contain, subdue, and control.

I submit the same may be said of the perceptual regimes. This may be explained with the help of Wittgenstein's comparison of language to a mechanism, which, like a pianola, may be faulty due to its "bad condition."[95] In such a case, the musical mechanism produces notes, which differ from the intended ones. Analogously, in a malfunctioning "propositional mechanism," the produced sentences convey meanings divergent from the intended ones. Perceptual regimes, similarly, though the name suggests a relentless mechanism, are not perfect or completely overwhelming and do not command rigorous obedience to their rules. If they were, every person would see everything uniformly. But they do not: people usually see the same things differently. The divergences in their perception are usually insignificant and innocuous but not infrequently people see things very differently and sometimes stubbornly hold on to their views. In such cases, the divergence between regimes of perception and individual acts of seeing generates tension, or τόνος, and thus becomes political, as can be seen from disagreements that flare between people seeing the same things in radically divergent ways.[96]

Deviation from the rules of perception imposed by a given regime may result from biological endowment, differing perspectives, expectations, biases, misunderstandings, interests, inability or refusal to see things as most people do, an idiosyncrasy in interpreting the cultural, social, and political rules, or may be due to all types of wishful thinking which accounts for wishful seeing. The point I wish to make here is that such divergences from the rules of perception attest to the democratic nature of perceptual regimes. This is for several reasons; some of them pertain to the agency of individuals who enact and obey the rules of perception, others emerge from the intention to upset the existing rules, while others still are related to their ontological status.

Divergence from the rules of perception occurs because, just as rules of language, they are unavoidably ambiguous. In remarks concerning ostensive definitions, Wittgenstein contested the idea that precision in understanding a word may be obtained by pointing to an object:

> It seems as if the other grammatical rules for a word had to follow from its ostensive definition. But is this definition really unambiguous? One must understand a great deal of a language in order to understand the definition. […]. The meaning of a name is not the thing we point to when we give an ostensive definition of the name.[97]

I contend that the ambiguity of perceptual rules affords an opening in which individual agency and creativity may reveal themselves and develop. This is an opening which enables one to account for a democratic aspect of perception.

The divergence from perceptual rules, though usually discouraged or chastised by the upholders of a given perceptual regime, may persist and take root. This is so especially when made by someone of public significance, in which case it becomes more noticeable. But it may be enacted by anyone. Even those who

> remain invisible and inaudible, can penetrate the… order via a mode of subjectivization that transforms the aesthetic coordinates of the community by implementing the universal presupposition of politics: we are all equal.[98]

Though such divergence is usually suppressed by the self-appointed custodians of the regime and is met with correction, reproach, or ridicule, it also may be adopted and emulated by other viewers. In this way, such deviations may thus turn out to be liberating, even if for a brief moment after which they become oppressive again.

Perceptual regimes are democratic also in the sense that there is no single centre or power responsible for their establishment and functioning. They emerge spontaneously through the interaction of the viewers, and no custodians are appointed by anyone to protect them. Rather, they are guarded by all viewers subjected to, and subjectified by them. Most of them, more or less consciously and continuously, attempt to perfect and correct its rules, but they also resist and undermine them. No regime would be needed if there were no forces to be subdued and tamed. Thus, perceptual regimes are contingently permanent compromises between the human desire for compliance and leeway, stability and novelty, order and freedom. This constitutive contradiction is responsible for their continuous evolution, usually gradual and imperceptible, but sometimes rapid and catastrophic.

To sum up, the above-outlined social hysteresis induces conformity to worldviews sustained by regimes of perception and is responsible for their quasi-permanence, or inertia. Individual attitudes towards established perceptual regimes are not only about compliance and submission, but also about deliberate questioning, contesting, or repudiating. This accounts for divergence from their rules and suggests that the constitution of perceptual regimes is far from an inclusive and smooth process. It is rather an agonistic struggle through which every member of a community of viewers and speakers strives to have their point of view acknowledged and considered by others. Some are more successful in imposing their perception of the world than others. The thus emerging irredeemable disparity is precisely what Rancière calls the "distribution of the sensible." As he writes,

> the idea of a "distribution of the sensible" implies [that] a "common" world is never simply an *ethos*, a shared abode, that results from the

> sedimentation of a certain number of intertwined acts. It is always a polemical distribution of modes of being and "occupations" in a space of possibilities.[99]

Democratic politics is therefore a constant struggle for the recognition of perceiving and speaking entities, which is also a struggle for the recognition of their points of view and judgements.

Leaving the Ladder Behind

Undeniably, Wittgenstein played an important role in the contemporary theory of perception. This should not obscure the fact that the subsequent developments of the theory transcended both his interests and his contribution. Nevertheless, his ideas did serve as a ladder, which made these theoretical steps possible.[100] Also, his towering presence in contemporary philosophy should not obscure the historical fact that the social constitution of perception attracted intense and comprehensive theoretical interest long before him. Thus, for example, while it may be true, as Martin Jay remarked, that Descartes contributed to the creation of the dominant cognitive regime together with its sensory order, Francis Bacon, his contemporary, was among the first philosophers of modernity to pose the question as to the causes affecting the human perception. As an empiricist particularly interested in perception, he believed that the human mind is under the spell of four illusions, or idols, which distort the adequate perception of things, and claimed that

> The assertion that the human senses are the measure of things is false; to the contrary, all perceptions, both of sense and mind, are relative to man, not to the universe. The human understanding is like an uneven mirror receiving rays from things and merging its own nature with the nature of things, which thus distorts and corrupts it.[101]

Yet, the critical approaches to perception accompanied the philosophical theories of knowledge emerged already in Antiquity. The comprehensive criticisms of sensory experience formulated by the Sceptics was prefigured by much earlier Antiphon's political theory of perception. As the precursor of the Sophistic movement and the father of political aesthetics, Antiphon not only remarked on the power of images to hold us captive but also attempted to diagnose the social and political sources of their power. In his speech *On Truth,* he claimed that among the laws established by people

> there is legislation about the eyes, what they must see and what not; and about the ears, what they must hear and what not; and about the

> tongue, what it must speak and what not; and about the hands, what they must do and what not; and about the feet, where they must go and where not.[102]

Antiphon's criticism points to social, cultural, and political influences, which affect the human senses, and are held by him responsible for misperceptions of reality. The critique of the conventionally constituted gaze became for him possible because he assumed a distinction between natural and conventional laws, and believed, naïvely, that by appealing to the natural law one can liberate people from these gaze-constitutive determinations he castigated. What makes Antiphon's and Bacon's doctrines particularly relevant today is that they did not confine themselves, like Wittgenstein and many contemporary philosophers after him, to the criticism of language or perception alone, but speculated also on the social and political influences on other human sensory experiences.

A comparison of their doctrines with contemporary theories of perception suggests that the gaze-centred approach, which prioritizes the viewer's ability to perceive, disregards the plethora of influences informing the process of perception, both the viewer-specific and "extraneous" ones, i.e., social, and political ones. The propositional approach to the problem of representation and vision is even more limited as it assumes the methodological priority of linguistic terms by means of which it aims to capture the structure of a picture, its shapes, lines, colours, etc. In relation to this, the proper attitude seems rather to ask the question of where the terms of a language used for a description of an image come from in the first place. The answer suggests itself that the terms of any language evolve in a process of tentatively trying to capture, by means of sounds, gestures, facial expressions, and bodily postures, the contents of images in a way established within a given group and, while attempting to do so, contributing to its constitution. In this way, the influences which we tend to categorize as extraneous to the gaze can no longer be conceived of as such: they are integral to, and constitutive for, the gaze.

But the same applies also to tactile, aural, olfactory, gustatory, and other impressions. This observation suggests yet another limitation of the propositional approach. In understanding visual perception, it overlooks the phenomenon of synaesthesia, which refers to the concurrence and association of sensations experienced by different senses, for example, a smell evoking a vision, or a sound evoking a taste. In their critique of the dominant approaches in the theory of perception, Howes and Classen argue that while synaesthesia, which plays an important yet philosophically underestimated role in cognition, may be grounded in the genetic outfit, it cannot be fully accounted for by neurological categories alone. A comprehensive theory of vision cannot dismiss the inter-sensual associations, or

cross-sense linkages, which are "fostered by culture," and it needs to take "social factors into account."[103]

One could say that social and political factors, i.e., cultural patterns, group pressures, and political ideologies, are just interferences detrimental to human perception, and responsible for its distortions. This may be granted, but only to a limited extent. For it does not mean that by barring such influences, one would be able to acquire the capacity to perceive things objectively, just as they are. One should rather say that just because human sight is malleable and falls easy prey to illusions is a demonstration that our ability to see is constituted by the socially established dynamic perceptual regimes. Illusions are an unavoidable cost of mastering the art of seeing.

Conclusion

All political regimes necessarily involve exclusion. This makes them repressive. This uncontroversial fact needs no demonstration. What needs to be explained, however, is the emergence and the workings of the mechanisms of exclusion and repression. Following the rehearsal of major developments in the contemporary theory of perception, from Wittgenstein, through Gombrich, Wollheim, and Nanay, to Alloa, the outlined conception of "seeing-with-others" suggests that a significant role in those mechanisms is played by perception and that perception itself has a social and political dimension. The argument is based on the concept of the regime of perception and the claim that perceptual regimes are to be understood as socially enacted and established cognitive orders, which, like political ones, though exclusionary and repressive, are co-constituted in an agonistically democratic way. Though they order perception "only," they cannot be dismissed as politically and theoretically insignificant, or benign. For this reason, aesthetics as a theory of perception is of paramount relevance to the theory of politics, and for the same reason, political theory cannot be ignored by aesthetics.

Notes

1 This chapter was written with the financial support from the National Science Centre grant no 2020/39/B/HS1/00706.

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