

ARTISTIC CREATION AND THE SEMIOTIC PROCESS: “CREATION” AND “DISSOLUTION” OF REALITY

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Abstract. *This paper is mostly a conjectural attempt to account for a deeper psychological aspect of visual artistic creation and to combine that insight with the current semantic and semiotic approaches to the dissolution of the visual signs that exist in the form of a drawing or a painting. Our view offers an insight into a psychological account of bodily uncertainty and anxiety, attempting to describe the corresponding emotional states that artists experience.*

Key words: *proto-self, bodily uncertainty, visual representation, dissolution of the sign.*

1. BRIEF PRELUDE

Developmental psychology commonly witnesses children drawing objects that have particular functional and emotional significance for them. The child experiences and manages objects in a manipulative and/or affective manner. It so happens that the child performs a singular visual disfiguration of the visual act of ‘pristine’ perception. This psychologically colored and emotionally fraught context allows the introduction of a large number of autistic infants and young adults marked as being ‘savants’, or initiates, exhibiting the so-called ‘savant syndrome’. “Some autistic children create drawings that are products of a *fixed viewpoint* (‘icebound stare’), thus the objects that are represented by the drawings are only a cluster of lines, angles and contours. These children produce non-iconic aspects of their visual experience, awkward forms rather than the representations of a class or symbol”, states Stefanović (2007, 202). Nadia’s and Stephen’s drawings, exemplifying the creations of autistic savants are acquired in children without any psychological problems only after studying the phenomenon of the linear perspective, and not before early adolescence, can be classified as bizarre as much as any other unconventional act of everyday behavior. Their

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prodigious acts of singular creation are excellent indicators of what such young children can do but also point at what they are not capable of achieving or doing (Stefanović, 2007).

Likewise, the immediate postnatal development of newly born children shows complete lack of centricity in the first several weeks after birth. These infants do not have any notion of wholeness due to the unfinished maturation of the central nervous system. Generally speaking, at this point in life one can talk about the *proto-self* that is unstructured, but also about the proto bodily schema that seem to give rise to the all-encompassing anxiety and/or fear of being dismembered due to the discrepancy between what is seen as it is and the chasm of the *inner cavity* that brings about inherent uncertainty, anxiety and terror of dismemberment based on the neural angst which can be seen as a product of the unfinished process of the maturation of the central nervous system (Jevremović, 2007).

Such ideas about a possible relationship between the analysis of the creations of visual arts from a psychodynamic standpoint and the hopefully helpful clarification from a combined semantic and semiotic viewpoint will be the crucial parts of the paper. Our speculations will therefore be an attempt at understanding and appreciating the visual masterpieces of people such as Hieronymus Bosch, Picasso and other artists that appeared to follow the strange but potentially insecure path of listening in to their own bodily fears and the yet unformed verbal messages. They seemed to only partially understand this while striving to make peace with the painful parting of their own perception of the fluid bodily schema and the dictates of the “normal majority” ruling the world.

2. REALISM AND ICONICITY

How do visual artists see reality? The obvious answer is that reality for them is monolithic and manageable, easy to deal with. This is very often perceived as a veritable representation of things, people, animate and inanimate entities around us that the artist sees and depicts. Such depiction, or should we say “description”, is named ‘realism’ as it strives to replicate the world as it is. The easier ‘something’ is recognized in the depiction or the work of art, the more successful the creator or the visual artist appears in the eyes of the people.

Thus, on the one hand we have reality, the world around us that the artist tries to present to his own self and others and the piece of art, the representation of what he has seen and tried to put on canvas.

On the other hand, this promises to be a relatively simple action, a standard process of creation, or *re-creation*, of reality just because the artist perceives the world and being separate from it, and does her best to represent it veridically. The only issue here, and it is a big one, is that this kind of viewpoint is generic and quite distant from how things exist out there, in the alien world.

Actually, we might even say that the imaginary and generic artists we described in the previous paragraphs are some kind of artifacts, and do not exist in contemporary society. Such “generic” visual artists were active and producing representations of the world some 15-20,000 years ago, as shown by the Paleolithic paintings found in the cavernous depths of the Altamira caves in Spain. And those ancient visual artists really performed to the best of their abilities - they worked hard to portray what they saw as reality, the animals they hunted and killed for food and to defend themselves. They put down pictorial representations of what they witnessed on the rough edges of the 300-meter deep cavities where they found shelter from elements and predators.

From a contemporary viewpoint of semiotics, whole-heartedly embracing the sign typology of Charles Sanders Peirce (according to Chandler, 2007), the ancient creators created 'icons' of events, processes and animate and inanimate beings they shared their lives with. Their creation of the world **resembled** the entities and goings on they perceived, be it mammoths or bisons, or the act of hunting. Let us not forget that icons were signs and signs that stood for something, whilst attempting to 'recreate' the object they stood for. Yet icons are easily recognizable and not misunderstood, therefore there was no need to speculate and/or have doubts about what they meant in the actual life of the cave dwellers. What stands out, and what one may find of significance is the fact that even today, those chronologically remote icons still stand firm in the sense that they are easily and correctly taken to be what they actually represent. Peirce (according to Chandler, 2007) would say that the icons of Altamira are cross-culturally and cross-chronologically interpretable by the observers, and were the main prerequisite for something to be considered a sign in the first place. Of course, one should not forget that the realistic representation of reality by virtue of an icon is dependent on the qualitative link between the sign and the object, meaning that what the artist sees in the object that she wishes to present visually has to possess certain common qualities that are, so to speak, shared to a relatively high degree by both.

3. RELAXED REALISM AND INDEXICALITY

As time passed by, and humans became *homo sapiens sapiens*, with enlarged brains and advanced culture and crafts, and began to live in comfortable and well-engineered places, offering optimal environments for visual artists to create, a new strain appeared in the process of human visualization. This new strain of perception must have been closely connected with an increased awareness of the so-called cognitive fallibility, i.e. the realization that human senses simply play tricks on us and make it almost impossible to feel that our percepts are correct in regard to the acquired sensory input. To be more precise, science and human knowledge have lately started to support the idea of our inability to see the world as it is.

As a logical consequence, two thousand years ago, in ancient Greece, there were ideas that humans were simply unable to see things for what they really were, and Plato was the forerunner of that visceral insight of the human genetic frailty and ensuing fallacies stemming from a lack of precise and detailed description of reality. Hence, Plato considered us only as constant voyagers on a limitless ocean, bumping from side to side in a tiny floating shell, never getting to experience either a firm ground or a safe landing site, always in an impermanent state of confusion and constant becoming.

This is why one ought not to wonder much when thinking about what happened in relatively recent history of the humankind, starting with the first recognition of human weakness or frailty in ancient Greece and the incipient doubts about a possible cognitive and perceptual certainty, in combination with a resurgent skepticism and a process of 're-evaluation of all values' in the 19th and 20th centuries.

The all-enveloping skepticism brought new evidence pertaining to visual perception which is, naturally, the habitat of the visual artist. New scientific findings tell us in very harsh terms about the already present apprehension regarding our epistemic, creative, and, even, ontological uncertainty: the human brain tracks the millions of signals coming from the retina in order to assemble and update a dynamic model of the spatial structure of the environment. This model is inferred from light patterns hitting the 100 million

photoreceptors in the retina of the eye. By the time the visual signal gets to the brain, it has already gone through multiple layers of neural circuit processing and has been reduced to 1 million fibers in the optic nerve, each corresponding to something like a "pixel" in a digital photograph (see Lakoff & Johnson, 1999).

George Lakoff and Mark Johnson employ a rich and systematic metaphorical comparison here: they write that we could imagine that human vision is freakily similar to an air traffic controller tracking dots on a radar screen representing airplanes. He does not actually see the airplanes directly, only the dots standing for each of them on the screen. What happens in the human brain meanwhile? The metaphor goes on to say that the dots are the neurons firing in the visual cortex. However, there is no single entity in the brain watching the screen so other parts of the brain use the visual information directly to make plans of possible ways to handle the given situation.

The important conclusion that can be drawn from Lakoff and Johnson's short analysis is that we, as humans, simply have no perfect anatomical and physiological tools at our disposal to accurately see the world/reality. We find ourselves in a strange, gray area of cognition that allows us to survive by guesswork and hints and unsuccessfully tries to manage the goings on in our everyday activities. *Even though we are able to see just one percent of the reality around us as it is*, we still keep on doing the same thing: we 'describe' and classify and, eventually, analyze reality. Naturally, with only one percent of light signals reaching our retina, we are still able to scrape all the information that we can gather by our five senses and make do while recreating the visually almost ungraspable world we find ourselves in. What is even more wondrous, our combined senses succeed in doing so by virtue of some representation that might not be felt or experienced properly. The sole prerequisite is that there is a link between something that we get sensory data on, or that the "unseen" is somehow affected by what is its actual substance.

In order to make our point clear, let us use a simple example that should help: if we see that someone's cheeks are red and eyes blurry, the first explanation might be a deduction based on the signs that have been noted – the person in question has a fever or might be suffering from a cold. What actually happens is that there exists a link between the phenomenon of the redness of the face and what is actually the case. Thus, something 'unseen', as we have said above, is affected by a particular essence — that is, the red face has been affected by fever, thus our conclusion should most probably be correct. This type of analysis was called **indexicality** by Peirce (according to Chandler, 2007), and his often quoted textbook example is smoke (sign) that refers to an unseen fire (object made visible by the presence of a sign). Peirce detected causality in this case, although we need not agree with him and can adopt a neutral position, as there is no reference, but only something labeled as denotation.

How do visual arts handle this human anatomical and physiological insufficiency of not being able to see reality as it really is and how do they go about creating their visual interpretation of the world around us?

Elusive reality has almost always been more or less detectable to the visual artist, one way or another - starting with the first non-realistic depictions of things as was the case with the first great masters that portrayed Christianity in all its forms, both transcendental (not constrained by space and time), in the works of Cimabue who suffused his accounts of the Virgin Mary and the prophets with massive religious enthusiasm, marking the abrupt end of relaxed artistic freedom after his death in 1302, and the non-transcendental,

evident in the masterpieces by Giotto that showcased the moment, the now and the here, heralding forthcoming Renaissance then, at the beginning of the 14th century.

4. ANARCHIC REALITY AND SYMBOLIC DISSOLUTION

Let us go back some 15-20,000 years ago, to the time when the unknown artists of the Altamira caves were etching their truly realistic but still naive and trainee-like depictions of the world they lived in. That was the age of innocence that stretched into the future for a long time, but finally led to dissatisfaction with what the depictions actually managed to convey to both the viewer and the artist. That was so because, somehow, subliminally perhaps, they had a feeling that the world was more their own, and subjective, and less prone to being represented as separate from their eyes. They came to realize that they could not make a clear-cut division between themselves and the object they aimed to offer as a representation of the world. Simply put, the visual artist started to face their own singular picture of the world that did not necessarily correspond to the representation of that world as shared by others. Their viewpoint began to slowly avoid the conventional groove of the outer edifice that had used to be monolithic and, *prima facie*, easily describable.

The culprit for this separation of complete congruency about the way we see reality and share views related to it was a freak kind of cognitive dissonance commonly called doubt. Interestingly enough, it was not the French enlightenment and Descartes who uttered the famous "Cogito, ergo sum", paraphrased as 'dubito, ergo sum' that attracted visual arts to question and doubt iconicity and even indexicality (that was so much more deductive and had an aura of logical necessity about it). It was Descartes himself who witnessed the birth of doubt in paintings that originated in early Renaissance, partly due to seeing Godhead through allegory and metaphorical parables, partly by way of sheltering the representations as fictive renderings of the Biblical narratives.

Thus, visual arts went on producing renderings of reality that were less and less similar to the iconic products of the previous age of innocence, those happy days when a visual sign corresponded to the depicted object, event or process. The aberrations were numerous - one might name Hieronymus Bosch and his successor, Pieter Breugel as the prime suspects of Northern Renaissance, but they were, among many others, just two distinguished Dutch painters belonging both to the North and the South of Europe, who began to offer subjectivity and personal feelings rather than the conventional wisdom and objectivity. Bosch's masterpiece triptych portrayed the *Garden of Eden* populated by humans, elves and unearthly semi-organic creatures that were nowhere to be found, except in the artist's imagination. Thus we can offer an educated guess as to what actually happened in the early days of the dissolution of the sign in visual arts.

Firstly, it was an unconscious but deeply felt necessity to remove the distinction between the artist's eye and the object they strived to depict; and secondly, there appeared to be a deep psychological motive to represent the external world starting out with an archetypal circle that might envelop one or many other external objects. Contemporary psychology attributes this peculiarity to possible western cultural constraints and preferences, but the notable psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion (1967) who was a proponent of Melanie Klein's Object Relations Theory (Klein, 1983) put forward a strong claim that infants and young children faced the task of explaining the inscrutable and were simply not equipped with sufficient knowledge to describe the world. Bion gave name to this epistemic obstacle: he named it "O", while the

later socio-cognitive processes were labeled as “K”, meaning that they were knowable in principle. Whatever the case, the findings that infants and young children tend to draw circles and tangential trajectories around those circular areas, suggesting movement (Koks, 2000; Cox, 2005), could handily be subsumed by contemporary cognitive semantics and semiotics.

It is easy to imagine George Lakoff and Mark Johnson claiming that our body is a ‘container’ of a sort that tends to move from one point to another, thus accomplishing movement resembling trajectories that lead from a landmark to some destination. The same idea holds true of many current cognitive scientists who view our own bodily schema(ta) using the concept of ‘container’ and thereby manage to treat the vast plethora of metaphors that are global and/or universal. If this cognitive hypothesis proves to be of veritable value, then the psychologists’ findings about infants and young children drawing circles representing both the surroundings and themselves and people and objects around them can be interpreted in a straightforward manner - the circle is the container, their body encircled by the world, cocooned by others, both people and animate/inanimate objects. Therefore one can witness their wonderment with what they see and experience unconsciously. This phenomenon of subjectivity that completely engulfs ‘objective’ reality and the world around us, and gives rise to subjective and strangely creative depictions appears to be confirmed even by a cursory look at modern visual art. Naming only the most prominent figures such as Picasso, Dali, Malevich, Magritte, Kokoschka and Munch, we can witness a process of slow and gradual, but irreversible dissolution of iconic representations that leads to less veritable depictions of the world. Picasso and his brown and blue periods are especially meaningful here - he started out painting in a more or less realistic manner, gradually loosening his iconic grasp, toying with non-apparent and cause-less accounts that were indexical, finally settling in cubism as his natural home. This may have happened because Picasso lost his iconic innocence and unconsciously gained a prophetic unaccountable insight. The same dissolution of the sign (depiction) is present in the works of the afore-mentioned visual artists. They simply embraced their own corporeal body schema, their subjective ‘container’ that translated onto the objects they wished to depict and thus circumnavigated the subject-object division, underlying the fact that beauty and truth are always in the eyes of the beholder.

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UMETNIČKO STVARANJE I SEMIOTIČKI PROCES: „STVARANJE” I „RASTVARANJE” REALNOSTI

Ovaj rad predstavlja pokušaj opisa i objašnjenja bazičnih psiholoških stanja u vizuelnom stvaranju, u kombinaciji sa savremenim sematičko-semiotičkim pristupom disoluciji vizuelnog znaka, bilo kao crteža ili platna. Naše gledište nudi psihološko objašnjenje zasnovano na telesnoj nesigurnosti i strahu, kao i formalno preslikavanje sličnih emocionalnih stanja kroz koja prolaze vizuelni stvaraoci.

Ključne reči: proto-self, telesna nestrukturisanost, vizuelna reprezentacija, disolucija vizuelnog znaka.