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LEONARDO THINKS

Opinion: Visual Theory and "Leonardo"

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In my own work-as art critic, as writer on the methodology of art history and as an International Co-Editor of *Leonardo*-I am intensely conscious of the vast distance between the interests of critics and historians of art and the special concerns of this journal. A belief absolutely central, I believe, to *Leonardo* is that ultimately science can be of real use in understanding visual art. This remains a utopian ideal, even though much challenging art is based upon novel technology. *Visual Theory: Painting and Interpretation* is a stimulating recent survey of highly influential approaches-the kinds of theorizing employed by most of the writers in the anthology deserve consideration [1]. Few of these writers make use of the work of psychologists of perception. The otherwise opposed feminists, poststructuralists and analytic philosophers, whose writings here are put to use by art historians and aestheticians, share an important implicit assumption. The psychology of perception, they think, is not the proper basis for visual theory.

In his contribution to *Visual Theory*, Arthur C. Danto surveys the changing theories of what he calls "Description and the Phenomenology of Perception." Two otherwise opposed philosophers, Nietzsche and Goodman, have argued that we always see the world according to conventions, a view contradicted, Danto observes, by some theorists in contemporary psychology [2]. In a revised version of his paper "Animals as Art Historians," Danto makes this point in a stronger way [3]. Here he adds some extremely challenging evidence from experimental psychology. Representation cannot be a convention, he argues, because such animals as sheep respond the same way to pictures of things as they do to the actual do things depicted in those pictures. Pigeons categorize pictures by subject, even when those pictures depict things they have not seen, and they can pick out the same person in different costumes and settings. This is a pretty stunning finding, for it shows that a lot of smart writers about visual theory have been on the wrong track.



For a long time, as Danto notes, philosophers and semioticians have argued about these issues. A great deal of literature in aesthetics is devoted to intricate philosophical debate that, this experimental work seems to indicate, is completely beside the point. If it becomes apparent that the basic biological structures that human beings share with sheep and pigeons determine how we view pictures, then it will be pointless to argue about whether representation is based upon convention or how to precisely characterize seeing of images. The fatal flaw of the many philosophical theories of perception has been their failure to take into account the possibility that the psychology of perception might provide such evidence. If Danto's reading of this research evidence be correct, the semiotic theories of representation presented by several contributors to *Visual Theory* are essentially flawed. Those theories, which recently have been taken up by many art historians, may be untrue to the facts.

It is too soon to tell whether these surprising findings can be generalized. So far as I know, no one has yet been able to determine whether human skills in reading narrative sequences of pictures or interpretations of the iconographic meaning of pictures can also be understood in relation to the biologically based nature of perception. Might a proper science of psychology resolve, or help to resolve, the disputes that vex art historians and critics? I pose this question without having any idea of how to answer it. Few writers, as yet, are deeply enough involved with the concerns of both art history and the psychology of perception to advance the debate. I am aware of the significant contribution of Rudolf Arnheim and other well known writers. Given, however, the present state of art history, these problems deserve renewed concern.

Leonardo, I want to suggest, might make an important contribution. What I have always found of special value is the journal's willingness to transgress boundaries of academic discourse, boundaries that make it difficult to deal with such issues. What kinds of information about perception might be relevant to such a central problem of art history as stylistic change? How might the connoisseur's attempt to detect stylistic features that define an artist's oeuvre be analyzed? Perhaps these problems, traditionally approached in highly intuitive ways, might now be better understood.

We may perhaps gain some perspective from a beautiful article by Ernst Gombrich-"The Form of Movement in Water and Air," a discussion of the drawings of Leonardo da Vinci [4]. Gombrich's highly sympathetic reconstruction of this artist's notes and drawings, a construction that points to the radical differences between Leonardo's adaptation of Aristotelian science and the concerns of modern fluid mechanics, identifies the subtle interplay between observation and fantasy in his images. And Gombrich notes some surprising connections between Leonardo's interest in the movement of water and his paintings. "An apology may be needed from an art historian," the author writes, "proposing to approach a subject, however tentatively, that extends far into the history of science" [5]. His winning modesty points to a real problem inherent in the concerns of *Leonardo*. Who can know enough to approach these subjects, which are of great interest to our readers? Is today---when art historians have a renewed interest in visual theory---not a good time to think about this question?



Endnotes

[1] Norman Bryson, Michael Ann Holly and Keith Moxey, eds., *Visual Theory: Painting and Interpretation* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991).

[2] Arthur C. Danto, "Description and Phenomenology of Perception," in Bryson, Holly and Moxey [1] pp. 201-215.

[3] Arthur C. Danto, "Animals as Art Historians: Reflections on the Innocent Eye," in *Beyond the Brillo Box: The Visual Arts in Post-Historical Perspective* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1992) pp. 14-31.

[4] E.H. Gombrich, "The Form of Movement in Water and Air," in *The Heritage of Apelles: Studies in the Art of the Renaissance* (Oxford: Phaidoti, 1976) pp. 39-56. 5. Gombrich [4] p. 39. 94.

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