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Critique of Lambert Wiesing's phenomenological theory of picture

Abstract

Im Verlaufe des Artikels werden einige Probleme bezüglich der phänomenologischen Theorie des Bildes vorgestellt. Die wichtigsten sind: der unklare ontologische Standpunkt des bildlich intentionalen Objektes und die mysteriöse Beziehung zwischen diesem Element und der materiellen Basis des Bildes.

In the course of the article several problems concerning the phenomenological picture theory are presented. The most serious ones are: the unclear ontological status of the pictorial intentional object and the mysterious relation between this element and the material basis of the picture.

1. Introduction

The phenomenological theory of picture together with the semiotics of picture is currently the most widely known picture theory. One of its most elaborate versions has been presented by a German phenomenologist Lambert Wiesing. Inspired by the reflections of Edmund Husserl, Heinrich Wölfflin, Konrad Fielder, Alois Riegl, Jean Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty he developed a theory which not only sheds new light on some of the well known art forms (e.g. abstract art and collage) but is also an interesting point of departure for analysis of contemporary visual phenomena (like for example digital image and video clip). In this paper I would like to present the results of my investigation regarding the basic theses of this theory. I decided to concentrate on the nature of the pictorial intentional object. There are of course many other issues which deserve attention, for example the phenomenological theory of abstract picture, the notion of presence

and its possible vulnerability to the poststructuralist critique of the ›metaphysics of presence‹, the relation of phenomenology of the picture to semiotics (although the last one has already been extensively discussed in SACHS-HOMBACH 2003: 84 f.; NÖTH 2005; HALAWA 2008: 88 ff.).

My enquiry is based mainly on three texts of Lambert Wiesing from the years 1997-2005: *Die Sichtbarkeit des Bildes. Geschichte und Perspektiven der formalen Ästhetik* (1997), *Phänomene im Bild* (2000) and *Artifizielle Präsenz. Studien zur Philosophie des Bildes* (2005).

2. The unclear ontological status of the pictorial intentional object

According to Lambert Wiesing's phenomenological theory of picture the constitutive element of the picture experience in general is an intentional object called ›Bildobjekt‹ (which will be referred to as ›pictorial intentional object‹). Without its presence there is no pictorial experience. In the case of non-abstract pictures the pictorial intentional objects consist in the objects being presented in the picture/entities the picture represents (›dargestellter Gegenstand‹, ›die Darstellung‹) (WIESING 2000: 10). In case of the abstract painting the intentional object consists of a variety of entities possible to be denoted by the particular arrangement of visual forms (WIESING 1997: 251).

Unfortunately the characteristic of the intentional object given by Wiesing seems very often inconsistent or at least vague. On the one hand it is said that the appearing of the intentional object depends on the presence of the viewer of the picture: without the viewer there is no intentional object (WIESING 2005: 31). On the other hand the intentional object is being described as ›irreal‹, which according to the author means that it is not situated in time and space. Therefore it is not an element of any causal relation (WIESING 2000: 28; 2005: 69, 160). The description ›irreal‹ should not be understood just as ›unreal‹, as the intentional object exists, albeit not in the same way as material things (WIESING 2000: 10). But how should we understand this first claim – that the existence of the intentional object depends on the viewer – in face of the second claim: that the intentional object does not stand in any relation to the spatiotemporal world? How would it be possible for such an object to exist in a given period of time during pictorial experience, e.g. 5 minutes, and yet not exist in time at all, as the author claims? In other words: on the one hand the pictorial intentional object is to be a kind of a complex of sense data appearing in the mind of the picture viewer as a result of the process of seeing (Wiesing refers to the writings of Ernst Gombrich who appears to hold a similar view (WIESING 2005: 52 f.)); on the other hand – it is supposed not to be situated in time. But sense data do appear in time. Another example: we read that the pictorial intentional object is something we see during the experience of the picture (WIESING 2005: 52). It is however strange to be able to see something that is not present in time or space. In the strict sense we can't see any intentional objects, but only the material objects serving as their basis – e.g. a painted canvas.

To clarify the matter it will be useful to distinguish between the ›picture as such‹ – the picture as a kind of intentional object existing (at least in part) independently of individual pictorial experiences; and the content of a particular experience of that object (which develops through time). Of course, the next step would be to specify the relation between the two. In fact another phenomenologist

– Roman Ingarden – already did it. He differentiated a work of art ›as such‹ (with a special mode of being of an intentional object) from an aesthetic object produced in the course of an individual act of experiencing it (INGARDEN 1988: 179 ff., 409 ff.). Wiesing switches between these two meanings. In order to avoid ambiguities I will reserve the phrase ›the pictorial intentional object‹ for the first one.

Even if we made such a distinction, the rigid isolation of – on the one hand – the spatial and temporal ›reality‹ of the viewer and – on the other hand – non-spatial and non-temporal ›reality‹ of the pictorial intentional object issue would pose problems to us. At first this isolation seems quite obvious: it would be as absurd to say that the trees presented in Breughel's *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* grow in the Musée d'Art Ancien in Brussels (where the picture hangs) just as it would be to claim that the James Bond represented in one of the films decided to use his gun exactly when I started to drink my cola. Therefore Leopold Blaustein described the objects seen in the picture as »quasi-temporal« and »quasi-spatial« (BLAUSTEIN 2005: 10). A closer inspection reveals however that there exist works of art designed to come into the interaction with the ›reality‹ of their viewers, e.g. with the space around them. The most obvious examples are the abstract paintings of Mark Rothko (e.g. *Red, white and brown*, 1957) and Gotthard Graubner (e.g. *Farbraumkörper – Diptychon*, 1977), which seem to ›seize‹ or influence the space around them so that the viewer feels surrounded by the picture. A common trick in a lot of older paintings – used to include the viewer into the virtual space of the painted scene – is to make a painted person look straight in the direction of the viewer (see e.g. Edouard Manet's *Breakfast in the open air*, 1863). To my mind a proper picture theory should be able to explain these cases.

The understanding of Wiesing's concept of the intentional object would seem to be facilitated by his reference to the Husserlian concept of the ›noema‹ (WIESING 2000: 45). Unfortunately – as the author does not specify his understanding of this concept – it is of no help for his readers. There are at least three different interpretations of the Husserlian noema (the psychological interpretation of Gurwitsch, the interpretation of Føllesdal (equating the noema with Fregean ›Sinn‹) and the East Coast interpretation of Sokolovski and Drummond). Depending on the adopted interpretation we receive different views on the ontological status of the pictorial intentional object.

In conclusion, a proper theory of picture should clarify its ontological starting point to avoid such ambiguities as the ones listed above.

3. Reducing the experience of the picture to the sense of sight

According to Wiesing all we experience in a picture are the qualities detectable by the sense of sight. Therefore he describes the intentional object's mode of existence as ›pure visibility‹ (›reine Sichtbarkeit‹) (WIESING 2000: 11 f.). But is it true that the pictorial experience is always purely visual?

First of all it should be noted that there exist pictures designed specifically to be experienced by other senses (for example the *Straights* series by German painter Inge Besgen).

Secondly, if the pictures are essentially visual, then it follows that the people deprived of sight wouldn't be able to appreciate them. However, the experiments of John M. Kennedy showed that blind people can recognize perspective drawings made up of touchable lines as well as produce such pictures (KENNEDY 1997; LOPES 1997, 2002; HOPKINS 2000; KULVICKI 2006: 99 ff.). Vision and touch appear to have (to some extent) similar contents (spatial properties of the world), which makes pictures exposing these contents in a certain way accessible to both senses.

Thirdly, the doctrine of the sheer visibility of pictures seems to be based on an assumption that it is possible to experience the world by means of only one sense modality. Contemporary philosophy however questioned this view emphasizing that the sense modalities very often mix in one experience and it is really hard or maybe even impossible to use only one sense at one time (MERLEAU-PONTY 2002: 240 ff.; BERLEANT 1964; SEEL 2003: 58 ff.).

In fact, this kind of platonic and dualistic favoring of the visual and non-material aspects of phenomena – stemming from the hierarchy of senses characteristic for Western philosophy – is typical for phenomenology (just recall Husserl's inclination to visual metaphors) and people highly inspired by the visually oriented ›culture of the computer screen‹.

The reduction of the pictorial experience to the sense of sight seems surprising as Wiesing devotes a chapter of his book to the classical theory of Alois Riegl, in which the role of so called ›haptic‹ properties in the pictorial experience is recognized (RIEGL 1929; in current art theory the topic of the relation between seeing and touching has been explored by DIDI-HUBERMAN 1999; 2002: 50 ff.). It would seem that familiarity with this theory should change Wiesing's radical view on the purely visual nature of pictures. This however does not take place, as Wiesing interprets Riegl's including of the sense of touch into the pictorial experience as purely metaphorical (WIESING 1997: 61). For me, this interpretation seems only partially fitting. Wiesing is right in that Riegl did not mean that the viewer should actually touch the picture (in fact Riegl's attitude to the sense of touch was rather negative (PRANGE 2004: 202)). Nevertheless, in the case of his theory this view is not accompanied by the one that the haptic properties of the represented objects are not present in the pictorial experience at all. In fact Riegl held that they are present – not as properties really experienced by touching the picture, but as remembrances of past experiences, in which the objects were touched. Riegl's theory was based on a particular theory of perception, according to which the sense of touch together with the sense of sight were responsible for the experience of space (only the sense of touch gives us decisive information about the boundaries of objects; the vision does not give us certainty, because we see only surfaces). The learning process of space perception consists in learning how to match the data given by sight with the data given by touch. After the skill of space perception has been acquired the use of touch is not needed because the subject has remembrances of his previous tactile experiences. The history of art was for Riegl a constant development – from the works which were literally spatial to works aiming at the reconstruction of space in the ›language‹ of visual properties and, in this way, appealing to the viewer's skill of space perception. The interpreters of Riegl point out that according to his theory even in the experience of works of art, in which this last struggle is present, the haptic qualities are present (RIEGL 1929: 62; FEND 2005: 175, 196 ff.; PRANGE 2004: 202). So according to Riegl even when the picture does not cause tactile experience it evokes a remembrance of this kind of experience (if it is creating an impression of space). The perceiving of the pictorial space depends on it. So the

interpretation of Riegl's theory given by Wiesing is not correct. This is of course not an argument in favour of the presence of the sense of touch in the experience of picture as the physiological assumptions of Riegl's theory seem questionable.

4. The unclear relation between the pictorial intentional object and the material basis of the picture

Another important element of the theory is the role of so called ›Bildträger‹ – a material object on the basis of which the experience of the intentional object comes into existence. The most glaring lack in Wiesing's theory is the unclear relation between these two elements. Wiesing contends that this is a problem and that he is not able to give any solution to it (WIESING 2005: 52 ff.). It should be pointed out however that he sees only one aspect of the issue: he mentions the problem of explaining how the perception of a material object creates a consciousness of the pictorial intentional object (WIESING 2005: 52 ff.). In fact the sharp contrast he aims to establish between the material basis and the pictorial intentional object (the basis is a material, physical object; the pictorial object is not a physical object, it is immaterial) is a source of other issues – for example: do changes in the material object cause changes in the intentional object? The view that the pictorial intentional object is totally independent of its material basis would lead to strange conclusions. For example it is a common fact that the painted canvases change because they are subjected to various physical and chemical factors developing over time. The material basis that underwent such changes is sometimes being renewed, which – even if done carefully – very often makes it not the same as at the beginning, the differences being perceptible. If there weren't any connection between the pictorial intentional object and the material object it would mean that the viewers of such transformed surfaces are never able to experience the right pictorial object. In other words they would not have any access to the original picture. Of course we could avoid this conclusion by holding a view that the same pictorial object can be experienced on the basis of different material objects. This however seems absurd in the case of pictorial art forms where even tiny differences of the material basis result in the change in experience. What may be interesting here is that Ingarden himself – in contrast to Wiesing – hinted at the possibility of changes in the pictorial intentional object as a result of the changes in the material foundation of the picture (for example in INGARDEN 1958: 71, 91, 94; this question was highlighted by RZEPINSKA 1975). Unfortunately he did not pursue the matter further.

There is another problem connected with the material basis of the picture. According to Wiesing the pictorial experience includes only the pictorial intentional object. The material basis should ›disappear‹ in the experience of the picture. This claim seems inconsistent with another claim of Wiesing – that the pictorial intentional object appears always in a particular ›style‹ (WIESING 2005: 76). A style is the ›how‹ of the picture – the way in which objects are presented in the picture. For Wiesing, if there were no experience of style, there would be no pictorial experience at all. That's why he describes the style as a transcendental condition of the pictorial experience. This condition is supposed to be perceived in the experience (WIESING 2000: 17, 55 ff.). In this respect Wiesing joins a group of theorists who regard the so called ›twofoldness‹ (awareness of both the design of the picture and the content of the picture) as a necessary condition of pictorial experience. To

my mind as a matter of fact we shouldn't say that the style as such is visible in the pictorial experience. The style as something general (a way; Wiesing writes even that the style is a language (WIESING 2000: 69)) is not able to be seen, just as it is not possible – as Wiesing himself claims (WIESING 2005: 31) – to see a rule. What can and in fact must be seen in the pictorial experience are the drops of paint as such. During the pictorial experience these drops of paint are being interpreted as a result of applying a particular style. In other words – in the pictorial experience we face a type-token relation: the material basis for the picture is a token of a particular style for the viewer. Therefore the pictorial experience must include the material basis of the picture. In face of this problem Andrzej Półtawski proposed to understand the pictorial experience as consisting of a dialectics of two heterogenic elements: the pictorial intentional object and the material basis (PÓŁTAWSKI 1992: 80 ff.).

5. Summary

In this short article I presented a few problems concerning the phenomenological theory of picture. As their status seems fundamental for the theory, they call for a solution. Only then will the phenomenological approach to picture gain more clarity and acceptance.

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