

Inviting Noesis and Noema;

the role of pareidolia in art and imagination; an underdeveloped aspect of painting theory

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Contemporary painting theory, and alas, its teaching, tends to be more ideological than psychologically and phenomenologically descriptive of what painters actually experience as they work. In the process of creating, children and artist alike often engage a little discussed mental and conceptual phenomenon we would do well to acknowledge more robustly and to incorporate into our notions of inspiration, semiotic theory and artistic practice.

We are all *conjurers* to some degree. Psychology calls an imagined perception, pattern or image or aspect¹ seen in random or chance fields where it does not actually exist *pareidolia*²; viz. bunnies in the clouds conjured in a daydream, or perhaps the Virgin appearing in tree bark, a stick seen as a moving snake in the half-light of an early morning walk, or while one is in a hypnogogic twilight state of consciousness, what Dali liked to call *paranoiac vision*³.

The pareidolic phenomenon is indeed strong, and it constitutes what I believe is a significant bridge toward naming the world. Pareidolic perceptions and the reverie it involves has of course long been used by children, artists and others for inspiration and simple diversion. In fact, paleolithic cave painters are thought to have been inspired plastically by fissures and swells in rock formations as they rendered animals, both naturalistic and fantastical. To borrow terms from Aristotle, and later alchemy, the *chaos*

¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein's discussion of aspect perception in the latter part of the Philosophical Investigations is often credited with inspiring an important strand in contemporary explanations of depiction in which the visual experience of perceivers of pictures has a key role in the explanation. (Paraphrased from Jonathan Fry's Wittgenstein and the Visual Experience of Depiction. <http://www.estheticatijdschrift.nl/magazine/2011/depiction/wittgenstein-and-visual-experience-depiction>. I agree with Wittgenstein in this but with one caveat, namely that artists may choose to behave as if they are blind if they so wish and that the mental ability to resist may be acquired through studio practice.

² <http://www.pareidolia.us>

³ Dalí described the paranoiac-critical method as a "spontaneous method of irrational knowledge based on the critical and systematic objectivity of the associations and interpretations of delirious phenomena." and "Paranoiac-critical activity organizes and objectivizes in an exclusivist manner the limitless and unknown possibilities of the systematic association_of subjective and objective 'significance' in the irrational..."

of nature may well have been treated as psychic *prima materia*⁴ (the passive principle), giving way through artistic engagement to the active *ultima materia*, the image-word, to the *noesis*⁵ of Edmond Husserl, the object-as-it-appears, becoming the noema, or object-as-it-is-intended as one “brackets” the attitude of taken-for-grantedness and aims to awaken a profound sense of wonder in the face of the as yet undifferentiated world. As Max van Manen writes in *PhenomenologyOnline*⁶

“When we are struck with wonder, our minds are suddenly cleared of the clutter of everyday concerns that otherwise constantly occupy us. We are confronted by the thing, the phenomenon in all of its strangeness and uniqueness. The wonder of that thing takes us in, and renders us momentarily speechless as when the mouth hangs open while being taken in by the wonder of something.”

It is my thesis that the pareidolic phenomenon is important for artists and theorists to use, a conceptual cornerstone in better establish a working description of what painters do and experience as they name the world around them, sometimes *nearly but not entirely*, out of whole cloth (*sui generis*) It also through reflecting on this that we begin to describe what we mean by artistic inspiration, in what Merleau-Ponty would have described as a phenomenological “step back”, a *heuristic reduction* of taking account of how we come to know, to name *noesis*, making *noema* clear to the mind even as it is known to be an invention. I wish to assert that it is in the tension between unconscious fragments emerging through pareidolic imagination and the naming mind, closing on such fragments that artistic intentionality is realized; that is in this process that the mind is given full range, coming to know itself as well as the social conventions that define consensus and knowledge. Moreover, I contend that a painter’s stance relative to pareidolic impulses is formative in the development of their artistic

⁴ Prima Materia is, according to alchemists, the alleged primitive formless base of all matter, given particular manifestation through the influence of forms. The concept is sometimes attributed to Aristotle. The alchemical operation consists essentially in separating the prima materia, the so-called Chaos, into the active principle, the soul, and the passive principle, Mind-body dichotomy the body. They are then reunited in personified form in the *coniunctio*, the ritual combination of sol and Luna, which yields the magical child — *filius philosophorum* — the reborn self, known as the *ultima materia*. King, Hugh R. (June 1956). "[Aristotle without Prima Materia](#)". *Journal of the History of Ideas* (University of Pennsylvania Press) 17 (3): 370–389. doi:10.2307/2707550. JSTOR 10.2307/2707550. Retrieved 2008-01-27

⁵ In Ideas I (Book One, 1913) Husserl introduced two Greek words to capture his version of the Bolzanoan distinction: noesis and noema, from the Greek verb *noéō* (νοέω), meaning to perceive, think, intend, whence the noun nous or mind). The intentional process of consciousness is called noesis, while its ideal content is called noema. The noema of an act of consciousness Husserl characterized both as an ideal meaning and as “the object as intended”. Thus the phenomenon, or object-as-it-appears, becomes the noema, or object-as-it-is-intended. From the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/phenomenology/>. ...thus the phenomenon, or object-as-it-appears, becomes the noema, or object-as-it-is-intended. Dr. Brian Winkenweder, 2012, private conversation and email.

⁶ <http://www.phenomenologyonline.com/inquiry/methodology/reductio/heuristic-reduction/>

sensibility, indeed their ability to talk about the formation of their imagination as they create.

An artist and a conscious viewer of art does well to acknowledge the shreds we weave into whole cloth as we name the world, the ways in which our naming of the world starts by seeing, mistaking in many cases what we take to be whole images, willing or unconscious constructions, gestalts, if you will, composed of fragments around which patterns and images are constructed, whole perceptions from sometimes very thin evidence. Artist and viewer responding to associative impulses, raising figures against grounds; the mind completing the half-seen, the vague and the phantom.

To some degree painters ultimately accept, reject or incorporate pareidolic influences, working through an ambiguous but rich pre-linguistic field of possibilities, sometimes dealing with what is maddeningly persistent, sometimes what feels inspired from a realm of consciousness not of one's rational volition or even choosing. We are in fact sometimes undone by the persistence of the unconscious in dealing with the emergence of imagination, and so resent it, suppress it, deaden ourselves to its nourishment though negation.

I am a painter. Much of my work is inspired by and involves creating and dramatizing *prima materia* by making largely undifferentiated fields in which I deliberately engage in "aspect blindness", to use Wittgenstein's terms in favor of not "seeing-as". I prefer to resist pareidolic possibilities, resist "closing" the image-name in favor of heightening suggestion, in favor of leaving the naming to the viewer, leaving what Da Vinci called "a jumble of things" open to the unconscious of others, and to myself. I often gaze at the work as an unsorted and yet dynamic proto-named, proto-pareidolic field of ambiguous possibilities, a sea to be navigated, a half-formed gift to be ordered with a light touch, with appreciation for wonder in the face of a gracious world to be named reluctantly as it seductively gives me a partial contour here, a set of disconnected fragments there, an alignment, a shape—an analog taste (and no more) of what often feels, well, better than what the mind already knows. In this I am engaging deliberately in what Wittgenstein might have called *aspect blindness* and willfully not *seeing-as*⁷.

In his *Treatise on Painting*, Da Vinci wrote, quoting Botticelli:

⁷ Aspect perception, as presented by Wittgenstein (in *Philosophical Investigations*) is primarily concerned with the visual experience of different aspects of a picture. Aspects, here, should not be taken as characteristics of the image, instead they are different ways of perceiving (in the sense of visual experience) the same image without that image physically changing. That is, aspect perception is the experience of "seeing as." Aspect Perception and Understanding the Meaning of Words in ...journals.uvic.ca/index.php/sophia/article/download/10711/2882

“...just by throwing a sponge soaked with various colors against a wall to make a stain, one can find a beautiful landscape. If it is true that in this stain various inventions can be discerned, or rather what one wants to find in it, such as battles, reefs, seas, clouds, forests and other similar things, then surely, this is like the ringing of bells in which one can understand whatever one wants to. But, even though these smears of color provide you with inventions, they also show you that they do not come to represent anything in particular.

It should not be hard for you to stop sometimes and look into the stains of walls, or ashes of a fire, or clouds, or mud or like places, in which... you may find really marvelous ideas.

Don't underestimate this idea of mine, which calls to mind that it would not be too much of an effort to pause sometimes to look into these stains on walls, the ashes from the fire, the clouds, the mud, or other similar places. If these are well contemplated, you will find fantastic inventions that awaken the genius of the painter to new inventions, such as compositions of battles, animals and men, as well as diverse composition of landscapes, and monstrous things, as devils and the like. These will do you well because they will awaken genius with this jumble of things.

Yet the pareidolic impulse born of gazing the “jumble of things” has much broader presence in life than a simple device an artist might play with to invoke artistic “genius”. Naming the world and wanting to believe the inventions of the mind are, it would seem, tightly related. Religious fanatics continue to report “seeing” images they hope and wish to see, such as the Virgin in the bark of a tree, a devil in smoke, or Jesus on tortillas; pre-existing beliefs confirmed through pareidolic manifestation, proof in a tautological loop. A miracle. The important distinction is that while many may *believe* what they “see” is proof of transcendent reality, they are in fact happily tricking themselves, delighted in fulfilling their own wishes to justify their beliefs, as it were, while the child and presumably the artist *knows* he or she is creating an inspired fiction, however compelling, however beautiful, however convincing. Their visionary creation is a new thing, a new vision, not mere confirmation of an old belief. The issue does, however, remain sticky.

Surrealist Max Ernst’s dreamed up *automatistic* landscapes by gazing at rubbings or *frottages*, dealing with what he and Dali called *paranoiac vision*. In his famous essay, The Surrealist Manifesto of 1924, and later his 1933 piece The Automatic Message (*Le Message Automatique*) Ernst expounded on the links between the unconscious, revealed through *psychic automatism* and *paranoiac vision* vis-a-vis the everyday rational naming mind.

As DaVinci recommended, painters still often work by first creating a field of meaningless smudges and then developing pareidolic suggestions and impulses, and they also continue sometimes to struggle to

resist the very things they invite; a conjurer's bad faith. Once seen, as it turns out, pareidolic imagery is hard to *not see*.

The following is a story told by Pablo Picasso, as quoted in Francoise Gilot (his former wife) and Carlton Lake, *Life with Picasso*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964, pp. 76-77—

I remember one evening I arrived at George Braque's studio. He was working on a large oval still life with a package of tobacco, a pipe, and all the usual paraphernalia of Cubism. I looked at it, drew back and said, "My poor friend, this is dreadful. I see a squirrel in your canvas." Braque said, "That's not possible." I said, "Yes, I know, it's paranoiac vision, but it so happens that I see a squirrel. That canvas is made to be a painting, not an optical illusion. Since people need to see something in it, you want them to see a package of tobacco, a pipe, and the other things you're putting in. But for God's sake, get rid of that squirrel." Braque stepped back a few feet and looked carefully and sure enough, he too saw the squirrel, because that kind of paranoiac vision is extremely communicable. Day after day Braque fought that squirrel. He changed the structure, the light, the composition, but the squirrel always came back, because once it was in our minds it was almost impossible to get it out. However different the forms became, the squirrel somehow always managed to return. Finally, after eight or ten days, Braque was able to turn the trick and the canvas again became a package of tobacco, a pipe, a deck of cards, and above all a Cubist painting.

Other painters might have happily incorporated the squirrel, grateful for the incongruity. Not Braque. This seems to me to illustrate a triumph of the rational will over unconscious visionary impulses. Bad faith in a certain sense. The Visionary not accepting vision. Braque's will to create a Cubist painting, as a pre-determined goal, eventually won, but at what cost?