

VISION'S RESISTANCE TO LANGUAGE

One is so used to assuming a reflexive relationship between vision and language that one runs the risk of losing touch with their incompatibility. Here I want to say a few words about the sense in which their relationship is antagonistic rather than one of reciprocity.

I am going to say that this antagonism is a product of language's irreversible effect on the visual, an irreversibility not clearly evident in the visual's effect on language. I want to say that although language depends heavily on visual imagery, it is by definition not concerned with the visual as such, while the visual does not necessarily depend on the linguistic and when it does it ceases to that extent to be visual.

The question of similarity or difference, reciprocity or mutual exclusion, seems in one sense to be a matter of where one starts. If one begins with sight and speech, as opposed to the visual and language, then the differences seem clear. Sight is involuntary, speech voluntary. I grant that this is not true to the extent that sight and speech are equally vulnerable to repression and displacement, but there is still the fundamental difference that if one opens one's eyes one can't help but see, but one must, obvious exceptions aside, mean to speak. One may open one's mouth without speaking, and it is this as much as anything which tells us that speech is a faculty and not a sense. One doesn't so much sense the world through as make a world with it.

The customary pair is not "sight and speech" but "sight and sound," where both contain the possibility of seeing sights and hearing sounds which might as well be meaningless as meaningful. "Sight and sound" embrace the possibility of incoherence as much as coherence, of disorder as much as order, of, even, formlessness as much as form.

I am aware that there are problems with such a characterization of sight and sound. That one never has it in a pure form. That children learn to focus immediately upon leaving the womb and

that one might therefore say that sight brings with itself, from the first, the idea of its organization, the will to clarify, to establish hierarchies and points of reference. Which is to say, to impose some kind of code on it or find one in it. To see it as or in terms of a language. But that is the point. If the idea of sight invokes the notion of a field awaiting organization, language is from the start the field of organization, and it organizes what it itself is not.

If one moves from speech to writing and from sight to, say, painting, then things begin to seem very similar. One thinks of Merleau-Ponty saying that all writing begins as painting, but I think differences, in part traceable to those between sight and speech, immediately begin to emerge, like wild flowers returning to the garden of a suburban house.

Painting and writing seem similar because they both appeal to a vision and both imply, or depend upon, a language or something like a language, a repertoire of forms or signs, and it will eventually become clear why I don't want to say that forms are signs. To the extent that they seem similar one may say that painting is produced thanks to the codification of vision, which code is the language of painting, while writing is produced by that codification of (originally) sound which is language. And in both case the codes are constantly recodified by what they produce.

But here is where differences begin to sprout. When I gave my essay the title "Vision's Resistance to Language," I had Heidegger in mind. Specifically, I was thinking of his idea of history, and of culture and especially language as historical. It occurred to me that words have histories in a way that marks and colors and even shapes do not. That only in a very special sense, which I'll discuss, is there anything in the history of the visual which may be compared with the confusion caused, in Heidegger's version of events, by the substitution, once Latin came to predominate, of the word *res* for *ens*, a substitution which severed the connection between things and the idea of being which in Greek philosophy had linked the perceiving subject to the rest of creation.

It is perhaps only at moments which are subsequently regarded as transitional that anything like that could be said to occur in the history of the visual. One can just about conceive of Duccio or Giotto as an artist who, caught between Byzantine and Renaissance ways of thinking, produced works uncertain as to whether the point of view of their perspective was the old one, in which God looks through the painting, the perspective converging on the viewer, and the new, in which the spectator looks into the painting at a re-convention of a space as secular as his (as we know, not her) own. In this sense Renaissance perspective might be thought of as a reversal of original perspective, a substitution of the secular for

the spiritual quite similar to the loss of meaning, loss of the original essence, of which Heidegger accuses the Romans.

But the very example underlies the extent to which painting and writing differ from one another without, in that, deferring to one another. With work such as Giotto's, one is in the presence of painting in which the visual has become highly encoded, and in which one code is turning into another. At one minute blue stands for purity, is a pure color (which is to say one not mixed with white or any other color), and is always worn, for that reason, by the Virgin Mary. At the next it's an adulterated color (which is one mixed with white and other colors) and stands for the sky or for anything else that happens to be blue – in other words, no longer has any fixed connotation save for associations formed through resemblance.

Obviously this is not a matter of mistranslation, any more than the Japanese word “hi,” which means “yes,” is a mistranslation of the English word which sounds like it, but it is an effect caused by the substitution of one code for another. As such it makes it possible to make a distinction between the visual and language. I should suggest that a difference between the visual and language may be found in the realization that blue, as a kind of fact of life, one of the three primary colors, has some kind of status independent of its denotation in a particular code, and that this kind of independence is not characteristic of sounds. One recalls Merleau-Ponty's assertion that one's encounters with blue are always mediated, that the blue of a shirt is different from the blue of the sky. That is the point. Blue was there before its mediation and was already meaningful – it is that meaning which is mediated. Sound is not mediated by language but is rather turned into the agent of mediation. It's not hard to imagine a civilization in which the sound “hi” meant nothing at all, while the celestial associations of blue seem unavoidable but at the same time to some extent independent of any conceptual identity which might be attached to that formless distance which is the sky at any given time. (Spirituality at one moment, the limits of human vision at the next. I must admit that putting it this way makes the two very similar. But only if one supposes that spirituality begins at the point beyond which one cannot see. I suppose it does. That's presumably why people are always seeing it as manifested, as opposed to actually visible in itself, in what one can see.)

What I'm proposing, then, is that the visual retains about itself an element of the unencoded even when it has become a part of a code. I want to suggest that this has something to do with the visual's relationship to sight. That is to say, with the relationship between that which is made to be seen and seeing itself. I further

want to suggest that language, as the code of codes, irreversibly erodes or obliterates the visual, precisely because of its dependence on visual imagery, which turns everything one sees into a metaphor, causing the thing to be lost in the concept it's made to represent.

By extension, the visual is not the same as the visualizing of an idea. Or when it is, the visualizing of an idea will not constitute the entire visual address of the context of which the visualization is a part. My little boy, who is learning to read and write, likes to explain to me that one can't spell letters because one spells with them. By the same token, things in the world don't have lines around them, things in representational paintings and drawings do. The drawn line is not visual so much as it brings the visual into view in accordance with a particular idea of it. It encodes it, in effect makes it function metaphorically in the service of an idea or vision of the visualizable. I want to suggest that there is an element in the visual which slips out of the code's control, or is inherently independent of it even as it functions within it, for which there is no analogy in language and which, in that, poses itself as something other than the linguistic and, in that, other than the discursive. Or, if one prefers, presents itself as the manifestation of a language beyond language, a kind of language without a history in the Heideggerian sense of the word.

A place where one may readily observe the resistance of the visual to its envelopment by language is in writing about art. There are a number of reasons why art writing should either founder or simply go off somewhere else when confronted with an art object, but one of them seems to be that it just can't prevent itself from doing so. Here is an example of how this usually takes place. This is from an article about the painter Steven Ellis, by the novelist Patrick McGrath:

A series of vertical columns, red and black, of varying widths, are ranged across the canvas. The texture is not consistent – here the paintwork solid red, here fading and aging, here bleeding from the edge in long diagonal washes. Here an edge is ragged, here straight, here a slender vertical wobbles, here it's true. But in two columns of the canvas a spongy, smeary green predominates, an organic green that somehow takes up the hints of wobble and decay elsewhere in the painting by evoking the color and texture of moss. The painting is infested with moss. So these crumbling fragments of a distressed painterly idiom – what are they good for but ruins? The contemporary painter is an architect of ruins, collecting his bits of debris like an old *bricoleur* and patching them together with wit and affection into structures that miraculously cohere. There is great

warmth and humor in this complicated piece of abstraction. The pleasure of ruins is palpable here.¹

What was a red and black painting at the beginning of the paragraph has become an elegiac pleasure having to do with painting as an institution, or perhaps Western culture in general, by the end. One suspects that if McGrath had talked about vertical stripes, rather than vertical columns – as opposed, incidentally, to what, horizontal or diagonal columns? – it would have been harder for the idea or image of architecture to emerge as the *logos* it immediately becomes. Within two sentences a visual effect reminiscent of moss becomes an infestation, of architecture, by moss as such. And all of a sudden wit and affection are being used to achieve a miraculous coherence. Of what? Of a painting? There is no longer a painting to be seen. Or if there is it is a painting which must now be seen as a complicated abstraction which knits together the architectonic (as ruin) and the naturalistic (as fungus) with warmth and humor.

I don't happen to think this is a very useful way to write about paintings. For one thing it seems to me that there's something dubious about supposing a late twentieth-century painting to be so similar to a poem by Wordsworth, but the point here is that this passage is only an extreme version of what would happen anyway once one departed from the path of banal and implicitly redundant description, and that is always completely misleading to begin with because it tacitly attributes banality to what it describes. Because as the column metaphor makes clear, one difference between the visual and language is that while paintings etc. may point to ideas, words are ideas. And what is more, they're as often as not ideas which convey themselves through an implicitly visual image, so that when describing a painting the writer is likely to submerge one visual image, the painting, in the images conjured up to describe it.

This is to say that naming a work of art, attaching it to language or suspending it in language, deprives it of its existence as a visual object in the world and replaces that existence with another, in which it serves as the armature for a display of metaphor – metaphor being that into which language turns the visual.

One could readily imagine that if McGrath had talked about red stripes, which are two dimensional, instead of red columns, which are three dimensional and capable of bearing weight, there would have been less room for the idea of architecture, and with it its concomitant concept of the ruin. And similarly that if he hadn't described something as mossy, then there would have been no ex-

cuse for the arrival of the fungus itself. It would also have been harder for the painting to become an oxymoron of the sort McGrath wants it to be, a witty elegy for a collapsed but somehow, indeed, in its very collapse, vibrant form. It would have had to be a painting instead. That is to say, a mute object whose eloquence lay not in words.

I'd like to say a couple of words about this mute eloquence, if only to lay myself open to the risks endured by McGrath, but also and primarily to return to the question of sight as a precondition for the visual. If McGrath had talked about red stripes instead of red columns, then he would have had to describe the surface they were on, or at least the field they run through. And it would have been a surface which was flat, or would it have been a surface signifying a space or depth? Because if you look at anything flat for long enough – not very long – it will become a depth, which contains things. And would the stripes have been separated from one another by other stripes, or by voids, or would they themselves be seen as stripes which were voids or spaces all held apart by that system of voids, depths, or chasms which is the line or edge, invisible in its visibility, which defines each stripe or is brought into existence by it?

It's true that such questions might just lead back to Wordsworth, who, as de Man observed, described a lake as both a surface and an abyss, but they also lead back to the question of sight as a precondition of the visual.² I should like to propose that sight knows only surprise or recognition. One either sees something one has seen before or one does not. Language, obliged to turn things into ideas before it can see them at all, knows only recognition, albeit a recognition which can come as a surprise. Language always knows surprise in terms of a shock of recognition rather than cognitive shock. Elsewhere in the essay to which I've just referred de Man suggests that: "The delicate interplay between perception and imagination could nowhere be more intricate than in the representation of a natural scene, transmuted and recollected in the ordering form of Wordsworth's language."³ In art writing like McGrath's one tends to feel that the imagination rather overpowers perception. And the reason may be found in Wordsworth, if you like. Wordsworth describes a lake as both surface and abyss, but also – and here is where the reordering of which de Man speaks begins to take its toll – as a "calm fire."⁴ No such metaphoric inversion is available to the visual, which is to say any visualization of such an image would be an illustration of a literary idea. A flat object may suggest or imply or present the idea of a void by virtue of being flat and thus invoking its opposite. But for it to suggest heat or wetness will require the deployment of association and reference.

In suggesting that the visual is robbed of its visibility once it's named I'm suggesting that it resists language by being mute, by not speaking for itself as a poem might, by, for example, invoking a lake and then attributing to it the qualities of fire. In this sense the visual is what's left when one has described a painting, not what might be brought to life by the description. What that does is to transfer everything that can be transferred from the realm of sight to that of the imagination, and imagination is of course defined as requiring the absence of the object which is being imagined.

What I've said so far might be formulated as follows. Naming the visual robs it of its visibility and lodges it in language. The object of vision is thereby detached from the world of things and inserted instead into one or another discourse. This happens even before the writer gets at it because any art object is the product of a discourse designed to contain or trap or present or free the visual. In order to succeed, it will have had to escape its own discourse, to get outside of it. The extent to which it succeeds will, perhaps, be the extent to which it will also be able to resist language's embrace on subsequent occasions. For those interested in the visual arts, what I've said might be expressible as the idea that nonrepresentational painting seeks to present the unnameable, in the sense of that which has not yet been named, and representational painting to perform a kind of defamiliarization which one might call an unnamings, in the sense of a subversion of the name which will in due course add to its scope. In more general terms it raises, or returns one to, the question of the visual as a kind of surplus which is there from the start.

It follows from this that there are two possible approaches to the visual. I've suggested that the incompatibility between the visual and language might be located in the difference between looking at something and reading it, and that converting it into something which might be read involves its transference into a code which has no use for the actually visual. One approach would be concerned with seeing what may be said once one has assimilated to discourse that part of the work which may be assimilated. Another would be to concentrate on the surplus – to see the work as a challenge to language, and to call for a language which can locate its own deficiencies in regard to the matter of sight. One approach would focus on the possibilities of the work as discourse, the other as event.

The first approach will, by definition, always concentrate on the work as an organization of some sort. It will deal with it in terms of the recognizable, but will grant that in being recognizable the work alters the category to which it is being said to appeal, and into which it's being inserted. One recalls Lyotard's suggestion that

the work of art is postmodern while it's being made, modern once it's finished and has become part of the art discourse. I'll rephrase this to say that it's visual until it's gobbled up by the language which surrounds the work of art, counterdiscourse fated to end up as discourse. One could also see such a process as Baudrillardian, the visual subsumed into the hypervisuality of the sign, the total conversion of surplus into discourse. Such an approach characteristically privileges the idea of perspective, of the work as an organization (voluntary or not) of ideas. That is to say, as the visualization of the inherently invisible: the visual as a surplus to be somehow passed or used up. Thus one has Martin Jay, at a conference devoted to vision and visuality, congratulating various of his colleagues on finding an alternative to Descartes, but at the same time admonishing them that:

In fact . . . the radical dethroning of Cartesian perspectivalism may have gone a bit too far. In our haste to denaturalize it and debunk its claims to represent vision *per se*, we may be tempted to forget that the other scopic regimes . . . are themselves no closer to a "true" vision. Glancing is not somehow superior to gazing; vision hostage to desire is not necessarily better than casting a cold eye; a sight from the situated context of a body in the world may not always see things that are visible to a "high-altitude" or "God's-eye-view."⁵

One sees here the visual conceived entirely as a kind of raw material for a vision intent on the revelation of truth, notwithstanding its uncertainty as to whether the latter is of the absolute or relative variety. At its best such an approach would seem to lead to Foucault, who had a Nietzschean concept of the role that truth might play in discourse. And in an important sense the perspectival approach leads back to Heidegger, whose book on Nietzsche contains the following: "Because the real is perspectival in itself, apparentness as such is proper to reality. Truth, *i.e.*, true being, *i.e.*, what is constant and fixed, because it is the petrifying of any single perspective, is always only an apparentness that has come to prevail, which is to say, it is always error. For that reason Nietzsche says, '*Truth is the kind of error without which a certain kind of living being could not live. The value for life ultimately decides.*'"⁶

In the perspectival approach, the visual's value for the nonvisual ultimately decides.

Another participant in that same conference thinks of the visual as a kind of pulsing.⁷ This seems closer to the visual, at least to the extent that it is further from the inscribed line which locates the pulse within a point of view, where a form leads to another form by being reformed. It is reminiscent of Kristeva's idea of the semi-

otic preceding the semantic, and in that invokes the infant developing a hierarchy of significances out of movement and focus in the visual field. And it recalls Cézanne and Matisse, who both insisted on vibration, that is, movement, as a fundamental property of color, that is, of the visual. But it still offers a principle of organization, of sense making, as a definition of the visual.

To see the visual in terms of its resistance to language one would need to see it, I think, as not making sense – to see it in its irreducibility to discourse. Such an approach would try to see the extent to which the visual is not like language in the way it works. That it contains no equivalent for spoken and unspoken consonants, nor for containing within itself the idea of a past. To the extent that the visual is not a language it is bestially amnesiac. Its memory is never its memory, but only the memory of that which organizes it. In this sense I think an approach to the visual which sought to preserve its mute and antidiscursive power would be indebted to Deleuze rather than to Foucault. Such an approach would seek to preserve the work as an event, irreducible to its interpretation as organization. It would be likely to have recourse to Deleuzian concepts such as flow and the gaseous, if only because these are at such a distance from the idealism and linearity of perspectivalism – three words which mean the same thing.

It might be an approach to the visual which understood that, unlike Giotto, the contemporary artist is not so much concerned with moving from one kind of knowledge to another as with trying to get outside of knowledge. Toward surprise rather than recognition. At the level of representation and recognition, I think it would certainly have recourse to the Deleuze who, in the context of a book about Spinoza, turns to Freud's Little Hans to explain that, viewed in terms of an ontology of function, a cart horse has more in common with an ox than with a race horse.⁸ Which is to say that perspectivalism is itself multiplicitous, and therefore not necessarily either idealist or relativist.

Such an approach would recognize that the visual is always present in and as something, but it would seek to prevent it from being taken over by that thing, or both from being absorbed into a metaphoricalness which originates in reading rather than looking. In this sense it would see the visual as that to or from which that which constituted its organization, its reading, was always seeking to return or threatening to depart. This would be the visual as that which language does not know, that which defies description by remaining visible.