

Sehen ist eine vermeintlich objektive Form der Wahrnehmung. Allerdings sieht der Mensch immer nur einzelne Aspekte eines Ganzen und deutet diese – gedanklich oder mit Worten – auf eine subjektive Weise. Ziel des vorgestellten Projekts ist es, Sehens- und Benennungsgewohnheiten bewusst zu machen und zu durchbrechen.

Seeing is a supposedly objective form of perception. However, people only ever see individual aspects of a whole and interpret them – mentally or in words – in a subjective way. The aim of the project presented here is to make people aware of their habits of seeing and naming, and to break through them.

A democratic society necessarily has to strive towards a balance between individual and collective values. Competence in aspectual thinking is a tool for a better understanding of human communication and the interactions between people and images, i.e., of the ‘world’. As Erving Goffman has pointed out, we can generate a desired world, when we understand how to deal with multiple realities. Empathy presupposes the faculty to imagine oneself in the place of others. Therefore this competence – the ability to deal with different perspectives, to think aspectually – has an aesthetic, an ethical and a social impact.

In the society we live in today, there is much concern about the changing role of images (online, as selfie, as newsfeed, as commercial). The changes in how we produce, use, distribute and comment on images directly affect our worldview.¹ Philosophers and artists face the task of having to bring some kind of orientation to this complex field so as to take away the feelings of anxiety that could arise when we do not know our way about. If we can get a better view of mechanisms of understanding and the creation of meaning – connecting the fields of cognition, poetics and artistic practice in a comprehensible pattern – then we can also provide protection against the manipulative use of the text-image relationship in advertising and in the production of published ‘facts’. In schools, universities and research institutes, such expertise should be common knowledge. No one with responsibilities towards clients, students or colleagues in research or the production of meanings should ignore the broad impact that aspectual thinking has on the world as we perceive it. Aspectual seeing is the shared competence that accommodates social cohesion and difference at the same time. Altered, versatile perspectives allow for new “ways of seeing”, and for fresh, creative modes of understanding.² This can find many applications, also in teaching situations, art education and academic discourse.

The precise ways in which we are entangled in our organised activities – such as interactions with images, meaning-creation and mutual understanding, etc. – are different for everyone.³ It is hardly surprising that the way out of our confusion is equally different for everyone.

Looking for meaning is a focal human drive, and the quest for signification is a reflexive force. Seeing is never passive but a complex practice involving perception, interaction and engagement. What is seen – what the viewer is aware of – is the fruit of a small epiphany, a sudden insight at the close of multi-layered, active processes.⁴

What we will begin to see is that there is never only one way of seeing, never only one right way of picturing what we see. This is what aspect-seeing highlights in every instance. It is the invisible facilitator of understanding and of making oneself understood; it is a valuable human cultural tool. We simply have to understand it and use it properly. It is the bliss of understanding.

Aspect Change

Aspect-seeing, a term introduced by Ludwig Wittgenstein, is a fundamental cognitive instrument, and vital in this context.⁵ Aspect change, synonymous with the practice of aspect-seeing and aspectual thinking, can happen as a sudden shift, or as a gradual process of shifting between

interpretations or perceptions. Meanings can tip over abruptly like in jokes, but images – as objects perceived through our practice of seeing – can also shift smoothly, little by little, and unnoticed. Rhetorical shifts in language, a metaphorical transfer or interaction between image and text, can provide examples of when and how we undergo such shifts.⁶

On the most basic level, we know aspect change as a phenomenon from Gestalt theory. We recognise Kippbilder and picture puzzles as games of visual perception, and we are familiar with 2D/3D representations such as the Necker cube, or cartoons of multi-representational images.

In ordinary language, we speak of an aspect to point out our visual focus or our viewpoint. The processes of *how* to see an aspect and its impact on perception as such (in art and beyond), remain unnoticed. Fundamental processes in perception and cognition are often overlooked, as they constantly accompany and facilitate our senses. As Ludwig Wittgenstein said, one tends to ignore what is “before one’s eyes”: “The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is unable to notice something – because it is always before one’s eyes.)”⁷

During the process of aspect change, a shift of meaning occurs and the perceived object is experienced in a new way, without it really changing. The objects that change under the influence of aspect-seeing are what we call shifting images.⁸ A familiar example for this is the duck-rabbit picture.⁹ Some see it as a duck at first, others as a rabbit, but none of us is wrong.

The trivial, but crucial, issue with this picture is that every act of perception is already an interpretation; our perception and assessment of the world change with the way we represent things, with our worldview.

The duck-rabbit picture suggests that we often do not notice certain aspects of the world, and fail to see what others cannot miss. As Wittgenstein said, “[a] picture held us captive”.¹⁰ Especially when philosophers conjure up their universal theories on the basis of their private perspectives, this becomes an invitation for misunderstandings.

It was Wittgenstein’s aim to break free of this captivity by pointing to different possibilities of interpretation time and again. Emphasising now *this* aspect of the world and now *that* one, he wanted to show his readers that almost every theory up to now has been too dogmatic; more generally, that no way of representing the world is capable of capturing all possible aspects. There is no single, right mode of representation, just as there is not one right way of interpreting the duck-rabbit picture. In light of this, the task of the philosopher is to complicate misleading, one-dimensional representations by re-describing the world from ever-new perspectives. In other words, our constant task is to bring about aspect changes. Aspect change is a tool we need to transfer our viewpoints into a whole spectrum of meanings, rather than to believe in one truth.

*I know that the crucial term ‘real’ may have been permanently Wittgensteined into a blur of slightly different uses, but proceed on the assumption that carefulness can gradually bring us to an understanding of basic themes informing diversity.*¹¹

It is in pictures like that of the duck-rabbit that concept and image come together through interpretation.¹² We shift the image we see until it clicks with the concept that must belong to it. “Now I see a rabbit!”, we exclaim, heaving a sigh of relief. Indeed, aspect-seeing is “half visual experience, half thought”.¹³ What we see differs with the attitude we adopt toward the objects perceived.¹⁴ This often demands imagination.¹⁵

Aspect change can thus best be experienced in the gaps between saying and showing. Switching modes of perception gives us a view of the simultaneity of competing aspects, competing ways of seeing. For example, in Frans Oosterhof’s work *Plaatsbepaling (Positioning)*, made in 1994, we see a young couple holding hands in a clearing of a thick forest. We see a car hiding behind a tree. Capitalised words are arranged clockwise: *the meeting, the border, the picnic, the trap, the farewell, the rope*. The interpretation of the image is charged differently by each one of the ‘subtitles’ – the viewer experiences aspect change as a variety of possible meanings.¹⁶

The recent work of the artist duo Hänni & Schenk (HKB 2017) exemplifies this method: their work *Echo* is a series of 50 dishes made of porcelain that retain the traces of a meal by annealing the enamel after the food was on the plate. The work hosts a discourse on Gestalt phenomena (What do I identify? Is it a galaxy? A globe? Spaghetti?), it alludes to the traditional role of tableware as representational currency and the political superiority of wealthy citizens and royals represented in the dinnerware, and is a visual power statement. It refers to cultural heritage, ‘China’ as well as Dutch, or to Swiss craft and customs. And seen from another aspect, it reveals a fleeting, daily, often social, human practice of having meals together.

Jokes

Many jokes can be seen as instances of the phenomenon of aspect change (which is why it makes sense to speak of aspectual or shifting jokes). Laughter and aspect changes are often accompanied by a pleasurable state of relief or elation. Sigmund Freud made explicit this connection between humour and perspectival shifts.

What Freud calls the joke-technique of “double meaning” or “plays upon words” is analogous to Wittgenstein’s duck-rabbit picture.¹⁷ The following joke is cited by Freud as a clear example of a shifting joke:

A doctor, as he came away from a lady’s bedside, said to her husband with a shake of his head: “I don’t like her looks”. “I’ve not liked her looks for a long time”, the husband hastened to agree.¹⁸

Just as the duck-rabbit picture is one image with two interpretations, in this joke the same word is interpreted in two different ways. Neither the image nor the word changes, yet they take on a different meaning according to the different ways in which we represent them. Upon being struck by the playfulness of an ambiguity that falls into place, a dose of pent-up mental energy escapes and we feel relieved.

Generally, the triggers and effects of ‘aha’ moments can reveal crucial facets of mental shifts: understanding a joke and getting the pun releases a set of reactions related to basic subconscious biological mechanisms, and neurochemical processes influence perception.¹⁹ Our desire to get the pun shows how we as humans strive to discover hidden aspects. Understanding creates bliss. The exemplary collaborative work between the literary scholar and poet Raoul Schrott and the cognitive scientist Arthur Jacobs focuses on the transfer zones between cognitive processes and poetic procedures. They connect perspectives from poetics, aesthetics and rhetoric to cognitive processes in order to explain semantic shifts in image perception. Aspectual thinking is presented as an operational mode of the brain, which is linked to the ‘aha’ experience and mental shifts between figures of perception.²⁰ Cognitive processes and neuronal patterns prove to have a physiological and biochemical component.²¹ The pleasure of understanding an image, text or a joke thus generates a state of elation, as it is exciting, playful and satisfying.²² This is an effect we want to map onto artistic practice and research by distinguishing it from current views on the productive role of wit in the arts.²³

[...] the enabling concept here being that of defamiliarization or making strange (ostranenie), the ability of the artistic construct to slow down perception and make the audience see the object in question as if for the first time.²⁴

The theoretical concept of this focuses on a blind spot in our lives: the way we ‘see’ the world essentially is the way the world is to us. Seeing as both metaphor and physical experience covers almost all instances in which we find ourselves *being in the world*. Erving Goffman lays the foundation for a theoretical realm of aspect-seeing in *Frame Analysis* (1974), where he examines organisations in relation to ‘reality’ in socio-cultural terms of actions and their meanings and consequences. Taking his cue from Alfred Schütz,²⁵ Goffman argues for “[...] multiple realities [...] to look for rules which, when followed, allow us to generate a ‘world’ of a given kind.”²⁶

“Bracketing” and “framing” describe modes in which individuals deal with and regulate “optical” and conceptual effects of framing, including “fraud, deceit, misidentification”.²⁷ Goffman establishes concepts of “slippage and looseness” in opposition to the belief “that the world can be totally perceived”,²⁸ and claims that “a primary framework is one that is seen as rendering what would otherwise be a meaningless aspect of the scene into something that is meaningful.”²⁹

Practice

We largely share similar physical set-ups and use similar institutions, which influence the way we organise space around us.³⁰ Our experiences influence our mind and language, and metaphors take off when they successfully transfer different experiential zones into our habits and worldviews. When we look at our linguistic habits, we can detect such hidden worldviews. Look at the way we describe the sunset in different languages:

‘Sonnenuntergang’, ‘coucher de soleil’, ‘il tramonto’. Its name reveals one aspect, from our respective subjective viewpoint.

Wittgenstein remarked that we often get inextricably caught up in the constructions and organisations that make up our everyday lives. Language is one such a construction, images are another, dancing a third, and so on. Each of these practices can be seen as a multi-layered game with rules and strategies that have become increasingly complex, and for which we now lack a comprehensive overview. Sometimes we get lost in them, and we do not know how to play on.

Here the fundamental fact is that we lay down rules, a technique, for playing a game, and that then, when we follow the rules, things don’t turn out as we had assumed. So that we are, as it were, entangled in our own rules. This entanglement in our rules is what we want to understand: that is, to survey.³¹

This is exactly what we want to practice: continuing to play these all-too-familiar games of image-interpretation with words, but this time with awareness and clarity. To this end, we want to understand the rules and techniques of our daily aspectual practices, and we want to invent a way of presenting those rules in a perspicuous manner so that everyone else is able to grasp them as well.

1 See *Machtwechsel der Bilder*, ed. by Enno Rudolph and Thomas Steinfeld, Zurich 2018.

2 See John Berger: *Ways of Seeing*, London 1972.

3 See Tobias Servaas: *Seeing Strange Tools as a Picture. How to Make Sense of Alva Noë?*, in: *Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und allgemeine Kunswissenschaft* 63/1 (2018), pp.157–164.

4 Nim Goede: *Shifting Images in Conversation with Tine Melzer*, Amsterdam 2018, www.metropolism.com/nl/features/33931_shifting_images_in_conversation_with_tine_melzer (last consulted 12 February 2020).

5 Ludwig Wittgenstein: *Philosophie der Psychologie – Ein Fragment/Philosophy or Psychology – A Fragment*, in: *Philosophische Untersuchungen/Philosophical Investigations*, ed. by G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte, 4th ed., Oxford 2009, pp.182e–244e.

6 See Walter Benjamin: [Brezel, Feder, Pause, Klage, Firlefanz, in:] *Denkbilder*, in: *Illuminationen*, Frankfurt a. M. 1977, p.312; Tine Melzer: *Aspect Change and Poetic Charge as Tools for Artistic Research in Literature*, in: *Artistic Research and Literature*, ed. by Corina Caduff and Tan Wälchli, Paderborn 2018, pp.145–155.

7 Ludwig Wittgenstein: *Philosophische Untersuchungen/Philosophical Investigations* [1953], ed. by G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte, 4th ed., Oxford 2009, p.56e, §129.

8 Goede: *Shifting Images in Conversation with Tine Melzer*.

9 First published in *Fliegende Blätter* 97 (1892, 23 October), p.147, taken up by Joseph Jastrow and re-introduced by Ludwig Wittgenstein: *Philosophy of Psychology*, p.204e, §118.

10 Wittgenstein: *Philosophical Investigations*, p.53e, §115.

11 Erving Goffman: *Frame Analysis. An Essay on the Organization of Experience*, New York 1974, p.13.

12 See Michel Foucault: *This is not a Pipe*, translat. and ed. by James Harkness, Berkeley 1983.

13 Wittgenstein: *Philosophy of Psychology*, p.207e, §140.

14 *Ibid.*, p.215e, §193.

15 *Ibid.*, p.218e, §217.

16 See Tine Melzer: *Taxidermy for Language-Animals*, Zurich 2016.

17 Sigmund Freud: *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, London 1960, p.37.

18 *Ibid.*

19 Alva Noë: *Action in Perception*, Massachusetts 2006; Raoul Schrott/Arthur Jacobs: *Gehirn und Gedicht*, Munich 2011.

20 Schrott/Jacobs: *Gehirn und Gedicht*, p.122.

21 *Ibid.*, p.356.

22 *Ibid.*, pp.357–370.

23 *Witty Art – Der Witz und seine Beziehung zu den Künsten*, ed. by Regine Sträfling and Erika Fischer-Lichte, Paderborn 2015.

24 Marjorie Perloff: *Wittgenstein’s Ladder. Poetic Language and the Strangeness of the Ordinary*, Chicago 1996, p.53.

25 Alfred Schütz: *On Multiple Realities*, in: *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 5/4 (1945), pp.533–576.

26 Goffman: *Frame Analysis*, p.5.

27 *Ibid.*, p.7.

28 *Ibid.*, p.35.

29 *Ibid.*, p.21.

30 Noë: *Action in Perception*; *id.: Strange Tools. Art and Human Nature*, New York 2015.

31 Wittgenstein: *Philosophical Investigations*, p.55e, §125.

