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Resemblance to nature contra naturalism – the big misunderstanding

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- Is naturalism and a resemblance to nature the same?
- Is figural painting necessarily naturalistic?
- Is abstract painting the sole alternative to naturalism?

Naturalism and the “Transcendental Painting”

Naturalism presents the exterior properties in its portrayal of the model, which can be a real object or an imagined reality. For improved delimitation and for the general clarification of the concepts, **Vietinghoff used the term “naturalism” strictly for works copied from nature. Such works may achieve technically masterful results but do not include any transcendent experience**, as the artistic imagination does not participate. Therefore, naturalistic works appear sterile, cool and “inanimate”. According to Vietinghoff, **naturalism is absolute non-art** and as far away from his defined “Transcendental Painting” as abstract painting. **Both naturalist and abstract painters represent extremes: the former depends on the visible reality and the latter leaves it completely.** Pure naturalism and abstract painting are the two opposing poles in the spectrum of possible artistic expression.

Naturalism is a rudimentary copy without imagination and creates “*études*” of workmanship or technical masterpieces based on meticulous observation. **The missing spirit is replaced with compulsive imitation.** An absolute, yet undeserved, importance is given to the world of physical appearance. The view of inner truth is confused with the external reality. **In naturalism, the visible details are zealously juxtaposed rather than in a performance of spiritual artistic experience.**

The naturalist believes to act as an artist is to collect knowledge of the subject and display it on the canvas. The animal painter shows his zoological knowledge, the landscape painter his skills in perspective, the sculptor or painter of nudes his anatomic expertise, the painter of battle scenes his discernment of uniforms and weapons. **In the eyes of the followers of naturalism, the aim of any artistic creation is fulfilled if the representation corresponds to reality. On the other hand, opponents of naturalism suspect any similarity to nature to be a consequence of the lack of creative power or the artist’s inability to distance himself from out-dated conventions.**

A painter who creates in the form of the “Transcendental Painting” shows on the canvas the plays of colors, forms and lights which the subject produces in his mind’s eye. However, the naturalist paints what the optic of his physical eye registers. The former penetrates the world and comprehends it from the inside; the view of the latter hits only the surface of the object. Naturalism is to “Transcendental Painting” as a documentary is to poetry, or an anatomic view of men to a philosophical view. Thus, naturalism is not a style but appears in the works of artists lacking imagination in every period. Naturalism is a sign of a lack of inspiration and even great artists do not experience inspiration continuously and sometimes even their works may flatten into naturalistic images. **“When imagination wanes, naturalism begins”**, Vietinghoff said.

Abstract and Transcendental Painting

Abstract painting and naturalism are diametrically opposite. The ultimate abstract painting has nothing to do with the natural perception. However, this cannot be the pretended inevitable and true alternative to naturalism. According to Vietinghoff, abstract painting is an absurdity because **isolated colors do not express something generally intelligible and abstract forms belong to the genre of decorative (ornamental) art**. Certain colors and forms may have a symbolic meaning on which society agrees, such as red ~ “love” or “stop”, green ~ “hope” or “go”, circle ~ “absoluteness”, “abundance” or “emptiness”, infinity sign [∞] “endless” or “married”. But abstractions, symbols, signs, hieroglyphs and pictograms are not always understood depending on the culture and time and have different connotations in other contexts.

Abstract paintings may depend on the esthetic feeling (taste), the will to stylize and structure, certain thoughts and reflections or even pure chance. Just as naturalistic works, they miss the transcendent experience as Vietinghoff formulated. **Naturalism and abstraction constitute a logical pair of opposites, but remain on a different level from the “Transcendental Painting”**.

In his manuscript “Vision and representation”, Vietinghoff shows why colors cannot be placed in a systematic order with absolute definite positions and with the possibility to be reproduced as sounds on a scale. Theories of colors seek parallels between colors and sounds which is interesting yet unsatisfying. The analogy must fail, because sounds, which are readable by notes, develop in the one dimensionality of time and colors extend on the bi-dimensional canvas. Thus, **colors do not represent a generally intelligible language and need always be attached to a figural shape to be unambiguously comprehended**.

According to Vietinghoff, abstract works are intellectual constructions or games depending on the zeitgeist. Thus, they are as “empty” as the naturalistic ones. **Both of them are missing the spiritual and mystic penetration of the sensual world which occurs during the artistic transformation which – in his eyes – is necessarily a transcendental experience as the precondition of true art**. From this point of view, only a few painters and sculptors, who followed and continue to do so along the path of abstraction, are credible. Other kinds of modern art of the twentieth century, Vietinghoff considered to be rebellious protests, capricious experiments, helpless wanderings in search of new kinds of expression, and self-representations addicted to publicity or simply mocking the public.

Naturalism is figurative (representational) but not every figurative work is naturalistic. Just as an abstract painting is not an inspired piece of art due to its radical distance to copying naturalism. At the first view, abstract paintings became more estranged from its “enemy” naturalism than from figurative and transcendental paintings. In certain periods of some painters (such as the studies of trees and dunes of Piet Mondrian), we recognize the **common endeavor of Egon von Vietinghoff and his contemporaries to dissolve the objects in pure color parts**. The pictures of the abstracts became gradually cooler and plainer (prime example: Mondrian); whereas Vietinghoff’s paintings show more and more warmth and plasticity.

Representationalism, Resemblance to Nature and Transcendental Painting

On the one hand, innumerable examples of paintings from Bosch, Rembrandt and Goya, to Corot, Gauguin and Kokoschka show that **realism, in the sense of representationalism or figurative art, does not necessarily lead to naturalism.** On the other hand, Turner impressively proved that **colors gradually dissolve from the subject during the transformation in transcendental painting without ending in a deliberately constructed abstraction.** For better distinction between “representational paintings” (with either natural resemblance or transcendental creation) and “representational but naturalistic” ones, Egon von Vietinghoff distinguished between optical and transcendental perception and, therefore, between optical and transcendental resemblance to nature.

“Resemblance to nature” means oriented on the object or united with the object but not “identically copied” from nature. The representation is a result of transcendental perception that looks life-like and is not only a correct reproduction of its formal characteristics. The transcendental painter looks “beyond” the objects or “through” them; he is not attached to their description but detaches himself from their visible forms. However, not every kind of detachment, as used in abstract painting, automatically guarantees a work of art. The alternatives of “either representational or abstract” are a false polarization and miss the essential point of visual arts. The Transcendental Painting offers another way to show the relation between the physical and the transcendental side of the world.

The **“optical resemblance”** to nature is solely oriented to the visible world and portrays the objects in their external appearance. The aim of this art is fulfilled if the painter achieves a remarkable copy, although it is bi-dimensional. Vietinghoff considered this to be **only skillful or even artificial art**, similar to a sleight of hand to amaze the public (*trompe-l’oeil* effect = trick of the eye). This is a substitute of nature similar to an artificial perfume which is confusingly close to the original one. Such pictures may serve as decoration for empty walls but they do not nourish a mind which is hungry for a deeper experience of art, similar to fast food lacking nutrition.

The **“transcendental resemblance”** is not blindly oriented to the measurable properties of the phenomena, because it is **not based on the observation of reality and its intention is not imitation.** Its objective is to transmit an irrational, mystic experience. Thus, **“trueness to life” does not require a precise copy of the surfaces**, which is both technically impressive and industrious but an uninspired piece of work. According to Vietinghoff, to paint “true to nature” means to follow what nature offers, i.e. to let representation remain in representationalism. The result may be more or less close to the subject depending on the painting technique (compare for example Giotto, Chardin, Sisley, van Gogh) and the artistic vision, i.e. the transcendental experience (compare for example Grünewald, El Greco, Rubens, and Turner).

Naturalism keeps the style of prior art periods which created a resemblance to nature. Thus, there is no external difference between optical (naturalistic) and transcendental resemblance to nature. If, in addition, two contemporaries painted the same subject, most beholders would not be able to see the difference between an expert performance and a transcendental masterpiece: compare for example the less inspired Canaletto and the genius Guardi or the less inspired Delaporte and the genius Chardin. (Please look at www.vietinghoff.org the chapter “Guided tours”, subchapter “Comparisons” referring the “Transcendental Painting”).

In transcendental painting the phenomena dissolve in color parts before the mind’s eye. The object as such disappears and the artistic imagination seizes the performance of forms and colors. The result of this artistic transformation, not the real object, is what we see on the canvas. Aside from the colors of the spectrum, color is always attached to a shape. As the combination of color and form serves as general intelligible language, the beholder of the colors join them easily together to the original form and he is able to understand the meaning of the color graduations and the play of light. This human ability develops from early experience, when a child learns to adapt its view to three-dimensionality.

This visual phenomenon also happens if some color parts have an “abstract” effect (obviously in Turner’s later paintings), due to the proximity to the subject. **Even after the artistic transformation, such paintings are recognizable, even a fruit and a face are changed into highly imaginative landscapes of colors, plays of light and reflexes and rhythms of forms in the transcendental experience of the artist instead of painted documentation.** This intelligibility is not given any more in abstract painting because the color is deprived of any sensual manifestation. Thus, the message needs a literary explanation – the origin language of painting is consciously abandoned.

Fidelity to nature, mystics and artistic sense.

Vietinghoff was also a mystic though he never claimed to be out of modesty (for more information look at the chapter “Vietinghoff – the mystic and his contemporaries”). His definition of “Transcendental Painting” includes **two aspects of “truth to nature”: to accept the natural phenomena with their real appearance and to transform them into art without arbitrary alienation.** By doing so, he embraced creation, as other great artists did before, and adapted it visually for the beholder. Vietinghoff considered the high-handed changes to nature made by the Dadaists, Cubists and Surrealists as similar to a “break with creation”. **To work “true to nature” does not mean only to copy, but to paint “loyal to nature” and to find the core of the phenomena, the heart of transcendence.**

The only way to reach this aim is to be unbiasedly receptive to the natural appearance with visual devotion and sympathetic love. According to Vietinghoff’s philosophy, **to invert, distort, dissect or mutilate objects, as is usual in fine arts since the 20th century, is an act of randomness bereft of meaning to the point of blasphemous mocking.** In all these cases, the natural phenomenon is harmed for whatever historical or psychological reason. There may be experiments in presumption (pride for instance), attempted break-outs due to desperation (due to the World Wars or the Spanish Civil War), conscious provocation (against the bourgeois conformism for instance), manifestation of misunderstood creativity or simply following the majority. At any rate, this variation of artistic concept does not spring from what Vietinghoff described as art with a transcendental home.

His art neither aims at criticism nor vituperation of the given appearance but intends to penetrate it with contemplation and understanding. A painter or sculptor cannot invent the already created world, unless he moves in a world of fantasy or dreams à la Piranesi or in mythological stories. According to Vietinghoff’s view, a painter cannot make up something meaningful or new but **work only as a catalyst to make visible what is beyond the visible.**

“Behind the mountains there are living people as well. Be modest! You have not yet invented or devised anything that others have not already invented or devised prior to you. And if you have, consider it as a gift from above which you must share with others.”
(Robert Schumann, composer, 1810-1856)

If an artist is looking for a psychological or socio-critical discussion, he should use a more suitable genre: literature, theatre, rhetoric or caricature. Since the representations of intentional thoughts and unintentional contemplation are in competition, **pure painting is based solely on visual perception and is limited from anything other than looking. The attention on color experience, pure vision and the essence of the fine arts is divided and reduced by cognitive messages such as psychological, anecdotic or political ones.** This is Egon von Vietinghoff’s artistic insight.

Naturalism understands “fidelity to nature” as rational representation of all observable physical marks. A naturalist cannot transcendently experience the perceived phenomena even if he is a painter. Thus, he is not able to judge the spirit of art and believes himself to satisfy it by his optical feint. An optical look is not

equal to a transcendental contemplation. In the first, a superficial deception of nature and a kind of visual fraud is seen, in the latter a true art-work emerges as a transmission of deeper insights. Nevertheless, both can astonish the beholder but the amazement is in response to two completely different causes: a perfect bluff or a revealed truth. Mainly, the beholder is not able to distinguish between the two and considers a purely technical or a crowd-pleasing work as true art.

“If the beholder is missing a sense for fine arts, he judges only the formal shape of art-works and cannot see even with all his willpower the difference between the results of fantasy and only imitation. The educated or miseducated philistine mistakes his lack of understanding of art with the term of art per se. According to the motto “If an artist or sculptor produces something incomprehensible, it must be art”. He believes to see art if the work remains incomprehensible whether due to his blindness for the transcendental aspects of life or because the image does not express anything.”
(Egon von Vietinghoff)

“The artistic expression cannot be discursively (logically) captured, thus it cannot be proved or explained. Therefore, unartistic people react on enthusiasm for true art with disbelieving eyes or an unappreciative shake of the head. Similar to the difference between the skepticism of the physicist, who believes fire is only an act of burning, and the emotion of the Parsee who sees a manifestation of his god. Similar to physicists who try to explain the emotion of the Parsee as a result of his imagination or autosuggestion, unartistic people tend to depreciate the emotion of the true art lover and judge it as eccentricity.”
(Egon von Vietinghoff)

The similarity of the real and the represented objects does not give any criteria for the artistic value at all, because it may come about in two completely different ways: pure imitation or representation of “meditatively” experienced play of colors. For the assessment of the artistic substance, it is crucial to distinguish optical from “transcendental” similarity to nature. However, it is difficult to judge, as many art works are simultaneously results of transcendental and imitating perception. In representationalism, only masterpieces of the greatest genius are completely free from naturalistic elements. They can renounce the crutches of imitation and are not limited by aestheticism due to their lucid creativity born from mystic insights, artistic imagination, and skill in spontaneous representation.

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