

1. I believe a legitimate way exists to describe what an image is: images are two-dimensional surfaces that reflect light in a heterogeneous way, according to a rule that makes a normal viewer, looking at them, see apparent depth. This rule has to do with the arrangement of the pigments on the canvas, and transforms them into *pictorial marks*, the material modifications of the surface that determine the way it manifests itself *visibly*, on the one hand, while causing a given perception in the viewer, on the other – the perception of a figurative space that seems to require the use, though in a *sui generis* way, of the language of depth for its description. Pictorial marks are not part of the figurative content. When we look at a painting we do not see brushstrokes but faces, landscapes or even simply figures that *seem* to overlap on each other. But this is like saying that brushstrokes are pertinent components of the *distal stimulus* of image perception: they act in a causal way on the viewer, but they are not part of the image.

Recognizing that pictorial marks do *not* belong to the figurative content of the image does not mean they cannot be perceived in their own right: when we look at a painting we can approach the canvas and make an effort to see it not as the place of a depiction, but as a material surface covered with pigments. This is an unstable perception that tends to dissolve as soon as the figurative dimension comes back into play: now we observe a point of the painted surface and we are able to see the canvas covered with paints of different kinds, but if the close view of a part of the painted surface gives way to an overall view, and the figurative dimension once again asserts itself for our gaze, the brushstrokes return to their status as components of the distal stimulus, with no role in the figurative context.

I believe this way of introducing the concept of the pictorial mark is legitimate, yet to get to the bottom of the question a different path has usually been followed: when we look at a portrait we do not see only a face, but *also* a set of lines and patches of color that are arranged in a particular perceptive configuration – that which permits us to see a *depicted* face. Hence a conclusion that seems to link the phenomenology of the image to its grammar. Images – it is said – belong to the category of representations: they stand for what they depict. Yet when we look at them they *do not* fool us: we do not believe we are standing in front of a real object, we know we are just perceiving a depiction. Now – the reasoning goes on – if images do not fool us it is because we see that they are composed of pigments spread on a surface: far from simply being parts of the distal stimulus, the brushstrokes must then be essential components of the perception of the image, because only in this way it is possible to

indicate the reason why we are aware of the figurative character of depictions.

Gombrich was wrong: when we perceive an image we are not the victims of a perceptive illusion, however consciously. This thesis has to be set aside; but to do so, we also need to rid ourselves of another conviction of Gombrich that in some ways seems close to the considerations we have just outlined above: the thesis according to which a painting can be seen either in its figurative function or in its consistency as pigment and canvas, but not in both of these ways simultaneously. An anecdote is used to back up this thesis: looking at *Las Meninas*, Kenneth Clarke tells with regret about his inability to see what the painting portrays and what it is in a single glance – a desire that is at least coherent with the dynamic of the thoughts suggested by that painting:

Looking at a great Velázquez, he wanted to observe what went on when the brushstrokes and dabs of pigment on the canvas transformed themselves into a vision of transfigured reality as he stepped back. But try as he might, stepping backward and forward, he could never hold both visions at the same time (Gombrich 1963:).

In this possible *alternation* of reality and figuration the illusory character of depictions loses ground, but this is a path that cannot be taken – at least for those who sustain the twofoldness of image perception. He who sees a face take form in a portrait does not as a result *not* see colors and lines, or *not* grasp their existence on the painted surface. Quite the opposite: he who looks, for example, at the self-portrait of Van Gogh cannot see the face without also seeing the brushstrokes that make it visible. But if things are so, if image perception *seems* to be accompanied by the perception of lines and colors, should we not perhaps assert that the brushstrokes do not belong only to the distal stimulus, but are also and instead elements that converge in determining the meaning of image perception? In turn, image perception should not be thought about as wavering between two mutually exclusive poles, but in the coexistence of two moments that determine its meaning: to see an image means, on the one hand, truthfully seeing the pigments and the canvas, while on the other hand we are somehow faced with what the image portrays, which is the object of a non-truthful perception or of an act in which seeing forms the basis of coherent imagining.

This is a widely held position, shared by different theories. But I do not think that is how things are, and I believe the anecdote of Kenneth Clarke somehow hits the mark. Realizing this, however, means clearly distinguishing between two easily confused notions: on the one hand, there

is what we have agreed to call the *pictorial mark*, namely that particular configuration of pigments that really alters the surface that hosts the image and determines its capacity to causally influence the viewer in a particular way; on the other, we have the *figurative marks* of an image, i.e. those particular visible components that belong to the content of the image itself and perceptively qualify it as a depiction of a certain kind, composed for example of certain lines that create a distinction between subjects and background, giving rise in perception to an appearance of depth. Kenneth Clarke was right: to manage to see a painting as a material surface covered with pigments I have to manage to completely silence the figurative character. Only then do I see the canvas and *its* different colors, and only then will the colors appear to me as an arrangement of pigments on a real surface.

Things are different when the perception becomes image perception: in this case I do not see the pictorial marks as real components of the painting, but I still see a given depiction – a fact, a landscape, a still life – and *I see it in its being made of lines and colors* that give rise to an apparent depth that cannot be confused at all with real depth. If I look at the self-portrait of Van Gogh I do not have a non-veridical perception of a real face, and alongside it the effective perception of a clustering of brushstrokes of different colors that prevent me from being taken in by an illusion; instead, *I see* an apparent object – a *painted* face – that presents itself to my perceptions through its being made of lines and colors arrayed in a given way. In this case, colors and lines are not material determinations that belong to the surface of the painting, but meaningful part of the figurative content, and their being this way necessarily belongs to the description of the depicted object as such. It follows that on the one hand there are pictorial marks that belong to the material dimension of the painting, and that they are part of the distal stimulus of image perception, while on the other there are figurative marks that, instead, are part of the figurative content and concretely constitute the way in which the depicted object presents itself to us – that apparent content that reveals itself to us in its essence as a depicted object, precisely because it is made of a given configuration of figurative marks: lines, patches of color, shading and so on.

Hence the thesis I would like to sustain: figurative marks are elements that belong to the *description* of the content of an image. They belong to it in phenomenological terms, and this means that in principle it is not possible to adequately describe what we see in an image without making use of the language of figuration. The line that in any drawing – even the most basic drawings made by children – makes a face visible does not

appear to us as a chromatic property of the surface of the paper, but as a mark that constructs a particular figurative element that has its own apparent depth, since as it presents itself it conceals what is behind it. So we do not see a pictorial mark that colors a given area and acts as the *borderline* between two different regions of the same surface; *we see a contour* that separates an apparent object from its apparent background. We see that line *in this way*, not as the border between two areas, but as the contour of an object, though this does not mean that it is not seen at the same time as a line, a figurative mark that, together with others, makes a *sui generis* objectual entity visible – a depicted object. After all, neither can the language of figuration we have had to use to describe the way the lines and colors are present in an image be set aside in the description of its content. He who looks at a portrait does not simply see a face, but a face composed of lines and colors, constructed with more or less evident brushstrokes: he see the *depiction* of a face. When there is an image, a surface takes on a particular depth, but the depth that appears in a photograph or a painting is not the real depth of objects, just as the way the objects stand out from the background is not equal, in terms of perception, to that of real objects, and a similar observation can be applied to every visual property that appears on the figurative plane, according to a particular modification – that modification which forces us to describe the content of an image making use of the language of figuration, of the quotation marks its puts around the reality of its objects.

According to this thesis I am advancing, the theories that encourage us to distinguish two levels of image perception based on pictorial marks and the non-truthful perception of what the image depicts have to be rejected because they overlook the unified territory of depiction – the terrain of figurative marks and their convergence to give rise to the figurative object, to the quasi-objects that present themselves in images. To perceive an image is not the outcome of the connection between two different kinds of perceptual experience: the configurational aspect and the recognitional aspect which are said to be distinguishable but inseparable aspects of a single peculiar experience. In my opinion, the peculiarity of image perception does not rest on the pretended complexity of the act of seeing-in, but on the nature of its object. Looking at a portrait we just see a particular object: a *painted* human face.

Hence, as well, the structure of my argument. To assert that there is a difference in principle between pictorial marks and figurative marks means, in fact, demonstrating what problems can arise when the difference is overlooked. But it also means, on the other hand, reflecting on how – starting from here – it becomes possible to take stock of the limits of the

concept of image and therefore of the forms in which the nature of figuration comes up short: namely *trompe l'oeil* and *anamorphosis*.

2. First I would like to try to indicate, at least in summary, the difficulties that can arise if we confuse pictorial marks and figurative marks. An initial order of problems emerges when we assign pictorial marks the function that belongs to figurative marks, claiming that the distal stimulus of the image must or can be the object of image perception. This kind of misunderstanding is found in all the theories that sustain that the character of the depiction of images *depends* on our being aware of the material dimension of the image – of the fact that it consists, for example, of pigments that cover the canvas in one way or another. At the same time, for many different theories, seeing the pigments and their arrangement seems to be a necessary intermediate step through which to access figurative content: in other words, we have the experience of what the image depicts only because *we see* what is objectively presented – the canvas and its pictorial marks.

It is doubtful that this is the case: to see a face in a portrait I must have the canvas and the pigments that cover it before my eyes, but this does not mean that the pictorial marks are precisely what present themselves to perception, just as it is not true – looking at the Kanizsa triangle – that I see what is *actually* on the sheet of paper on which it is drawn, though it is clear that I cannot see that triangle if the paper does not bear that particular *configuration* of lines and colors that causally determines such perception on my part. After all, even in the case of many paintings we have seen repeatedly, we may still not be able to confidently say if they are on canvas or a panel, in tempera or oil, and it seems hard to deny that the reason for this is that when we look at them we *do not see* the material surface and the pictorial marks, but some figurative marks unified in a pictorial content. I may have repeatedly seen a painting by Ghirlandaio that shows a grandfather and grandson facing each other, yet still not know if it is a canvas or a panel, or what kind of paint was used; and it is hard to imagine how such details could have escaped my attention, if we are to claim that I must have first observed these factors because it is only through their effective perception that I could have the possibility of accessing the figurative content of the painting.

On the other hand, there is one sense in which those properties have not escaped me. Canvas, fresco or panel are not just material characteristics that resonate in the *pictorial marks*, they are also *stylistic forms* that influence the visible appearance of the *figurative marks* of which the image is composed. In his reflections on the “woodiness” of icons and its contrast

with the softness of canvas, Florensky believes he can glimpse the fundamental lines of a «metaphysics of the surface of representation», and while these lofty-sounding considerations may leave us puzzled, it is still true that different material surfaces permit different perceptive results and produce a different character of the painted scene. Nevertheless, this is tantamount to saying that the nature of pictorial marks has an echo on the plane of figurative marks – and the latter rightfully belong to the sphere of image perception because images are composed of visible configurations of lines and colors. To see a face depicted in a portrait does not mean seeing a face and, at the same time, noticing the canvas and the pigments; it means realizing that certain figurative marks have been combined to make a perceptible *configuration* that has the forms and colors of a face.

It is worth insisting on this point, to try to clarify the relationship that connects pictorial marks and figurative marks to the image. Pictorial marks belong to the material dimension of the representation and are part of the situation of stimulus that causally determines the perception of a depiction, which – in turn – is composed of figurative marks, gathered into some perceptive configuration. The marks of pigment that modify the reaction to the light of the panel of Ghirlandaio in our example do not belong to the depicted face as such, though they are one of the causes of our perception of the face of an old man in that painting: the lines and colors, on the other hand, do belong to it, because that *painted* face exists for us *as a particular perceptible configuration that has those marks and those colors as its figurative components*. That face appears to us this way: not as a real face that has real forms and colors, but as a face painted by certain contour lines and painted as it is, with a set of colors that are the hues of certain temperas that have been spread on the surface in a given manner.

At first glance these remarks look very similar to Bantinaki's discussion of the problem. In a recent contribution – *Picture Perception as Twofold Experience* (2010) – Katerina Bantinaki draws our attention to the difference between on the one hand pigments and brushstrokes as material features of the canvas and, on the other hand, pigments and brushstrokes as element of a figurative whole – as components which are organized by a pictorial form – the form they are seen as forming and which is the outline of the subject of the picture. Take Lucien Freud's portrait of Queen Elisabeth II: on the canvas there are red and brown patches of color, but if you look at the portrait you will see them as part of a perceptual unity – of this functional organization which qualifies the whole as a portrait of Queen Elisabeth. As she says in her paper:

In the case of the portrait of Elisabeth II, under the influence of the organizing form (the form of the Queen) the material elements lose their

distinctness in perception. For instance, the red pigment at the bottom half on the canvas and the brown patch on the upper left function now as organic parts of the whole: they figure in our awareness not as just red and brown patches, but as the lips of the Queen's portrayed face and as a shadow on her portrayed forehead. Although the distinct material parts of the design may have physical properties like shape or color, under the influence of the identifiable form such properties assume a certain *meaning* for us: they are seen as meaningful, rather than just as physical, properties (Bantinaki 2010: 140).

So far, so good – at least in my opinion, but I disagree with her effort to put this description under the aegis of a twofold theory of image *perception*. According to Bantinaki, Aristotle's theory of the essential relation between matter and form can help us to elucidate the twofold but unified character of the object of picture perception. On my own, I must confess that I am not so confident of the clarifying function of this old aristotelian distinction, but let's take for grant that Aristotle's account of the unity of concrete substances can help us to understand the unified character of the *object* of picture perception: this is tantamount to say that this very distinction is inadequate to describe the relation between the twofold nature of picture *perception*. A dotted line is made up of dots or dashes and looking at such a line you see a perceptual unity: this particular dotted line. And it is true: a dot in a dotted line looks somehow different from the same dot alone on an empty canvas. But it would be odd to say that to perceive a dotted line is the outcome of a twofold act of seeing: the act of seeing the single dots and the act of seeing the line, unified in a peculiar complex experience. Unity is a feature of the object we perceive, not the link between two different aspects of our perceptual awareness.

It goes without saying that in order to perceive a dotted line we need to perceive every single dot; nevertheless single dots or dashes *as such* are not the object of our perception: we don't see single dots or dashes, but a dotted line. Single dots or dashes as such are not part of the perceptual content, but parts of its distal stimulus.

The same holds for picture: just because we see meaningful figurative marks tied together to make up a perceptual object – a painted landscape, a etched face, a drawn palace – we cannot see the pictorial marks and seeing-in the object of representation. We just see a painted landscape, a etched face, a drawn palace, and we see these objects thanks to different distal stimuli: pigments on canvas, tracks of ink or pencil on paper.

These considerations can help us to understand why it does not seem permissible to consider images in the light of the concept of *sign*. It is not permissible, in the first place, to see pictorial marks as signs that stand for

figurative content. A sign must be the object of perception: pictorial marks, on the other hand, belong to the dimension of stimulus and are not, as such, the object on which our perceptions are focused. Of course the pictorial marks can become the focus of our perception, but if the condition of being able to see the material surface of a painting covered with pigments coincides with the weakening of its figurative dimension, then it is hard to understand in what sense it is possible to speak of pictorial marks as signs: when we perceive them, the arrangement of the pigments is only a material determination of a real object among others, not a sign that represents a figuration.

The situation does not change when we try to consider figurative marks as signs. A sign has a denotative function by virtue of a rule, and a rule – Wittgenstein wrote – is something that cannot arise just once, but implies repetition. The same is true for signs, which in principle are repeatable, because what establishes their identity is determined by the particularity of the function that has been assigned to them: what counts in a sign is that it should be recognizable as a sign that has *one* syntactic and semantic function within a *system* of signs, not the perceptible determinacy of all its properties. I can write the *same* letter with different typographical characters, without modifying its syntactic identity by doing so. And it is no coincidence that this is so: a sign must be recognizable in its different implementations, but precisely for this reason it has features that characterize it essentially in its identity, and others that instead have no influence and can vary, because they are not what *must* be repeated to guarantee its recognition. The figurative marks, on the other hand, cannot be inserted in the type-token dialectic, and do not permit similar variations: any alteration concerning the visible dimension of a figurative mark leads to a variation of the image content. Now, if there are *not* any *different* realizations of a figurative mark and if any visible alteration of that mark translates into a difference inside the content of the image, this happens because the figurative marks do not have meaning by virtue of being signs of something else, but by virtue of their being *parts* of a more complex figuration. Just as any small variation of ingredients can change the flavor of a food, so a variation in the figurative marks can bring about a variation of the overall image of which they are parts.

In *The Objective Eye* Hyman has asserted that when we talk about images we ought to distinguish between two different orders of rules. There are the iconographic rules that permit us to interpret certain symbolic and allegorical references of an image, and there are the technical rules that allow us to control and guide the paintbrush to achieve the desired result. The former call for a convention shared by the painter and the viewer: I can

interpret what the pelican fighting against a serpent stands for if I know the iconographic rule that allows me to pass, according to an established convention, from one to the other. The latter are not of a conventional nature, and even if the draftsman can learn them from a manual or a teacher, an equal knowledge of these rules is not required on the part of the viewer, who does not see what the image portrays through convention, but thanks to the efficacy of the techniques of representation. Therefore Gombrich errs when, commenting on an old memory from school – the method for drawing a cat – he asserts that images are the result and the starting point of a processes of coding and decoding:

Whatever can be coded in symbols can also be retrieved and recalled with relative ease. The tricks of how to draw this or that – a cat for instance – can really be described as such simple methods of coding (Gombrich).

Hyman is right: there are no conventional rules that attribute a figurative value to a set of brushstrokes, though there can be iconographic rules that attribute an allegorical meaning to an image. Yet limiting the image to a set of technical rules makes sense if and only if we put ourselves on the terrain of *pictorial marks* and ask ourselves what are the real modifications of the canvas that permit the creation of a given visibility. To use Hyman's words: the technical rules

are techniques for the application of *slip* or *ink*, which are designed to control the appearance of a foot, a stem, a branch or a leaf and which therefore mediate between the marks on the surface of a picture and its content (Hyman 2006: 172).

If, on the other hand, we put ourselves on the terrain of figurative marks, talking about technique is completely out of place, because something – a line, a colored surface, a configuration of points – is a figurative mark not to the extent that it is a means, among other possible means, to achieve a given result, but only to the extent that it is part of a figuration – only if, to describe it, we necessarily have to make use of the figurative language and to speak of apparent depth, of the apparent distinction between a foreground and a background, and so on. To speak of a result, here, means making use of an ambiguous expression, because the image results from the figurative marks not as the effect desired from the means employed to obtain it, but as the entire result of the parts, and this is why where it is unthinkable that we can achieve the same result using different figurative marks, it is generally possible to achieve the same goal using different techniques.

To assert that the figurative marks are not material components of the painted surface also means stepping back from the thesis according to which he who observes a depiction sees, though not truthfully, what the image stands for: the object it represents. Images – it is argued – involve us in a deception: they show us persons, landscapes and objects that are not there before us, and if we do not fall into the trap they have prepared for us, it is only because something prevents us from believing in what we see. A portrait by Titian shows us the face of Pietro Bembo, and if we do not believe we are standing in front of that venerable gentleman it is only because alongside the experience of that face there is also the perception of the pigments and the canvas, or the awareness of many clues that do not allow us to really believe in what is depicted. This is also the reasoning of Michael Newall, who in a recent book has asserted that image perception is a non-truthful seeing that is not translated into a false belief only because contextual factors prevent the perception from holding sway. Newall cannot help but recognize that there are differences between truthful perception of a face and what we see when we look at a portrait, but it seems to be possible to account for these differences by remembering the many different experiences that show us the object that is their crux in an inadequate way, such as when we glimpse a person in the fog, or see the person only partially. Therefore seeing a face in a portrait would be an experience similar to that of seeing a real person without having put on our glasses. Which is like saying that every image finds itself at the terminus of a game of progressive depletions:

How is it, given that our experience of seeing X that is occasioned by a picture might only in some respects be like our experience of actually seeing X, that it can be an experience of seeing X at all? This will not seem so strange when we consider that we often have an experience of seeing the same object under different aspects. That is, actually seeing an object is often like other instances of actually seeing it only in some respects. For instance, seen in daylight and at close quarters we will be able to see an object as having many of its visually discernible properties. But when we see an object at night, we cannot see its hues. At a distance, through fog or otherwise blurry vision, we cannot make out details of its shape. Through a screen of foliage, or among a moving crowd, we might see only certain parts of the object. In all these situations we are often still able to see that this is the same object (although we might not do so as reliably as we would in more forgiving conditions). This is a capacity that can be understood as characteristic of our visual systems, for it allows seeing, and so the experience of seeing, under adverse viewing conditions (night, fog, when glimpsed, etc.),

sacrificing a degree of accuracy in the interests of efficiency. The non-veridical experience is in this respect just like the veridical experience: it can involve the experience of seeing X as having many of the visually discernible properties it in fact has, or it can involve the experience of seeing X as having relatively few of those properties. (p. 33).

In a portrait, then, we see a real face, but we see it badly; or, more precisely: we believe we see it, because it is a non-veridical perception that, for various reasons, is impossible for us to heed.

This is a questionable thesis. First of all, it is not clear in what sense image perception is non-veridical, since normally no one thinks he is seeing the real objects that correspond to what the image shows us. To understand that the face we see in a portrait is not real we do not have to peer at the frame, to examine the material substance of the canvas, or pay attention to a set of contextual factors – the fact that we are in a museum, of seeing the face in a troubling separation from the rest of the body, and so on. We do not need these contextual elements, and this is because our perception, from the outset, is conscious of the particular nature of its object and of the perceptive differences that distinguish it from real objects: we see from the outset – and with all the clarity we might require – a face that is *only* depicted. This has nothing to do with the *vague* and *non-veridical* perception of a real object; it has to do with a clear, distinct, veridical perception of an apparent object. Of course if looking at a portrait we were to believe we were seeing a person, in flesh and blood, it would make sense to say that we were the victims of a sensory deception; but this is typically precisely what does not happen when we look at a painting, since there is a great and visible difference between a real face and a painted face, just as there is a great and visible difference between an oak tree and an olive tree.

Perhaps what deceives us about the nature of what we see when we observe a portrait is the adjective “apparent” we have used to describe what presents itself on the figurative plane. This term seems to refer to an illusion from which we have finally been liberated: we saw a real face, but then finally we realized our error, and the word “apparent” is the trace of this altered cognitive attitude. Yet the situation is not like that, and if we talk about the apparent nature of depicted objects it is not to remark on the result of a negation, but to indicate a difference that results from a comparison: a painted face is different from a real face, but nevertheless it is one perceptive object among others, and its particularity is not based on the fact that reasoning or a different perception has convinced us of the non-veridical nature of our perception. In short: there is nothing that prompts us to describe what we see when we look at a portrait in terms of

the non-truthful viewing of a real face – nothing, if not a supposed philosophical thesis.

Secondly, the attempt to get to the bottom of image perception by comparing it to cases in which our viewing of a real object is somehow hampered has to raise perplexity for a different reason as well. When we look at a real face it may happen that we cannot see it entirely; or we may see it in lighting conditions that alter its colors, diminish its depth, and so on. But these impaired perceptions of a face can be thus described precisely because there is a perceptive praxis that allows us to see *that* face better, to grasp it in its correct depth and entirety. We can say we see it badly because we have a clear idea of what we should do or what should happen to let us see it better. What can be said, on the other hand, about what we see when we look at the painted face of Pietro Bembo? With respect to what ideal perception can we measure our perception, in order to consider it hampered to some extent? Certainly not the perception of the face of Pietro Bembo, because a painted face is *different* from a real face, and we would not see the former better if we were to see it as identical to the latter, just as it would make no sense to say that we see a mask better when we see the face it conceals. On the other hand, recognizing that a painting is a material object among others does not mean that we see it well only when we do not grasp what it depicts and thus see it only for what it really is – a canvas covered with pigments. Quite the opposite: looking at a Cubist painting, we can reasonably say that we are not able to see well what we should or could see, if we are not able to glimpse in the play of forms and colors what those figurative marks somehow make perceptible.

I believe that at the root of Newall's position – which does not differ, on this point, from those of Gombrich, Wollheim and many other image theorists – lies the thesis according to which the figurative marks do not belong to the image content, but only to the perception of its material substrate. Only if we reason in this way, in fact, is it possible to sustain that when looking at an image we see either its material consistency or, alternatively, the real object it represents. This is an incorrect thesis, however, based on the confusion between figurative and pictorial marks, and it actually urges us to misunderstand the phenomenological nature of depicted objects – their way of being perceptively present in their nature as particular objects, as figurative constructions that are articulated in a visible multiplicity of figurative marks.

3. I would like to conclude these remarks by briefly examining two forms of images that prompt further reflection on the relationship between pictorial and figurative marks, and also deserve mention because they

reciprocally indicate the limits of the conceptual space of the image: *trompe l'oeil* and *anamorphosis*. The confines of the concept of image can be easily summarized: depiction exists up to the point where in order to describe what we perceive we are forced to use figurative language; in short, as long as we perceive as such an apparent depth that arises from a multiplicity of figurative marks. We have already explored these considerations; now, instead, we have to observe how the aware perception of an appearance can be dissolved, moving in two different directions. It can, first of all, be transformed into an illusion that is revealed as soon as the character of figurativeness resurfaces once again: in this case we have a *trompe l'oeil*. But a second path is also possible – the path of anamorphosis: in this case, the figurative marks become ever less conspicuous, to the point of indicating the borderline beyond which the image seems to weaken and the figurative marks get lost in the pictorial marks.

Let's first examine *trompe l'oeil*. There is an obligatory initial observation: in spite of the many anecdotes that narrate the illusions of the senses, works of *trompe l'oeil* very rarely fool us. Looking at a painting by Cornelius Gijsbrechts we are *amazed*, we may be astonished, but we are not fooled; we do not attempt to grasp the brushes painted in front of the canvas. Of course an entire tradition of anecdotes exists underlining the possibility of deception: Zeuxis trying to raise the painted curtain on a painting by Parrhasios, a cardinal who asks Raphael's portrait of Leo X to sign a document, or tales of crows, horses and dogs deceived by the paintings of Apelles, Bramantino, Floris. The examples are many but it would be a mistake to interpret them as factual accounts of an era in which men observed images with a less jaded eye than in the present. I believe these anecdotes simply express an ancient taste for narrative, for praise in the guise of a little fable, a tale that speaks for itself and precisely for this reason more openly conveys the power of the painting or underscores the limits of natural perception and of human nature. It seldom happens that *trompe l'oeil* fool us, yet at times it does take place: the differences that separate what is depicted from what is real become almost invisible, and the perception of the image shifts without our knowing it into a non-truthful perception of reality. It should be emphasized that this removes nothing of the character of image of the *trompe l'oeil*. Something is an image if what it shows us is described in the most appropriate way in the language of apparent depth, and this is also the case of works of *trompe l'oeil* which *can* and *must* be thus described – as depictions. Of course, every so often a *trompe l'oeil* does fool us, but when this happens we have to realize that we have seen incorrectly, and as a result we have described

what we observed in an inappropriate way. Sometimes we make a mistake, but there is no reason why we should judge the nature of an object based on perceptions that convey it to us in an unsatisfactory way. No one would ever claim to be able to establish the color of an object once and for all after glimpsing it in the dark or observing it in deceptive lighting conditions, and anyone would be ready to correct such impressions were the conditions of perception to return to those we *recognize as optimal* and the color to turn out to be different from what had previously been experienced. The same thing happens with depictions. Again in this case there is a norm that supports our perception and urges us to assert that we see an image well when we are able to clearly see both what it depicts and the fact that it is a depiction. We see a portrait well when we have a clear view of a painted face, and we see a *quodlibet* well when we see the depictive nature of the small objects that stand out from a background that is also merely painted. The fact that a *painted* object in a figurative space *is not* a real object in a real space is irrelevant: the objects perception conveys to us are, in any case, quite different from what we have reason to believe really exists. So it is hard to understand why we should consider better, and more exact, the perceptive experience of he who sees only a canvas covered with pigments, where he could also see a painted scene: depicted scenes have a stable intersubjective presence that can be ascertained, and as such they are the goal towards which our perceptions are directed.

It would be worth focusing more at length on this, but the reason I want to discuss the nature of *trompe l'oeil* on this occasion is a different one. Works of *trompe l'oeil* are unstable images that do not attempt to arrest in time an illusion that can at best be momentaneous. Furthermore, they require a particular perceptive praxis: they encourage us to look at the image with the gaze of the killjoy, of the person who attempts to adopt a perceptive behavior that lays bare the image for what it is. To achieve this, nevertheless, the viewer cannot simply make do with grasping the image in its consistency as figurative marks; he must also activate a perceptive praxis that makes the material component of the image emerge, its being a canvas that hosts pictorial marks, because only in this way is it possible for him to free himself, once and for all, of the uncertainty in which the illusionistic game of *trompe l'oeil* wants to trap him.

A different way of formulating the same considerations might be to observe that in the case of the *trompe-l'oeil* the *display* of the image plays an essential role: the *trompe-l'oeil* is inseparably linked, in fact, to the skillful gesture of the person who after having produced it positions it precisely in that spot, foreseeing my route of arrival and my vantage point, guiding me along a path I thought I had chosen, a path actually chosen by

others. The painter knew, and he has used this knowledge to play with me, to confront me with a perception that seems to have been made not to be believed, filling me with wonder and admiration. I cannot simply play the role of the spectator when faced with this image; I must earn it. And that means: I must engage myself in a process which coincides with the demise of the relationship of dialogue that links us to the painter and makes the depicted scene the vehicle for his playful, communicative intentions, instead of the focus of our interest. So *trompe-l'oeil* offers a game with a precise starting point and a specific objective, reached by making an orderly series of moves: first of all, you have to let yourself be amazed by the image, without paying too much attention to critical warnings; then you reveal its devices to unmask the painter who is addressing you from behind the image. Only after these moves are you able to explicitly underline the fact that the scene before your eyes belongs to the dimension of figurative space, making your observation that of a spectator.

Thus the particular temporal aspect of the reception of these images. *Trompe-l'oeil* invites us to play a game that has to unfold and come to a conclusion, or the image will not make sense: in the reception of *trompe-l'oeil* time is not just the accidental form in which a content indifferent to time manifests itself; it is the rhythm of arsis and thesis that sustains the shift of subjective attitude with respect to the scene perceived. Now we see a violin hanging on the wall and, if we are willing to play the game, for a moment we have to overlook what we know, to allow our gaze to linger over what may deceive it, to let ourselves be amazed by what we are seeing. So first of all we surrender to the claims of the image and its attempt to snare us in the web of illusion. But the game then urges us to evaluate what perception offers, forcing us to discover the extent of the inadequacy of images when we try to gauge them against the criteria of reality. Thus, at the end of this game we are looking at just an image, and the nexus that links the reception process of *trompe-l'oeil* to its meaning lies completely in this adverb: the image introduces itself as *just* an image, precisely because it is grasped as the result of a process that originates in our willingness to allow our gaze to accept a claim of reality we know is false from the outset, continues in an investigation of its resistance in the terrain of perception, arriving at its explicit negation and our consciousness of the fact that we are confronted only by a painted scene.

So the reception of *trompe-l'oeil* takes the form of a game whose dynamic is based at least in part on a series of conversational implicatures — to use Grice's term. First of all there is a perception: we see a depiction that strikes us because it attempts to deny its very character as figuration. The mode of execution, the precision of the detailing, the place in which it

is displayed, the nature of the depicted scene — all converge toward a single goal: the image seems to be made to deceive us and to make us think we are seeing a real scene. Yet this is not the case, as the viewer is aware from the outset. Precisely for this reason, he is driven to wonder what experience the artist who painted the work in just this way wanted to trigger in viewers. Working in this way, the painter wanted to tell us something, but if we approach the matter as a dialogue we are forced to ask ourselves how the communicative gesture, which consists in presenting us with that image, seeming to break the first maxim of quality — to not say what you believe is false — can be reconciled with acceptance of the principle of cooperation on which any dialogue depends, permitting single dialogic moves to arrange themselves in coherent, meaningful unity. To reconcile the principle of cooperation with moves that mock the maxims of dialogue means entering the territory of conversational implicature. Grice states this clearly: when the content of a dialogic move evidently violates a conversational maxim, then we must assume it complies with it for what it implies — for the meaning we have to attribute to it. If what you say is obviously false, but in spite of this I believe you intend to comply with the principle of dialogic cooperation, then I have to imagine that your statement should be interpreted in terms of irony — and this is just what happens when we are amused by the pretense of reality of images. Therefore, if he accepts the dialogue proposed by the image, the viewer is forced to give rise to a conversational implicature we can freely formulate as follows: if a *trompe-l'oeil* attempts to pass off as real something that is merely depicted it is because the person who painted it wants the viewer to look beyond what has been presented — the supposed reality of the painted scene — to grasp, in the forms of irony, the vain futility of imagery's claim to reality.

Therefore it is no coincidence that many *trompes l'oeil* have the theme of the depiction of a painting: they stage, in an exemplary manner, the process of reception of the *trompe l'oeil*, its way of forcing us to get free of an illusion and to refocus on the figurative character of the marks that bring it to life, *passing through the recognition of the merely material dimension of the image*. And if this is the case, in the perceptive praxis of *trompe l'oeil* and in its way of revealing the multiplicity of levels on which the image takes form, and its fleeting illusory character, a lesson of phenomenology of the image that pivots on the distinction between image and reality, between pictorial and figurative marks, is made manifest.

The fading of the image in the form of the *trompe l'oeil* is echoed by its dissolving in anamorphosis, in this form of depiction that since its origin has seemed to be bent on clarifying for us the nature of perspective as a

drafting technique. Well before Descartes observed that painters represent rectangles with trapezia and circles with ellipses, Piero della Francesca concentrated on the phenomenon of marginal aberrations. They depend on two conditions: perspective distortion becomes intolerable if 1) the angle of viewing is widened beyond a certain size and 2) if we observe the image shifting too far away from the projection point of the perspective construction. These two conditions seldom happen – in general, Renaissance perspective painting set itself the rule of keeping the viewing angle within clearly defined limits, and the form of the canvas establishes the place of the viewer – but the problem that had to be solved, for the first theorists of perspective, would assert itself as the most appropriate theoretical zone in which to reflect on the fact that every perspective construction *visibly* contains a gap between sign and design that is never entirely removed by positioning ourselves in the place assigned to us by the perspective construction. It has been repeated many times: we have learned to see the convergence of orthogonal lines in perspective paintings, and even if this thesis, thus formulated, is false, it still contains a grain of truth: precisely because their figurative depth is simply hinted at and is in any case visually weaker than real depth, depictions force us to see properly the forms in which it is manifested – the law of occlusion, of oblique lines, of the convergence of orthogonal axes, of aerial perspective and so on. Real objects in real space conceal the objects and the background behind them, but occlusion in depiction is different: it is a conclusive and permanent denial of the visibility of what is hidden. In depictions we see foreshortening and perspective distortion with a new clarity, because in real experience foreshortening and perspective distortion belong more to the determinacy of the stimulus than to awareness of the percept. Of course the etchings of Dürer on perspective seem to tell us that it is sufficient to look at the image through a peephole to make depictions take on an illusory tendency, yet it will also suffice to leave that place and to accentuate the perspective angle to make the figurative mark appear with greater clarity, to make the image become less persuasive, losing its apparent depth until it completely loses its impact as an image. So what emerged in the marginal aberrations as a problem, in anamorphic paintings became a game rich in interesting reflections for a theory of image – a game Leonardo hinted at in his experiments on *perspectiva composita*¹. Precisely like *trompe l'oeil*,

¹ "Ma la 2a pratica [la prospettiva 'composta', n.d.r.] è una mistione di prospettiva fatta in parte dalla arte e in parte dalla natura, e l'opera fatta colle sue regole non à parte alcuna che non sia mista colla prospettiva naturale e colla prospettiva accidentale - colla prospettiva naturale intendo essere la parete piana dove tale prospettiva è figurata, la qual pariete ancora ch'ella sia di lunghezza e altezza parallela, ella è costretta a diminuire le parti remote più che le sue parti prime, e questa si prova per la prima di sopra (la prospettiva semplice, n.d.r.) e la sua diminutione è naturale; e la prospettiva accidentale cioè quella che è fatta dall'arte fa il contrario in sé, perché cresce nella pariete scortata tanto più li corpi che in lor sono equali, quanto l'occhio è più naturale e più vicino alla pariete e quanto la parte d'essa pariete dove si figura è più remota dall'occhio; e questa tal pariete sia d.e. nella qual si figuran 3 cerchi

anamorphosis too is an image that urges us to engage in a praxis, but one that has a dual form: it may ask us to try to draw to the surface the figurative dimension from the merely pictorial dimension or, vice versa, it may ask us to witness the dissolving of the image, the progressive distancing of the design from the sign, to the point in which the marks lose their figurative nature and what remains is just the material surface with its pictorial marks. In both cases, the reception of the image is transformed into a sort of visual meditation on the nature of depiction: the viewer who follows the path that leads from the image to its dissolution concretely stages the difference that exists between pictorial and figurative marks, while demonstrating how the depicted scene takes form not beyond the brushstrokes, in a non-truthful recognition that passes over them, but in their concrete way of coming alive, taking on a value that permits figurativeness that is nevertheless always and necessarily the figurativeness of a set of lines, of parts of a design that never ceases to be visually present, at least as long as the image remains visually present for us.

eguali che son dopo esso d.e.,cioè li circoli a. b.c.; ora tu vedi che l'occhio h vede sulla pariete rettilinea li tagli delle spetie maggiori nelle maggiori distantie e minori nelle vicine (fig.29)Il che natura nella sua prospettiva adopera in contrario, conciosiaché nelle maggiori distantie la cosa veduta si dimostra minore e nella distantia minore la cosa par maggiore. Ma questa tale invenzione costringie il veditore a stare coll'occhio a uno spiracolo e allora da tale spiracolo si dimostrerà bene; ma perché molti occhi s'abbattono a vedere a un medesimo tempo una medesima opera fatta con tale arte e solo un di quelli vede bene l'ufitio di tal prospectiva e li altri tutti restan confusi; egli è dunque da fuggire tal prospectiva composta e a tenersi alla semplice, la quale non vuol vedere pariete in iscorso, ma più in propria forma che sia possibile"