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NATURAL SIGN AND PAINTING

Today, when aesthetics, in the sense closely related to the one given to the term by its “founder” A. Baumgarten, i.e. the study of beauty and at the same time the philosophical reflection upon the fine arts, is a well grounded philosophical discipline, one tends to forget that before this discipline emerged in an explicit way, intersections of visual arts and philosophy had been rare. Even if we assume that modern contemplations on fine arts (predominantly visual ones) which J. Białostocki¹ named “reflection on art” or “aesthetics-program” (different from aesthetics-science) whose expression we may find in *Kunstliteratur* or *critica d’arte* is a kind of anti-platonism, i.e. an attempt to prove that artists do not have to – in fact must not – leave the ideal city, that is, even if we suppose that the basis of modern way of thinking about art is essentially philosophical, we have to admit that in the majority of cases artists, as well as theoreticians of art, did not venture into philosophical circuitous routes repeating only from time to time some commonplace theories. On the other hand, philosophers, with some exceptions I will discuss later, did not pay much attention to artistic themes, only occasionally treating them as illustrative motives or reference points dictated by the obligatory model of good education.

We may find a good account of how fine arts functioned within philosophical reflection in the following quotation from Lockean *Some Thoughts on Good Education*: *When he [the child] can write well and quick, I think it may be convenient not only to continue the exercise of his hand in writing, but also to improve the use of it farther in drawing, a thing very useful to a gentleman in several occasions (...) I do not mean that I would have your son a perfect painter; to be that to any tolerable degree will require*

¹ See J. Białostocki, *Estetyka obrazu*, in: *Refleksje i syntezy ze świata sztuki. Cykl II*, Warszawa 1987, p. 45–48.

more time than a young gentleman can spare from his other improvements of greater moment.² In other words, a superficial familiarity with rudimentary techniques of depiction may turn out to be useful, although a deepened knowledge is simply a waste of time. What is more, visiting a picture gallery is – as one of the articles in *Spectator* claims³ – enjoyable entertainment only when poor weather does not favour open-air plays. Summing up, one ought to remember that we should not overestimate connections between philosophy and visual arts in the early modern period. However, that makes pointing out moments in which such intersections took place more salient. One such instance is the problem of natural sign. It is a problem which perhaps may seem to be of marginal importance, at least from the point of view of the art theory of that time, but which paradoxically turns out to be crucial. The nature of this paradox merits a separate discussion.

At the outset, we have to underscore that the first modern treatise on painting, written in the 1st half of 15th c. begins by formulating a definition of sign – Leon Battista Alberti writes: *I call a figure (signum) here anything located on a plane so the eye can see it.*⁴ However, it is not the meaning of this term that theoreticians active in subsequent periods will be interested in. A sign is, for Alberti, the smallest visible element of a picture which may be combined into larger unities. In the posterior period the term *sign* acquires a broader meaning: painting still uses signs, but now *sign* means the represented, painted object. Here one may quote the definition of pictorial sign given by A. Arnauld and P. Nicole in *The Art of Thinking: but when we view a certain object merely as representing another, our idea of it is an idea of sign, and the first object is called a sign. This is how we ordinarily think of maps and paintings. Consequently the sign includes two ideas, one of the thing which represents, the other of the thing represented. Its nature consists in prompting the second by the first.*⁵ The authors of *The Art of Thinking* use a widely contemporarily acknowledged classification dividing signs into the natural and the conventional. In the *Discourse on Saint and Profane Images* we may read as follows: *there are two kinds of signs: natural ones, like smoke coming out from a fire or an imprint of a foot (...) or artificial ones, assumed thanks to an agreement among people (...) and these are letters,*

² J. Locke, *Some Thoughts on Good Education*, eds. R. Weissbound Grant, N. Tarcov, Indianapolis 1996, § 161, p. 119.

³ *Spectator*, nr 83, Tuesday, June 5, 1711, in: *The Spectator*, vol. I, London 1822, p. 322.

⁴ L. B. Alberti, *On Painting*, trans. J. R. Spencer, New Haven 1993, p. 42.

⁵ A. Arnauld, P. Nicole, *Logic, Or, The Art of Thinking*, trans. J. V. Buroker, Cambridge 1996, part II, chap. 4, p. 35.

notes, lines, numbers etc. which can be understood only by those few who study them. For this reason, in order to fulfill the desire and common need to communicate one's ideas to others, the art of creating pictures has been invented and those pictures may be easily recognized and serve as a common language for all the nations.⁶ The above described signs are natural for two reasons: first, they are established by the nature itself, second, man may read them thanks to his natural skills. *There is no problem with natural signs* – we read further on in already quoted *The Art of Thinking* – *because the obvious connection between this kind of sign and things clearly indicates that when we affirm the thing signified of the sign, we mean not that the sign is this thing in reality, but only metaphorically, and in signification. Hence, without any introduction or ceremony, we will say about a portrait of Ceasar that it is Ceasar, and about a map of Italy that it is Italy.*⁷ The idea that it is possible to define picture as a sign which easily enables everyone to identify that which it refers to may be found in other texts, too – it is enough to mention the first of the *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous* written by G. Berkeley, who, using this example illustrates how it is viable to perceive the outer world through ideas in the mind and at the same time through the senses.⁸ *Nota bene*, if we define natural sign as transparent and performing a sort of “self-effacement” while being a “pure” transmitter (medium), thanks to which the beholder's attention is directly drawn to what the sign signifies, then we quite probably have to treat rationalists' ideas as natural signs as well.⁹ In the same vein, i.e. describing the reaction of the viewer who immediately identifies the representation performing syllogism *hoc est hoc*, Sperone Speroni, a 16-century Italian philosopher, logician and poet, in his *Apology of Painting* describes the pleasure resulting from a successful imitation.¹⁰ The fact that painting, thanks to the traits being analyzed, is accessible to everyone (which is not true as we now know), makes it superior to other arts, mainly poetry. Moreover, painting appeals

⁶ G. Paleotti, *Discorso intorno alle immagini sacre e profane*, Bologna 1582, chap. III (quoted in: *Trattati d'arte del cinquecento. Fra manierismo e controriforma*, a cura di P. Barocchi, Bari 1960–1962, vol. 2, p. 138–140).

⁷ A. Arnauld, P. Nicole, op. cit., part II, chap. 14, p. 120.

⁸ G. Berkeley, *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous In Opposition to Sceptics and Atheists, I Dialogue* (see G. Berkeley, *Principles of Human Knowledge, Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous*, ed. R. Woolhouse, New York – London 1988, p. 152).

⁹ See L. Marin, *La critique du discours*, Paris 1975, p. 73–74.

¹⁰ Sperone Speroni [1500–1588], *Discorso in lode della pittura*, Venezia 1740 (post mortem edition), quoted in: *Scritti d'arte del cinquecento*, a cura di P. Barocchi, Milano – Napoli 1971, t. 1, s. 1002.

to the highest sense, i.e. that of sight. For this reason, painting's influence on man is the most decisive. We may quote here the words of J.-B. Dubos that establish the difference between painting and poetry by referring to the difference between natural and conventional signs (this differentiation was later on adopted by G. E. Lessing¹¹): *I am of opinion, that the effect which painting produces on men, surpasses that of poetry; and am induced to think thus for two reasons. The first is, that painting operates on us by means of the sense of seeing. The second, that it does not employ artificial signs, as poetry, but natural ones; by which it makes imitations. (...) Painting makes use of natural signs, the energy of which does not depend on education. They draw their force from the relation which nature herself has fixed between our organs and the external objects (...) Perhaps I do not express myself properly, in saying, that the painter makes use of signs; 'tis nature herself which he exhibits to our sight. (...) The most tender verses can affect us only by degrees, and by setting the several springs of our machine successively work. Words must first excite those ideas, whereof they are only arbitrary signs.*¹² Dubos adds to the already known characteristic of natural sign a new, essential feature – not only does a picture show a natural sign to the beholder, but it also displays nature itself. The identification, as it were, reaches its climax. At the same time, the danger that threatens those seeing natural signs becomes clearly visible. *The Art of Thinking* reads: *It is quite possible for the same thing both to conceal and to reveal another thing at the same time. So those who say "nothing appears by means of that which conceals" have asserted a highly questionable maxim. For since the same thing can be both a thing and a sign at the same time, it can as a thing conceal what it reveals as a sign. Thus the hot cinder, as a thing,*

¹¹ See G. E. Lessing's letter to Nicolai dated 26.05.1769: *Both [signs existing in time and signs existing in space] can be either natural or arbitrary; consequently there must be two sorts of painting and two sorts of poetry, a higher and a lower kind. Painting requires co-existing signs, which are either natural or arbitrary; and this same distinction is also to be found in the consecutive signs of poetry. For it is not true that painting uses only natural signs, just as it is not true that poetry uses only arbitrary signs. But one thing is certain: the more painting departs from natural signs, or employs natural and arbitrary signs mixed together, the further it departs from its true perfection; just as conversely poetry draws all the closer its true perfection, the closer it makes its arbitrary signs approach the natural. Consequently the higher kind of painting is that which employs only natural signs in space, and the higher kind of poetry is that which employs only natural signs in time. (...) and the highest kind of poetry is the one that turns the arbitrary signs wholly into natural signs. Now that is dramatic poetry, for in drama the words cease to be arbitrary signs, and become natural signs of arbitrary things.* [quoted in: D. Simpson, *The Origins of Modern Critical Thought: German Aesthetic and Literary Criticism from Lessing to Hegel*, Cambridge 1988, p. 65–66].

¹² J.-B. Dubos, *Critical Reflections on Poetry, Painting and Music*, vol. 1, trans. Th. Nugent, London 1748, chap. XL, p. 321–323.

*hides the fire and, as a sign, reveals it.*¹³ In other words, natural sign may be equivalent to idolatry; it may falsely bring out nature before man. It must be underlined that, contrary to Plato for whom visual arts displayed shadows of shadows or mirror images of sensual world i.e. they showed falseness instead of truth, for Dubos that power of painting is rather positive. He writes as follows: *In fine, there is no body hardly but what has had several occasions during his life-time, of observing, how much easier it is make men apprehend, what we are desirous of conveying to their imagination or understanding, by means of the eye, than by the help of the ear. A design which exhibits the elevation of a palace, makes us instantly comprehend the nature of the building; and the plan thereof gives us immediately an idea of the distribution of apartments.*¹⁴ A similar thought may be found in the following part of Locke's above quoted paragraph on the profits resulting from knowledge of perspective, which, he thinks, is useful *especially if he [the child] travel, as that which helps a man often to express in a few lines well put together what a whole sheet of paper in writing would not be able to represent and make intelligible. How many buildings may a man see, how many machines and habits meet with, the ideas whereof would be easily retained and communicated by a little skill in drawing, which being committed to words are in danger to be lost or at best but ill retained in the most exact descriptions?*¹⁵ The most elaborate expression of the view that the only perfect way to gain knowledge is to use sight and natural sign may be found in J. Comenius' precepts contained in *The Great Didactic* where he perceives learning things as getting an insight that is analogous to external viewing, and therefore *if we wish to implant a true and certain knowledge of things in our pupils, we must take especial care that everything be learned by means of actual observation and sensuous perception. (...) If the object themselves cannot be procured, representations of them may be used. Copier or models may be constructed for teaching purposes, and the same principle may be adopted by botanists, geometricians, zoologists, and geographers, who should illustrate their descriptions by engravings of the objects described. The same thing should be done in books on physics and elsewhere. For example, the human body will be well explained by ocular demonstration if the following plan be adopted. A skeleton should be procured (either such an one as is usually kept in universities, or one made in wood), and on this framework should be placed the muscles, sinews, nerves, veins, arteries, as well as the*

¹³ A. Arnauld, P. Nicole, op. cit., part II, chap. 4, p. 36.

¹⁴ J. B. Dubos, op. cit., p. 324-325.

¹⁵ J. Locke, op. cit., § 161, p. 119.

*intestines, the lungs, the heart, the diaphragm, and the liver. These should be made of leather and stuffed with wool, and should be of the right size and in the right place, while on each organ should be written its name and its function.*¹⁶ It is clear that here what we are confronted with is a natural sign which identifies itself with the signified object and, what is more, learning is said to base on the syllogism *hoc est hoc*, i.e. on the same syllogism on which Speroni based pleasure resulting from looking at a work of art – pleasure which was at its highest when its source was sculpture which *imitates better* [than painting] *as in this case there is no similarity, but essential identity for both of them* [sculpture and model] *are bodies in genere substantiae.*¹⁷

Now, taking up the purely artistic questions, first of all we have to underscore the fact that artistic practice as well as theory was driven by a particular way of thinking of art, defined by several ancient anecdotes, predominantly those which were known thanks to Pliny's the Elder *Natural History*. These stories form, as it were, a kind of modern artistic "mythology". One of them is about the two greatest mythical artists, Zeuxis and Parrhasios, who competed in order to establish which of them was capable of painting a more realistic picture. Zeuxis painted grapes in such an illusionistic way that birds flew to peck at them and, convinced that he was the winner, asked his rival, Parrhasios, to remove the veil covering the picture which the latter brought to Zeuxis' studio. At that very moment Zeuxis realized that he had been fooled as the veil was painted, too, and so was forced to acknowledge the superiority of the other.¹⁸ This story defines the early modern way of thinking of the nature of painted images. What follows is an exemplary definition of image (*nota bene* almost literally repeated in Diderot's *Encyclopaedia*) given by *Dictionnaire universel* by A. Furetière (1690): *Image is a natural and very trustworthy painting of objects that is created whenever they are placed next to a very smooth surface. We see images of all objects in mirrors (...) Image also means artificial representations which are made by men in painting or in sculpture (...) Image means moreover pictures which we make ourselves in our souls by mixing a variety of ideas and impressions which we have acquired through our senses.*¹⁹ And this is how a picture was defined by one of the major 17-cen-

¹⁶ J. A. Comenius, *The Great Didactic*, trans. M. W. Keatinge, New York 1967, p. 185–186 (XX.8,10).

¹⁷ Sperone Speroni, op. cit., p. 1002.

¹⁸ See Pliny the Elder, *Natural History: A Selection*, trans. J. F. Healy, London – New York 1991, p. 330 (XXV.65).

¹⁹ Entry "image", in: A. Furetière, *Dictionnaire universel*, Haga, Rotterdam 1690 (Genève 1970).

tury French theoreticians of art (*nota bene* this definition repeats Leonardo da Vinci's famous phrase): *A picture is a flat surface which one has to annihilate deceiving the eyes.*²⁰ The idea of picture is closely connected to that of representation – *To represent means to create an image or picture of an object which lets us know it as it is. A mirror represents objects in a natural way. (...) To represent means also to let something know through figures or signs (...) To represent means also to take someone's place, to have his authority.*²¹ It is worth noting in this definition the connection between the idea of natural representation (i.e. representation the characteristic of natural signs) and mirror. In a mirror (and mirror together with window are the two most frequently used metaphors describing painting) one can easily identify what is reflected as the mirror displays a faithful image and on the other hand a mirror does not draw the beholder's attention to itself, but to the mirrored object.²² A picture-mirror being based on the mimesis principle shows forms and colours. *The essence and definition of painting* – states *Cours de la peinture* written by R. de Piles – *is, the imitation of visible objects, by means of form and colours: Wherefore the more forcibly and faithfully painting imitates nature, the more directly and rapidly does it lead us to its end; which is, to deceive the eye.*²³ Therefore, the more a picture resembles a mirror, the better it is. *It [painting] is in general the Art of Imitating and its Perfection is that the Imitation is so Natural that the Picture makes the same Impression as the Object itself that the Painter would imitate*²⁴ – we read in one of manual from the beginning of the 18th century offering a popular explanation of the art of perspective. Pleasure results from a pleasant deceit, from taking the image for its model. If that happens, one may say that the painted pictures are veracious. *The veracity in painting consists in such a perfect imitation of that which we want to represent as to create illusion.*²⁵ What we are dealing with here is a baroque conceit, because deception becomes the measure of truth (*a good*

²⁰ R. de Piles, *Abregé de la vie des peintres*, Paris 1699 [Hildesheim 1969], p. 46, book I, chap. XVI.

²¹ Entry “representation”, in: A. Furetière, op. cit.

²² See U. Eco, *Sugli specchi e altri saggi*, Milano 1985, p. 9–37.

²³ R. de Piles, *The Principles of Painting (Cours de la peinture)*, London 1743 [quoted in: *Art in theory 1648–1815: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Ch. Harrison, P. Wood, J. Gaiger, Oxford 2000, p. 308].

²⁴ B. Lamy, *Perspective Made Easie*, London 1710 [Alburgh 1987], p. 11.

²⁵ Entry “truth”, in: A.-J. Pernety, *Dictionnaire portatif de peinture, sculpture et gravure*, Paris 1757 (Genève 1972).

*Picture is nothing else in it selfe but a delusion of our eyes*²⁶) – picture is but a sincere lie, a righteous deception. Of course, it has to be underlined once more, it is only a way of looking at pictures, a mere convention which finds its clearest expression in *ekphrasis*, a literary description of a work of art.²⁷ In his *Essay des merveilles de nature* E. Binet we find a statement that confirms the conventional aspect of aesthetic reception of pictures: *It is not a picture, but nature and those human figures look so naturally at all those who are looking at them, that you would swear that they are alive. 2. Look at the fishes over there, if you poured some water on them, they would start to swim, because they lack nothing (...) 4. When Painting was still in the cradle and was toddling, the brush was so stupid, the works so heavy, that you had to write on them “this is a bull”, “this is a donkey”, because otherwise, you would have thought them to show a quarter of veal; now you have to write below that it was painted by such a such painter lest you should think that these are dead men stuck to the canvas or living persons lacking life, so well they all are painted. (...) Speaking of great Paintings you have to talk about them as if the objects were real, and not painted.*²⁸ The progress of art leads then from an early, as it were, primitive stage, in which imitation was clumsy, to a developed stage, in which a picture is so truthful as to be identified with the thing represented in it.

The above quoted story of the two Greek painters, so important to the modern reflection on arts, is sometimes interpreted as showing that art may deceive not only animals, but man as well. Both of them painted pictures belonging to a *genre* which became extremely popular in 17th and 18th centuries and was called *trompe-l’oeil*.²⁹

²⁶ F. Junius, *The Painting of the Ancients (De pictura veterum)*, London 1638 [Berkeley 1991], p. 50–51, vol. 1, book I, chap. 4.

²⁷ See N. E. Land, *The Viewer as Poet. The Renaissance Response to Art*, Pennsylvania 1994, *passim*.

²⁸ E. Binet, *Essay des merveilles de nature, et des plus nobles artifices*, Rouen 1632, p. 314, chap. XL; a similar phrase may be found earlier, see F. Bocchi, *Eccellenza del San Giorgio di Donatello*, Firenze 1592, after: *Trattati d’arte del cinquecento. Fra manierismo e controriforma*, a cura di P. Barocchi, Bari 1960–1962, vol. 3, p. 160, 178. *So the sculpture, if it wants to be much praised, should be active, almost moving and alive (...) the first artists have possessed so little skill and been so rough that one could not recognize nor discern what they have painted and it was necessary to write names right next to the painted objects such as: “this is a horse”, “this is a tree” (...).*

²⁹ The bibliography on *trompe-l’oeil* is quite rich; here we mention only the most important books and catalogues: *Le trompe-l’oeil: plus vrai que nature?*, Musée de Brou, Bourg-en-Bresse 2005; *Sinn und Sinnlichkeit. Das Flämische Stilleben 1550–1680*, Villa Hügel, Essen 2002 [entries U. Kleinmann, p. 111–130]; *Deceptions and illusions: five centuries of trompe l’oeil painting*, ed. Sybille Ebert-Schifferer, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C. 2002; *Illusions. Gijbsrecht. Royal Master of Deception*, ed. O. Koester, Sta-

Trompe-l'oeil is typically a still life painted in such a way as to delude the viewer and make him believe that he is not looking at a 2-dimensional picture, but a 3-dimensional object. In order to succeed, the painter has to use some easy technical tricks, but – and this is even more important – has to conceal marks of his activity. *Trompe-l'oeil* is a hyper-realistic image in which such factors as style or *maniera* are totally absent – in other words, *trompe-l'oeil* destroys artistry. A picture of this kind is really like a mirror: smooth, impersonal, truthful. This is one of the main reasons why 19th and 20th century painters did not like or esteem *trompe-l'oeil* and did not think of it as art – in their view it was not artistic, but artificial. The rivalry between Zeuxis and Parrhasios shows to what extent the threat of idolatry is serious. On the other hand, Pliny mentioned in other tales all that which is omitted in the quoted one, i.e. artistic genius, capability of making right choice, of displaying *la belle nature* – of showing nature which is more beautiful than the real one, and therefore different from it. Hence, the mimetic dimension of art was as often underlined as its deceptive character: *Sculpture and painting are essentially imitators and not creators of things; when a painter using colours creates St. Paul, and a sculptor makes him of marble, it does not mean to me that they create St. Paul in flesh, but that they imitate and counterfeit him in such a way that what they have created should resemble him in terms of body, face, weight etc. (...) Imitating him or, to use our terms, counterfeiting him is nothing but a desire to show that a thing is that which in reality it is not; this is the proper end of both of these arts.*³⁰ Imitation, then, implies difference between image and model and if pleasure results from the eye being deceived, it combines error and consciousness of being erroneous. *Therefore I conclude* – writes Ch. Batteux – *that Arts, in that which is essential to Art, are but imitations, resemblances*

tens Museum for Kunst, Kopenhagen 1999; A. Chong, W. Kloek, *Still-Life Paintings from the Netherlands 1550–1720*, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, The Cleveland Museum of Art, Zwolle 1999; *Trompe-l'oeil. L'arte dell'inganno*, Galleria Silva, Milano 1998; *Disguised Vision*, Tokyo – Hiroshima – Kamakura – Koriyama 1994–1995; William M. Harnett, eds. D. Bolger, M. Simpson, J. Wilmerding, New York 1992; *More Than Meets the Eye: The Art of Trompe l'Oeil*, Columbus Museum of Art, Ohio, 1985–1986; A. Frankenstein, *The Reality of Appearance. The Trompe-l'oeil Tradition in American Painting*, New York 1970; *Illusionism and Trompe-l'Oeil*, Palace of the Legion of Honor, San Francisco, 1949; *Le Trompe-l'oeil. De l'Antiquité au XXe siècle*, [ed. P. Mauriès], Paris 1996; M. Monestier, *Le trompe-l'oeil contemporain. Les maîtres du réalisme*, Paris 1993; M. Milman, *Trompe-l'oeil. Painted Architecture*, Geneva 1986; M. Milman, *Trompe-l'oeil Painting. The Illusions of Reality*, Geneva 1982; C. Dars, *Images of Deception. The Art of Trompe-L'oeil*, Oxford 1979; M. L. d'Otrange Mastai, *Illusion in Art. Trompe-l'oeil. A History of Pictorial Illusionism*, New York 1975; M. Battersby, *Trompe-L'oeil. The Eye Deceived*, London 1974.

³⁰ V. Borghini, *Selva di notizie*, 1564 [quoted in: *Scritti d'arte del cinquecento*, a cura di P. Barocchi, Milano – Napoli 1971, vol. 1, p. 614].

which are not Nature but seem to be; and thus the matter of Arts is not verity but verisimilitude.³¹ In other words, even in the case of *trompe-l'oeil* – which tends to be forgotten by those who criticize and have criticized illusion in art³² – pleasure has double source: error and recognition (an ideal *trompe-l'oeil*, i.e. one that is not recognized by anyone, does not give pleasure just because nobody pays any attention to it). In my view, only once we accept this thesis, are we able to understand the outwardly contradictory precepts which ordered either to imitate reality so as to deceive the beholder, or to give its idealized picture.

So, first of all, we are dealing then with a concept of natural sign (as exemplified by painting) which is a sign based on “natural” similarity and makes it easy to recognize that which it refers to (the painted object). It is a sign, which performs a sort of self-effacement by being totally transparent but which still preserves the nature of sign – we may quote here once again *The Art of Thinking: the sign includes two ideas, one of the thing which represents, the other of the thing represented*. Second of all, we are dealing here with a particular *genre* of painting, *trompe-l'oeil*, pictures which are what they are not, deceive the beholder, counterfeit the object they represent. We shall then think of *trompe-l'oeil* as of an ideal embodiment of natural sign – *trompe-l'oeil* is and is not what it represents. At the same time it is a proof of what has been called *the semiotic desire for natural sign*³³ typical of early modern art. It is a desire whose highest expression may be found in debates on tragedy (and aesthetic illusion) in 18th century which is the highest art for – as Lessing says – *and the highest kind of poetry is the one that turns the arbitrary signs wholly into natural signs. Now that is dramatic poetry, for in drama the words cease to be arbitrary signs, and become natural signs of arbitrary things*.³⁴ This desire continues in a way, on the one hand, the problem raised by Plato in his *Cratylus* (432b-c) where he inquires whether it is possible to make an image identical with its model, and on the other the myth of Pygmalion, a sculptor whose work turned into a living person. The aim of the aforementioned metaphor of mirror was to point out the mimetic function of art. Now, it may be interpreted in terms of natural sign.

³¹ Ch. Batteux, *Ch. B. Les beaux arts reduit a un meme principe*, Paris 1746, p. 14, chap. 2.

³² See E. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion. A Study in Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, New York 2002, passim.

³³ M. Krieger, *The Semiotic Desire for the Natural Sign: Poetic Uses and Political Abuses*, in: *The States of “Theory”. History, Art and Critical Discourse*, ed. D. Carrol, Stanford 1990, p. 222.

³⁴ See footnote 11.

T. Hobbes in *Elementa Philosophiae* (*De corpore*, I.3) notes that although truthfulness refers to the sentence, it is sometimes used as meaning “that which is contrary to what is apparent or fictional”. Therefore, the sentence ‘the reflected image is man’ is not true, but we cannot deny that the reflection itself is a true (real) reflection. Thus, saying in front of a portrait “this is Caesar” instead of “this is a portrait of Caesar” is true – if one may say so at all – only thanks to a convention just like describing painted persons as “alive” is a conventional rhetorical figure.

Summing up, the juxtaposition of painting and natural sign, performed rather from the point of view of artistic theory and of philosophy, reveals the rhetorical character of the former – *trompe-l’oeil* is, as to say, a purely rhetorical *genre*. That it was somehow intuited by its contemporaries is proved by a fragment that can be found in G.W. Leibniz’s *New Essays on Human Understanding: So when we are deceived by a painting our judgments are doubly in error. First, we substitute the cause for the effect, and believe that we immediately see the thing that causes the image, rather like a dog barking at a mirror. (...) Secondly, we are further deceived when we substitute one cause for another and believe that what comes merely from a flat painting actually comes from a body. In such cases our judgments involve both metonymy and metaphor (for even figures of rhetoric turn into sophism when they mislead us)*.³⁵ Following Leibniz’s thought, one may say that *trompe-l’oeil* shows that the desire for “naturalness” is something paradoxically conventional. One thing has to be mentioned here. This paradigmatic convention expired in 19th century (in art the leading metaphor, as Abrams would say, was not mirror, but lamp) and started to be denounced for being false and not giving pleasure but disgust: *It is sufficient that philosophically we understand that in all imitation two elements must coexist, and not only coexist, but must be perceived as coexisting. These two constituent elements are likeness and unlikeness, or sameness and difference, and in all genuine creations of art there must be a union of these dispartes. The artist may take his point of view where he pleases, provided that the desired effect be perceptibly produced – that there be likeness in the difference, difference in the likeness, and a reconciliation of both in one. If there be likeness to nature without any check of difference, the result is disgusting, and the more complete the delusion, the more loathsome the effect. Why are such simulations of nature, as wax-work figures of men and women, so disagreeable? Because not finding the motion and the life which we expected,*

³⁵ G. W. Leibniz, *New Essays on Human Understanding*, trans. P. Remnant, J. F. Bennett, Cambridge 1996, p. 136, book. II, chap. 9, § 8.

*we are shocked as by a falsehood, every circumstance of detail, which before induced us to be interested, making the distance from truth more palpable. You set out with a supposed reality and are disappointed and disgusted with the deception; while, in respect to a work of genuine imitation, you begin with an acknowledged total difference, and then every touch of nature gives you the pleasure of an approximation to truth. The fundamental principle of all this is undoubtedly the horror of falsehood and the love of truth inherent in the human breast.*³⁶

The story of Zeuxis and Parrhasios ceased to define the summit of artistic possibilities and the way a competent viewer should respond to the work of art. It rather started to be a funny anecdote showing how one should not react because such a reaction is typical of primitive viewers and animals like the monkey described by G. W. F. Hegel: *There are, no doubt, as well, examples of completely deceptive imitation. Zeuxis' painted grapes have from antiquity downward been taken to be the triumph of this principle of the imitation of nature, because the story is that living doves pecked at them. We might add to this ancient example the modern one of Büttner's monkey, which bit in pieces a painted cockchafer in Rösels "Divisions of the Insect World", and was pardoned by his master, in spite of his having thereby spoilt a beautiful copy of this valuable work because of this proof of the excellence of the pictures. But when we reflect on these and similar instances, it must at once occur to us that, in place of commending works of art because they have actually deceived even pigeons and monkeys, we ought simply to censure the people who mean to exalt a work of art by predicating, as its highest and ultimate quality, so poor an effect as this.*³⁷

³⁶ S. T. Coleridge, *On Poesy as Art* [quoted in: *English Essays from Sir Philip Sidney to Macaulay*, ed. Ch. W. Eliot, New York 1909–1914, p. 271–272].

³⁷ Quoted in: G. W. F. Hegel, *The Introduction to Hegel's Philosophy of Art*, trans. B. Bosanquet, London: Kegan Paul, Trench & Co., 1886, p. 81–82, Chap. III, 77.