

to these determinations. Free thought must be won by a historical anamnesis capable of revealing everything in thought which is the forgotten product of historical work. Becoming resolutely aware of historical determinations, a true reconquest of the self (which is the exact opposite of the magical flight into 'essential thought') offers a possibility of really controlling these determinations. It is only by mobilizing all the resources of the social sciences that a historicist realization of the transcendental project can be carried to its conclusion. Like souls which, according to the myth of Er, have drunk the waters of Lethe after having chosen their lot of determinations, our thought has forgotten the ontogenesis and the phylogenesis of its own structures; since their roots are to be found in the structures of social fields established by history, they can be restored to our thought by knowledge of history and of the structure of these fields. The effort I have made here to try to advance this knowledge would be justified, to my mind, if I had succeeded in demonstrating (and convincingly) the possibility of a way of thinking about the social conditions of thought which gives thought an opportunity of freedom in relation to those conditions.

## 2

## The Social Genesis of the Eye



I do not interpret, because I feel at home in the present image.

LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN

The book by Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy*,<sup>1</sup> appeared to me at first as an exemplary realization of what a sociology of artistic perception ought to be, and also as an opportunity to get rid of the traces of intellectualism which might have remained in the exposition I had made some years earlier of the fundamental principles of a science of artistic perception.<sup>2</sup> Describing the comprehension of a work of art as an act of *decoding*, I suggested that the science of the work of art had the goal of reconstructing the artistic *code*, understood as a historically constituted system of classification (or of principles of division)<sup>3</sup> which is crystallized in an ensemble of *words* permitting us to name and perceive differences;<sup>4</sup> that is to say, more precisely, the goal of writing a history of these codes, instruments of perception which vary in time and space, notably as a function of transformations in the material and symbolic instruments of production.<sup>5</sup> I based myself on a systematic analysis of the variations in the preferences of the visitors to European museums according to different social variables (such as level of education, age, place of residence, profession, etc.) in order to demonstrate that the categories of perception (naively held as universal and eternal) applied by art lovers in our societies to a work of art are in fact historical categories, and these need to be reconstructed

both in their phylogenesis, by a social history of the invention of the 'pure' artistic disposition and competence, and in their ontogenesis, by a differential analysis of the acquisition of this disposition and this competence. In other words, I reiterated that the disinterested game of sensibility and the pure exercise of the faculty of feeling spoken of by Kant assumed totally particular historical and social conditions of possibility, since aesthetic pleasure – this pure pleasure 'which ought to be able to be felt by any man' – is the privilege of those who have access to the economic and social conditions which allow the 'pure' and 'disinterested' disposition to be durably established.

That being said, even though my intention from the start was to try to make explicit the specific logic of sensory knowledge, analysing it more or less simultaneously with respect to very different empirical objects (such as the Kabyle ritual), I had a great deal of difficulty in breaking with the intellectualist conception which – even in the iconological tradition founded by Panofsky, and especially in the semiological tradition, then at its peak – tended to conceive the perception of the work of art as an act of decoding, or, as one liked to say, a 'reading' (through a typical illusion of the *lector* spontaneously inclined to what Austin called 'the scholastic point of view'). This perspective is the foundation of the 'philologism' which, according to Bakhtin, leads to treating language as a dead letter destined to be *decoded* (and not to be spoken or understood practically); more generally, it is the foundation of the hermeneutism which leads to conceiving any act of comprehension according to the model of *translation* and turns the perception of a cultural work, whatever it may be, into an intellectual act of decoding which presupposes the elucidation and the conscious application of rules of production and interpretation.

Here is, in fact, the paradox of the historical comprehension of a work or a practice of the past – that of Piero della Francesca for example – or of a practice or a work emanating from a foreign tradition – Kabyle ritual: to make up for the absence of the (true) understanding immediately available to an indigenous contemporary, one must perform the task of *reconstructing* the code found invested there; but without meanwhile forgetting that the singularity of the original comprehension is that it in no sense presupposes any such intellectual effort of construction and translation; and that the contemporary native, in contrast to the interpreter, invests in his comprehension practical schemas which never crop up as such in consciousness (in the manner, for example, of grammatical rules). In short, the analyst's theory of the perception of a work of art must involve a theory of the initial perception as a practice, one which has no theory or concept itself and for which he has to find a substitute

through the work of trying to construct a framework of interpretation, a model capable of explaining practices and works. This certainly does not mean that he forces himself to *mimic* or reproduce in practice (according to the logic, dear to Michelet and many others, of 'resurrecting the past') the practical experience of comprehension – even if an explicit mastery of the schemas which are in practice involved in the production, and the comprehension, may lead to the possibility of feeling the practical experience of the native contemporary – but *in a somewhat vicarious mode*.

Michael Baxandall's analysis therefore encouraged me to carry to its conclusion – despite all the social obstacles in the path of such a transgression of the social hierarchy of practices and objects – the transfer to the domain of artistic perception of everything which my analyses of the ritual acts of Kabyle peasants or of the evaluative operations of professors and critics had taught me about the specific logic of practical sense, of which aesthetic sense is a particular case. The science of the mode of aesthetic knowledge finds its foundation in a theory of practice *as* practice, meaning as an activity founded on cognitive operations which mobilize a mode of knowing which is not that of theory and concept, without nevertheless being (as those who feel its specificity would often have it) a sort of ineffable participation in a known object.

In the same way that today the most culturally deprived people seem to lean towards a taste described as 'realist' because, unlike lovers of art, they do not possess in a *practical state* the *specific categories* stemming from the autonomization of the field of production (which permit differences in manner and style to be perceived in an immediate manner)<sup>6</sup> and so can apply to works of art only the practical schemas they use in daily existence,<sup>7</sup> so in the same way the contemporaries of Piero della Francesca engaged in their perception of his paintings schemas which stemmed from their daily experience of the sermon, the dance and the market. The immediate comprehension thus offered to them undoubtedly has little in common with that procured for the cultivated amateur of our time by that 'Kantian' eye which was invented in and through the effort of painters to assert their autonomy, notably by asserting their mastery of what they gained as their own in the division of labour of symbolic production – namely manner, form and style.

### The Quattrocento eye

The relationship of false familiarity that we entertain with the techniques of expression and the expressive contents of fifteenth-

century painting, and in particular with the Christian symbolism whose nominal remoteness masks the deep and real variations with the passing of time, prevents us from perceiving the size of the gap between schemas of perception and appreciation which we now apply to these works and those they objectively demand and which their immediate recipients applied to them.<sup>8</sup> There is no doubt that the comprehension we may have of these works – which are at once too close to disconcert us and to demand a learned decoding, and too far away to offer themselves in an immediate manner to the prereflexive and almost corporeal grasp of the harmonized habitus – may be the source, illusory as it might be, of a very real pleasure. It remains true that only a real labour of historical ethnology may permit us to correct errors of accommodation which are more likely to pass unnoticed here than in the case of the so-called primitive arts – especially African art – where the discordance between the ethnological analysis and the aesthetic discourse cannot escape the attention of even the most hardened aesthetes. In effect there are few cases where scientific construction of the object requires as obviously as here that rare form of intellectual intrepidity which is necessary to break with received ideas and to defy propriety, and to think about works as sacralized as those of Piero della Francesca or Botticelli in their historical truthfulness as paintings for ‘shopkeepers’ (the nineteenth century, which invented our aesthetic, said out loud what is unthinkable today).

To break with the illusory and partial comprehension that is founded on denial of historicity, the historian must reconstruct the ‘moral and spiritual eye’ of the Quattrocento mind, meaning in the first place, the social conditions of this *institution* – without which there is no demand, hence no market for painting – called the *interest* in painting and, more precisely, the interest in such and such a genre, manner or subject. ‘The pleasure of possession, an active piety, civic consciousness of one or another kind, self-commemoration and perhaps self-advertisement, the rich man’s necessary virtue and pleasure of reparation, a taste for pictures: in fact, the client need not analyse his own motives much because he generally worked through institutional forms – the altarpiece, the frescoed family chapel, the Madonna in the bedroom, the cultured wall-furniture in the study – which implicitly rationalized his motives for him, usually in quite flattering ways, and also went far toward briefing the painter on what was needed.’<sup>9</sup>

The brutality, or innocence, with which the requirements of clients (especially their concern to get their money’s worth) are asserted in legal contracts constitutes in itself a first important piece of infor-

mation, both about the attitude of buyers of the fifteenth century with respect to the works and, in contrast, about the ‘pure’ gaze – purified of any reference to economic value – which today’s cultivated spectator, the product of a more autonomous field of production, feels just as bound to bring to bear on ‘pure’ works of the present as on ‘impure’ works of the past. As long as the relationship between the patron and the painter can be taken as a simple commercial relationship in which the patron decides what the artist should paint, and over what time period, and with what colours, the properly aesthetic value of the works cannot be really considered as such, meaning independently of their economic value; sometimes still prosaically measured by the painted surface area or the time spent at it, the latter is more and more often determined by the cost of materials utilized and the technical virtuosity of the painter,<sup>10</sup> which is expected to be manifestly evident in the work itself.<sup>11</sup> If, as Baxandall shows, interest in technique continually increases at the expense of attention to materials, it is undoubtedly because gold becomes rare and because the concern of the *nouveaux riches* to distinguish themselves leads to a rejection of the ostentatious display of wealth, in painting as well as in clothing, while the humanist current comes to reinforce Christian asceticism. It is also because, to the extent that the field of artistic production gains autonomy, painters are more and more able to display and attach value to the technique, the manner, the *manifattura*, hence the *form* – in short, everything which (unlike the subject, which is most often imposed) belongs to painters alone.

But an analysis of the ‘more or less conscious responses of painters to market conditions’, and the advantage they were able to draw in asserting the autonomy of their *métier* from the growing propensity of their clients to privilege the technical aspect of the work and the visible manifestations of the ‘master’s touch’, refers us back to an analysis of the visual capacities of those clients, and of the situation in which simple lay people could acquire the practical skills which guaranteed them immediate access to pictorial works and allowed them to appreciate the technical virtuosity of their authors.

Reconstructing a ‘vision of the world’: this project, seemingly routine, reveals itself as perfectly unprecedented, if not impossible, the moment one tries to rely on the old notion of *Weltanschauung*, undoubtedly one of the most overused in scientific tradition. This is first of all because, as Michael Baxandall himself notes, ‘a society’s visual practices are, in the nature of things, not all or even mostly represented in verbal records’;<sup>12</sup> and then because a seemingly mandatory use of such ‘testimony of visual activity’ as paintings or

sketches would merely prejudge the very problem one is asking them to help resolve. In fact, it is on this circular argument that Baxandall the historian relies in postulating that social factors 'lead to the development of distinctive visual skills and habits; and these visual skills and habits become identifiable elements in the painter's style.'<sup>13</sup> The knowledge of dispositions, inseparably cognitive and evaluative, with which he equips himself by drawing on written sources which touch on the uses of arithmetic, on religious practices and representations, or on dance techniques of fifteenth-century Italy, allows him to understand the paintings in their historical logic and, therefore, to treat them as documents of a historical vision of the world, and to find in the visible properties of pictorial representation some indications concerning the schemas of perception and appreciation which painter and spectators engaged in their vision of the world and in their vision of the pictorial representation of the world.

'A moral and spiritual eye' fashioned by 'religion, education, business',<sup>14</sup> the 'Quattrocento eye' is nothing other than the system of schemas of perception and appreciation, of judgement and of pleasure, which were acquired through the practices of daily life (school, church, marketplace) by listening to lectures, speeches or sermons, measuring piles of wheat or lengths of cloth, or by resolving calculations of compound interest or maritime insurance, and which were put to work in ordinary existence and also in the production and perception of works of art. Against the intellectualist error to which an analyst easily falls prey, Baxandall aims to reconstitute a 'social experience' of the world, understood as practical experience acquired by frequenting a particular social universe, meaning, in the present case, the habitus of a merchant or, as he himself puts it in an intentionally schematic summary of his study, that of a 'church-going businessman, with a taste for dancing'.<sup>15</sup>

These practical schemas, acquired in the practice of commerce and invested in the trade in works of art, are not those logical categories which philosophy loves to lend to a painting. Even in the case of a professional judge of taste, the critic Cristoforo Landino, the terms used to characterize paintings, and which may be understood as the expression of his 'reaction to the paintings, clearly, but also towards the latent sources of his standards',<sup>16</sup> are organized according to a structure, but one which does not have the formal rigour of a properly logical construction: 'Pure, easy, gracious, ornate, varied, prompt, blithe, devout, relief, perspective, colouring and composition, design and foreshortening, imitator of Nature, lover of the difficulties - Landino offers a basic conceptual equipment for addressing Quattrocento pictorial quality. His terms have a structure:

one is opposed to, or is allied with, or is subsumed by, or overlaps another. It would not be difficult to draw a diagram in which these relationships were registered, but the diagram would imply a systematic rigidity which the terms in practice do not and should not have.'<sup>17</sup>

The different dimensions that analysis inevitably isolates for the needs of understanding and explanation are intimately linked inside the *unity of a habitus*, and the religious dispositions of a man who has attended church and heard sermons are completely merged with the mercantile dispositions of a businessman accustomed to the immediate calculation of quantities and prices, as the analysis of the criteria of evaluation of colours shows: 'After gold and silver, ultramarine was the most expensive and difficult colour the painter used. There were cheap and dear grades and there were even cheaper substitutes, generally referred to as German blue. [ . . . ] To avoid being let down about blues, clients specified ultramarine; more prudent clients stipulated a particular grade - ultramarine at one or two or four florins an ounce. The painters and their public were alert to all this and the exotic and dangerous character of ultramarine was a means of accent that we, for whom a dark blue is probably no more striking than scarlet or vermilion, are liable to miss. We can follow well enough when it is used simply to pick out the principal figure of Christ or Mary in a biblical scene, but the interesting uses are more subtle than this. In Sassetta's panel of *St Francis Renouncing his Heritage* at the National Gallery, the gown St Francis discards is an ultramarine gown. In Masaccio's expensively pigmented *Crucifixion*, the vital narrative gesture of St John's right arm is an ultramarine gesture.'<sup>18</sup>

### The foundation of the charismatic illusion

To love a painting, in the case of the Quattrocento merchant, is to *find a dividend there*, to recover one's outlay, getting something for one's money, in the form of the 'richest' colours, the most obviously costly, and the most clearly exhibited pictorial technique; but it is also - and this might be a definition of the premodern form of aesthetic pleasure - to find there that supplementary satisfaction which consists in finding oneself in it entirely, recognizing oneself, feeling well, feeling at home, finding in the painting one's world and one's relationship with the world. The *well-being* procured by artistic contemplation may result from what the work of art gives an opportunity to achieve, in a form intensified by gratuitousness - acts

of successful comprehension which make for happiness, like the experience of an immediate accord with the world, preconscious and prereflexive, like a miraculous encounter between practical sense and objectified meanings. This is to say that the charismatic ideology which describes the love of art in the language of being love-struck is a 'well-founded illusion': it describes very well the relation of mutual solicitation between aesthetic meaning and artistic significations – of which the lexicon of love, if not sex, is an approximate (and doubtless the least inadequate) expression; it passes over in silence the social conditions of the possibility of this experience.

The habitus urges, interrogates, makes the object speak, while for its part, the object seems to incite, call upon, provoke the habitus; of course, as Baxandall remarks, skills, memories or images that manage to blend with the properties directly perceived can only come forth because, for a predisposed habitus, they seem magically evoked by these properties (the magical efficacy which poetry often attributes to itself finds its principle in that sort of almost physical harmony which gives words, and their connotations, the power to call up experiences buried in the folds of the body). In short, if (as aesthetes never stop proclaiming) the artistic experience is a matter of sense and feeling, and not of decoding and reasoning, it is because the dialectic between the constituting act and the constitutive object, mutually soliciting each other, is effected in the essentially obscure relationship between the habitus and the world.

The contract for *The Adoration of the Magi* between Ghirlandaio and the prior of the Hospital of the Innocents in Florence shows that a painting in which economic sense is satisfied is also one which gratifies religious sensibility, by proportioning the economic value of colours to the religious value of their iconographic props, by giving the gold to Christ and to the Virgin and by using ultramarine to *give worth* to a gesture by Saint John. But we know from Jacques Le Goff's research that the calculating mind of the merchant also found something to apply itself to in the properly religious sphere, with the appearance of Purgatory, which introduces accounting into the spiritual order, having coincided with the birth of the bank.<sup>19</sup> One has only to add the moral (and political) satisfactions obtained by the perception of a harmonic and harmonious representation, equilibrated and reassuring, of the visible world, and quite simply, the pleasure of freely exercising a hermeneutic expertise, and one can see that in the case of the Quattrocento man the experience of beauty in what it can have of the miraculous is born of the relation of reciprocal intromission established between the socialized body and a social object which seems made to satisfy all socially instituted

senses, sense of sight and sense of touch, but also economic sense and religious sense.

A historical analysis which repudiates the verbal generalities of the analysis of essence in order to immerse itself in the historical particularity of a place and a time represents an obligatory passage – an inevitable moment (against empty theoreticism) and one destined to be surpassed (against blind hyper-empiricism) – for any scientific research into *invariants*. Interpreted in this way, the knowledge of the conditions and historical conditionings of the pleasures of the 'Quattrocento eye' may lead to what undoubtedly constitutes the invariant and transhistorical principle of properly artistic satisfaction, that imaginary achievement of a universally happy encounter between a *historical* habitus and a *historical* world which frequents it, and which it inhabits.