Art and Psychology: A Phenomenological Inquiry into the Nature of Pictorial Representations

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Abstract

Starting from the relationship between Merleau-Ponty and *Gestalt* psychology, this essay aims to investigate and clarify the nature of pictorial representations, taking the work *Eye and Mind* as its point of departure. When examined critically, the scientific analysis of *Gestalt* psychologists allows us to grasp the "existential" significance of perception, that is, that dimension of meaning which, according to Merleau-Ponty, can be found both in the world of experience and in pictorial representations. Wertheimer's laws of unification, and more generally, the factors highlighted by Gestalt-based perception psychologists, can be understood as the conditions of appearance of pictorial representations. From this investigative perspective, it is possible to propose a description of the nature of representations that moves beyond both the notions of "similarity" and denotation, understood here as cultural conventions or linguistic codes (Goodman). The painter, through their work, does not merely imitate the world but rather re-creates it. In this sense, "similarity" may emerge as a consequence of what painters achieve, but it is neither the foundation of their work nor an explanation of their activity. The aim, therefore, is to clarify the relationship between art, the world, and visual perception, by analyzing some examples (particularly from the works of Cézanne and Magritte), in order to grasp the true nature of pictorial representations.

Keywords Perception · Depiction · *Gestalt* psychology · Merleau-Ponty

1 Introduction

This essay explores the nature of pictorial representations through a phenomenological lens, focusing on the relationship between Merleau-Ponty's philosophy and Gestalt psychology. Taking Eye and Mind as a point of departure, the study examines how scientific analyses of perception illuminate the"existential"dimension of meaning that underlies both lived experience and artistic creation. Moving beyond theories based on resemblance or cultural conventions, the task of the painter is shown not as mere imitation but as a re-creation of the world's visibility. Through close readings of artists such as Cézanne and

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Magritte, the essay aims to clarify the dynamic interaction between perception, representation, and Being, revealing art as a profound expression of the mystery of existence.

According to Merleau-Ponty, the activity of painters holds profound philosophical significance: it teaches us how to look at the world and invites us to recalibrate both the weight and the role of our interpretations. Artists such as Cézanne guide us toward the "things themselves", discovering the genesis of appearance – that primordial dimension of Being that precedes words and concepts. In his final essay, *Eye and Mind*, Merleau-Ponty poses the question: "What, then, is this secret science which he has or which he seeks?" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a, 1964b: 161). According to our working hypothesis, the"secret science"to which Merleau-Ponty refers is perception, and more specifically, *Gestalt* psychology.

Cézanne, in particular, creates "worlds" by drawing upon the perceptual modalities underlying phenomenal appearance—rules that Gestalt psychology has experimentally uncovered through the identification of their conditions. The connection to this specific tradition lies in the phenomenological method employed by Gestalt psychologists, which focuses on "functional relationships" (Bozzi, 1989: 27) and the identification of dependent and independent variables (Burigana, 1996: 274) that determine the conditions for the emergence of the phenomenon under investigation (Bozzi, 1989: 48).

Merleau-Ponty critiques Gestalt psychologists for retaining a naturalistic residue rooted in realism—an objectivist assumption that obstructs a proper understanding of the nature of phenomena. These unexamined biases, he argues, impede the possibility of transcending the realism-idealism dichotomy. Through his critical investigation within experimental psychology, Merleau-Ponty develops a novel interpretation of the phenomenological method characterized by a dual movement: on the one hand, he draws on Husserl to critique Gestalt psychology, while on the other, he reinterprets Husserl's work in light of the "new psychology" (Taddio, 2024: 15). The nature of perception, he contends, exhibits specific qualities that cannot be explained through the naturalistic and objectivist framework of the sciences.

Paintings are objects that orient our gaze while simultaneously seeming to refer to "something else". The techniques employed by painters shape an expressive output that results from the interaction of the materials they use; through their work on the canvas, artists bring to light genuine "pictorial worlds." By *recreating* dimensions of the visible, they present our gaze with "things" imbued with meaning.

Painters disclose "things" that are the expression of a *système d'équivalences* secretly linked to that dimension of Being Merleau-Ponty describes as "raw" or "wild": worlds belonging to the same (phenomenal) "fabric" – to use the author's metaphor – from which the entire sphere of the experienceable is woven.

Beginning with Cézanne, modern and contemporary art has explored and examined its own limits, its existential status, and its "originality". By "originality", we do not mean the uniqueness of the artwork but rather its attempt to approach the origin (Agamben, 1999: 61) – that is, its effort to express, as in Magritte (2016: 64, 94, 138, 157, 258), the mystery of existence and creation. In this sense, a work of art can be seen as an expression of the enigma of our subjectivity, of our "being-in-the-world". The generative process of the artwork embodies and manifests the meaning of creating the sensible world.

One might object that this is a scientifically unprovable thesis, but that is precisely the point: art gives shape to a feeling even before it gives shape to *logos*. It creates space for that "wonder" or "awe" from which both art and philosophy arise (Damasio, 2005; Severino, 2016). To explain the creative and artistic process scientifically, making it fully intelligible, would strip it of its anthropological function of expressing the mystery of existence (Heidegger, 2008; Lévi-Strauss, 1966). Similarly, the progress of science has diminished

the heuristic power of religions, just as the birth of philosophy marked a rupture with mythical tradition. By structuring itself as a certain and indubitable form of knowledge (*episteme*), philosophical thought no longer rests on faith but must find legitimacy and grounding in *logos* to counter all forms of doubt (Severino, 2016).

Science has curtailed the salvific claims of religions and their totalizing function, which once positioned them as ultimate explanations of existence – a bridge between our subjectivity and the entirety of creation. This shift does not necessarily imply the disappearance of spirituality; however, in the West, faith has been circumscribed, relegated to a matter of individual conscience, while the state and scientific thought have been placed in an autonomous dimension (Severino, 2009).

Like religion, art responds to a fundamental *Homo sapiens'* need for meaning: we are mammals endowed with a high degree of awareness, and our way of life "feeds on meaning" (Cassirer, 2023; Dunbar, 2022). The progress of neuroscience, with its attempts to explain the processes underlying our creativity, marks the loss of the aura of the artwork (Benjamin, 2008) – that existential depth connecting art to the divine and directing us toward the "mystery" of our existence. Were the creative processes behind art ever to be fully explained, art would definitively lose its original function: to give shape to the profound mystery of existence. In a sense, art and science are inversely proportional: the rise of science has redefined the boundaries of art, religion, and philosophy. This transformation has not led to the disappearance of these activities from our horizon, but it has progressively eroded their original function.

Art has not always served as mere entertainment or a source of aesthetic enjoyment, as it often tends to be considered today. Historically, it has maintained a profound connection to our theological-metaphysical sphere, addressing humanity's need to provide stable meaning to our existence. Art gives shape to the problems of its time and reflects the metaphysical framework of its era: in the digital age, contemporary art embodies the current techno-scientific models. From this perspective, understanding the architecture of the past is essential for grasping how a people or culture conceived and inhabited their own time. The relationship between metaphysics and aesthetics mirrors the relationship between the creative "model" an era employs to explain the creation of the entire *kosmos* and how this order is reflected in the idea of artistic creation. To capture the moment of creation (the generation of meaning) means expressing the conditions and significance of the emergence of forms: that elusive point of transcendence found in the *punctum caecum* and the concept of "death," which Simondon (2020) describes as the moment when our metastable form of life collapses. Through its forms, art encompasses, expresses, and retains what reason alone cannot dominate: birth and death, the creation and dissolution of forms represent the ineffable traits in which the tension inherent in the arc of our existence is embodied. It is precisely this space of ineffability within existence that art reveals and brings it to expression – creating a world and, with it, a dimension of meaning.

Things serve as tools manipulated to achieve specific purposes; art, Magritte (2016) contends, relates to things in a disinterested way, grasping and revealing them as they are "in truth." Tied as we are to use, Magritte – echoing Merleau-Ponty (1964a, 1964b) – suggests that we have lost the ability to truly see the world. His paintings aim to show us things as they really are: a specific perspective on a thing no longer serves as a limitation within the multiplicity of its potential aspects but instead connects us with the "truth of the appearing of Being", unveiling a dimension of existence.

Van Gogh's *Peasant Shoes* are not merely another physical object among many; their wear expresses the subjectivity of the individual who wore and lived in them over time, who inhabited those places and spent their life wearing them (Heidegger, 2008). Each

form of appearance embodies the original dimension of our subjectivity, which Heidegger (2004) associates with the notion of *Dasein*: a subject no longer understood in Cartesian terms as opposed to the world, but in a constitutive (*Gestalt*) relationship with it.

Merleau-Ponty, drawing on Heidegger, affirms that we *are* in the truth: the study of perception reveals this existential and original dimension, from which our knowledge initially gains legitimacy. This does not imply that all scientific knowledge derives from perception, but rather that originates in our initial phenomenal encounter with the world. Were we to live in an indeterminate, unstable, and incoherent world, where no regularity could be discerned, it would be impossible for us to deduce any knowledge of reality.

There is an irresolvable contradiction in the idea of experiencing the end of one's own existence: at the core of our subjectivity lies a constitutive *aut aut* that directs us toward life, toward the order of worldly experience, relegating death to an unfathomable mystery. Given our contingency, even as we stand at the center of our own field of existence, the concept of "death" seems to remain obscured beyond the framework of meaning that defines our perspectival gaze on the world.

This concealment recalls the anamorphic skull at the center of Holbein the Younger's painting *The Ambassadors* (1533), which Lacan (1977) discusses in *Seminar XI* in an ideal dialogue with his late friend Merleau-Ponty, who had already passed away. The frame-eye orients our gaze in a perspective way toward that representation of meaning we commonly identify as our *lifeworld*. Conversely, if we were to see only the "negative", our ability to project and to imbue our actions with meaning would collapse.

In a famous painting, Escher depicts an almost imperceptible skull embedded within a pupil, suggesting, as in Holbein's portrait described by Lacan, the idea that the eye simultaneously orients us toward life while concealing and veiling the possibility of our annihilation, like an imperceptible vanishing point that can never be directly experienced. Our body is a perceptual system attuned to that portion of reality – the *world-environment* – which constitutes our ecological niche. In this sense, an objectified, meaningless world would starkly reveal itself as a desubjectivized physical reality, one uninhabitable and insupportable, akin to the existential feeling masterfully described by Sartre in his novel *Nausea* (1938). Stripped of its framework of meaning, the world would cease to be a world at all. Merleau-Ponty compares the work of art to the "lived body" to illustrate the equivalence and correlation between our body, understood as a physical body, and the material substrate of the artwork: "The body is to be compared, not to a physical object, but rather to a work of art" (Merleau-Ponty, 2005: 174). The meaning of an image cannot be reduced to its substrate or to the analysis of its parts, just as our "lived body" cannot be reduced to the sum of its internal organs. The concept of *Gestalt* captures this holistic dimension and the constitutive bond between the world and the subject: the meaning things hold for us emerge within the "perceptual field", through their relationships and interrelations. The world, as we perceive it, is the result of the entire spectrum of processes involved. For this reason, the phenomenological assumption holds full and independent legitimacy: phenomena exist solely within this field of existence.

Simondon identifies symmetry as the absence of order: the phenomenal order of any dynamic of meaning appears and establishes itself through the breaking of symmetry (Tagliagambe, 2020: 91). A completely white canvas presents no order; order only emerges when the first line is drawn. From that point onward, we can distinguish figure from background, order from disorder. In doing so, we establish the unit of measurement that allows us to evaluate our relationship with the artwork. The artwork itself creates the model for its own interpretation. This model is not external to the work, as in the case of "the standard metre in Paris", analyzed by Wittgenstein (2003: §50), which provides and thereby

establishes the unit of measurement for length. We cannot use the metre itself to verify whether the standard metre in Paris is indeed one metre, as it is the standard that defines the unit of measurement. To measure it would require treating it not as a standard but as an ordinary object. We determine whether something measures one metre using the model provided. But can we measure or evaluate art? According to what standard? Art lacks any external model by which it can be evaluated; it is art itself – the world it establishes as a "second nature" – that provides the tools for its own evaluation and interpretation (Taddio, 2019). "If the work is successful", writes Merleau-Ponty, "it has the strange power to teach its own lesson" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a: 19).

Cézanne paves the way for modernity by problematizing the role of subjectivity in relation to the world he depicts, artistically reflecting on the processes of creation and formation, and addressing that *punctum caecum* of transcendence at the origin of every form of creation. From Merleau-Ponty's perspective, this *punctum caecum* underpins our gaze upon the world: "The painter 'takes his body with him,'" Valéry states. "It is by lending his body to the world that the artist changes the world into paintings" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a, 1964b: 162). The meaning of appearance, like art itself, is both "illusory" and necessary for life and the "health" of our subjectivity. A world devoid of meaning would render any form of social organization arduous, if not impossible, and would strip all existential projects of their purpose (Heidegger, 2004: §50).

"The painting is an analogue or likeness only according to the body" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a, 1964b: 165). The painter, through their body – whose subjectivity is defined by its constitutive relationship with the world – grasps meaning in both active and passive ways: through interaction with the world-environment, they simultaneously give and receive meaning (in a feedback process). The body is a "perceptual system" immersed in its environment. We are *in-the-world* (whether in this one or in alternative virtual worlds): every appearance is a "virtuality of Being" (Taddio, 2024). Lending one's body to the world to recreate a world imbued with meaning underscores the idea that, without a perceiving subject, the world would not exist. It is the relational bond between the "lived body" and the "world" that ensures that appearance (for us) carries meaning.

The concept of *Gestalt* is employed to elucidate the dimension of "meaning" within our perceptual field, where a comparable expressivity (Gibson's *affordance*) emerges in the work of painters. At the core of *Gestalt* psychology lies the notion of "direct experience", understood as unmediated. This theoretical shift enables Gestalt psychologists to depart from empiricist-associationist approaches. A thing, as it appears within the perceptual field, is apprehended as a whole: direct experience is inherently a complex experience, irreducible to its parts. The task of phenomenological analysis, therefore, consists in making explicit the implicit content of immediate experience.

Goethe exemplifies the isomorphism between subject and world when he states: "If the eye were not sun-like, it could never behold the sun". This concept finds visual expression in Magritte's famous painting, *Le faux miroir* (1928), where the sky and clouds appear within the iris of a large eye. We perceive shapes, light, and colors in this way because we are "world-shaped": world and subject are structurally interconnected as products of an adaptive process. The world represents our ecological niche, a plane of existence aligned with our form of life. We can directly perceive only the worldly dimension of reality – that is, the environment understood as the horizon of all our experience. Reality that is too small or large to be experienced lies beyond our direct perception, accessible only indirectly through mathematization and scientific experimentation. While we inhabit the world, science "manipulates things and gives up living in them" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a, 1964b: 160). In alignment with Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger states that humans dwell "poetically".

This is the specific function of the "word" and natural language, through which humanity cares for Being – that "mode of existence", unique to our form of life, through which we *are* in the world. We do not inhabit reality in the physical sense, nor do we exist solely within quantitative horizons. Rather, we primarily live and project our existence within our *Lebenswelt* ("life-world"), a world in which things possess their own expressivity, addressing us and inviting us toward an order of meaning (*affordance*). In *Being and Time*, Heidegger (2004) effectively describes the structure that indissolubly ties the subject to the world.

Merleau-Ponty demonstrates how our "body schema" provides a relative stability in our relationship with the world, even when we change perspectives by moving through space. Action and perception intertwine to create a bond that connects our "lived body" to the world and ties the appearance of the world to our subjectivity – an inseparable "double bind". In this sense, perception cannot be reduced to a series of causal connections between the object (distal stimulus), the eye (proximal stimulus), and the brain. The interaction between subject and environment generates immersive, circular, and feedback-driven effects (Fuchs, 2017: 167). Using Merleau-Ponty's (2012) terminology, we are "embodied" in the world and "seen" by it, a phenomenon he describes as *réversibilité*. This perspective overcomes the dichotomy between classical idealism and realism: there can be no world without subjectivity, and, conversely, no subjectivity without a world. A similar approach can be found in Gibson's ecological theory (1986: 15), which conceptualizes the world as encompassing all that we can experience. The physical reality beyond the world – too small or too large to be directly experienced – can only be investigated, though never directly perceived, through the experimental methods of empirical sciences.

2 Contours and Gradient-Free Surfaces

Koffka, along with Gestalt theorists more broadly, conceptualizes "phenomenology" as a "naïve and full a description of direct experience as possible" (Koffka, 2013: 73). By "naïve and full a description", Koffka seeks to distinguish language from perception, urging us to describe phenomena in a "non-preconceived" manner. In doing so, he cautions against applying the logical structure of thought to perception. Instead, the aim is to understand the laws governing perception and to explore how perception is constituted within the field dynamics that envelop and hold our gaze upon the world. Perception is assumed, grasped, and described from a first-person perspective. Within this methodological framework, Gestalt theorists aim to identify the conditions of appearance for a given phenomenon. Consequently, this perspective can be applied to the problem of depiction (Gombrich, 1960; Goodman, 1976; Hopkins, 1998; Walton, 1990; Wollheim, 1998), shifting the focus from what the image denotes to the very nature of perceptual phenomena. "Painting, even when it appears devoted to other purposes, celebrates no other enigma but that of visibility" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a, 1964b: 166). The object depicted in a painting is realized based on its conditions of appearance, the materials and the tools employed. It is this interaction that brings forth the expressive quality of the colors of the object. While the conditions of appearance (modalities) do not depend on the material medium, expressivity – such as that of a "woolly red" associated with a specific fabric – is always conveyed through its relationship with the material employed.

The artist unveils a world and embodies its meaning. Through their technical-productive practice, they engage with the conditions of the phenomenal emergence of the

object: forms, colors, and expressivity interact to determine the dynamic forces within the perceptual field. This "visual grammar" resembles a "phenomenological chemistry", wherein the interaction of elements (forms, colors, etc.) takes shape within the self-organizing processes of the phenomenal field.

Consider the example of the "Kanizsa triangle" (1980: 274): we see a white triangle with anomalous margins. This figure can be grasped in both its existence and its mode of existence only by assuming the phenomenal givenness of the world as directly experienced. We perceive a figure endowed with a specific meaning: it is a thing (a triangle) with a distinct identity. If we were to examine only the physical stimulus – whether distal, proximal, or, more broadly, the processes occurring within the brain – we would find no triangle. Perception is the result of the entire range of processes involved, not from any single part of them.

The analysis of this famous example highlights the inadequacy of describing the physical stimulus to account for the expressive richness of the directly experienced world. Transparency, depth, color, movement, and expressivity are all phenomenal aspects that exist solely within the plane of reality we call the "world" (our *Lebenswelt*). Various aspects of the world exist exclusively within the realm of direct experience, and thus there is no full correspondence between the physical description of the stimulus and the phenomenal world. Since there is no one-to-one causal correspondence, the empiricist notions of "sensation" and "impression" can neither exhaust nor comprehend the meaning of perception: "The structure of actual perception alone can teach us what perception is" (Merleau-Ponty, 2005: 4). Sensation, in fact, is caused by something that should theoretically correspond precisely to our *world-image apparatus* (Lorenz, 1978); however, individual sensations (just like individual parts) cannot convey the meaning of the thing as it appears in its entirety (*Gestalt*). For example, since the sides of the Kanizsa triangle do not exist at the level of distal stimulation, how can we claim to explain what we observe solely through sensation?

To adopt the notion of "sensation" as a way to explain and understand perception, as Merleau-Ponty reminds us, is to lose its meaning and overlook the "something more" that is unique to perception: "Each part arouses the expectation of more than it contains, and this elementary perception is therefore already charged with a meaning" (Merleau-Ponty, 2005: 4). Even when we are aware that the surface of the figure is objectively homogeneous, we perceive the triangle within it as being a slightly darker white. What is "objective" from the perspective of the distal stimulus (the homogeneous background) is not perceived as such; instead, we see the darker white within the "anomalous margins" of the figure, which are absent at the level of the physical stimulus. The world and the meaning of things emerge from relational processes intrinsic to reality. To comprehend this, the appropriate frame of reference is phenomenological: perception is a system that involves both the subject and the world, which mutually implicate one another as structure (*Gestalt*).

In the painting *Le Jockey perdu* (1948), Magritte presents the tree-leaf pair using edges without gradients. We see trees shaped like leaves and perceive their unity, recognizing them as such, even though their perimeter is absent at the level of the distal stimulus. If our analysis were to focus solely on the physical stimulus, with the aim of objectifying the world as it is (realism), we would lose the phenomenon and the meaning it reveals. A similar observation applies to the meaning disclosed by a pictorial image: the images at Lascaux, Merleau-Ponty asserts, do not coincide with the rocks of the cave (the physical substrate of the image). "The animals painted on the walls of Lascaux are not there in the same way as fissures and limestone formations" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a, 1964b: 164).

The painter, through their practice, manifests a knowledge *embedded* in perception: they "engage" perception, implicitly employing the rules of phenomenal givenness that have always constituted it. The comprehensive set of conditions for the emergence of phenomena, as discovered by experimental psychologists, underlies both pictorial representation and the phenomenal appearance of things in the world.

The conditions identified by experimental psychology not only outline the mechanisms through which we perceive phenomena but also serve as the foundation for understanding how these phenomena can be presented, for instance, in pictorial art: "Thus painting is only an artifice which presents to our eyes a projection similar to that which the things themselves in ordinary perception would and do inscribe in our eyes" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a, 1964b: 172). The painter's activity recreates the world by inscribing their subjectivity into it: Cézanne "thinks in painting" (Ibid.: 178). This "secret" and "silent" science embodied by the painter "comes from the eye and addresses itself to the eye. We must understand the eye as the 'window of the soul'" (Ibid.: 186).

In *La condition humaine*, Magritte writes: "In front of a window seen from inside a room I placed a picture representing exactly that part of the landscape masked by the picture. So, the tree in the picture hid the tree behind it, outside the room. For the viewer, the tree was simultaneously in the room in the picture and outside in the real landscape" (Magritte, 2016: 66). In his writings, Magritte outlines a mentalist philosophy: for him, everything is purely a mental construct (Magritte, 2016: 100). Beyond his philosophical perspective, however, we might interpret *La condition humaine* not only as a metaphor for the mind but also as a representation of how a painting recreates the world, making it appear – through the same principles – as a "second nature".

We can describe the conditions of a thing's appearance on the canvas in terms of "phenomenal invariants" that constitute the perceptual structure of the event (in the specific case of pictorial representation). These invariants represent both the dependent and independent variables underlying the perceived phenomenon. Within the tradition of experimental phenomenology, such relationships are directly observable properties. By systematically varying the influence of some phenomenal properties on others (*percept-percept coupling*) – that is, the properties of the event responsible for a particular perceptual effect – the experimenter identifies critical pairings (*couplings*). The gradual variation of qualities enables the determination of the necessary conditions for a phenomenal event to emerge as the outcome of a specific set of relationships. The painter's activity implicitly engages with the modalities of phenomenal perception, recreating the "donation of meaning" inherent in the phenomenal appearance of things within the perceptual field. The painter recreates a world that employs the same modalities that underlie the phenomenal world, thereby establishing a *système d'équivalences* between different worlds.

We can consider a painting as an appearance in relation to the world; however, we might also consider the world as a representation of reality, or even reverse these terms and conceive of appearance – whatever form it takes – as something that precedes any subsequent epistemological assumptions. It is our lived body that establishes the frame of reference through which we take a position on the appearance-reality relationship: a relationship between what we consider "appearance" and what we regard as "real" (Taddio, 2023: 1024). In this sense, every form of appearance entails a disclosure of Being: "Vision encounters, as at a crossroads, all the aspects of Being" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a, 1964b: 188). Even hallucinations, for the subject experiencing them, remain a fact, an encountered datum, even if that experience is confined to their subjectivity. A thing appears: a phenomenon of the world emerges – whether an object, a painting, or a virtual object – based on the system of relationships involved.

   Just as water exists as such only if there is a precise relationship between hydrogen and oxygen in specific proportions – and it would be meaningless to inquire whether water, deprived of one of these elements, could still be considered as such – the same applies to the subject-world relationship. The world, in fact, is what emerges from the interaction between our physical body and the environment; therefore, it is meaningless to ask whether it could exist independently of our subjectivity. The character of the world's existence, the meaning it holds for us, can only be understood by examining the level of complexity that arises from the interaction between our body and the surrounding phenomenal environment. Similarly, we might assert that the meaning of a work of art – whatever it may be, even within a potentially infinite hermeneutic process – manifests itself through its phenomenological offering to our gaze (Figs. 1, 2, and 3).

Fig. 1 Kanizsa triangle (1980)
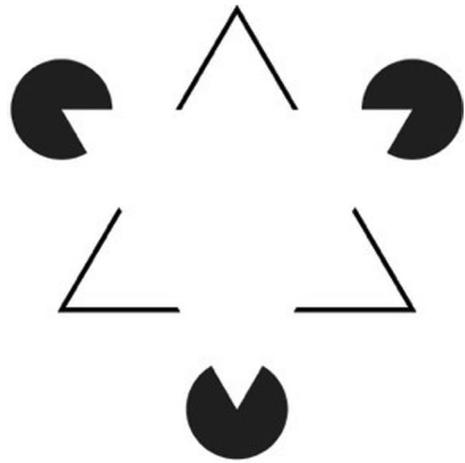
Fig. 2 Magritte, Le Jockey perdu (1948)

Fig. 3 Detail of La condition humaine, (1933)
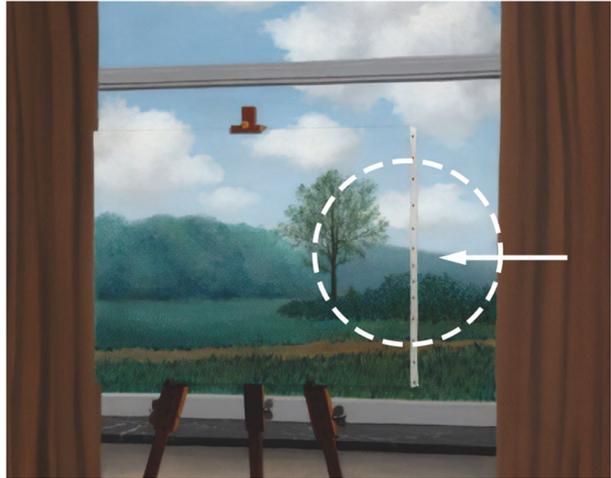
3 Amodal Completion

Consider specifically *amodal completion* (Kanizsa, 1991: 51): here, we encounter the direct and concrete perception of the invisible. In this case, we experience what Merleau-Ponty describes as the "surplus" of visibility = something visible that we can directly observe in things; this occurs, for example, when a partially occluded object is perceived as continuing behind the occlusion. This phenomenon was already noted by Wittgenstein, who states: "I see that an animal in a picture is transfixed by an arrow. It has struck it in the throat and sticks out at the back of the neck. Let the picture be a silhouette. – Do you see the arrow – or do you merely know that these two bits are supposed to represent part of an arrow?" (Wittgenstein, 2003: 173).

According to Wittgenstein, an observer looking at an image of an animal pierced by an arrow is not interpreting the scene based on what they "know" or have learned in the past; rather, they *see* the arrow piercing the figure, as shown in the silhouette below (Fig. 4). This is not a real alternative: we see an arrow piercing a body, not two separate and autonomous segments. Hypothetically, we could describe the scene in such terms, but this would

Fig. 4 Note: This data is mandatory. Please provide missing figure caption

not correspond to what we observe: thanks to amodal completion, we perceive a single arrow. Similarly, in Figs. 5 and 6, we see a single and partially hidden line. In the third case (Fig. 6), we could theoretically interpret the figure as being composed of five separate and autonomous segments. However, despite the absence of a corresponding distal stimulus, we perceive one single, continuous line that is partially obscured. If we were to adopt the concept of "sensation" as the basis for perception, we would miss its meaning. By adhering to this notion, we could never claim to see a single line. Sensation presupposes a correspondence between what we see, the proximal stimulus, and the distal stimulus. In this case, since no such correspondence exists, we should perceive five segregated and autonomous units rather than a single entity (Fig. 6).

Wittgenstein himself invites us to compare the image of the pierced animal, drawn as a silhouette, with Köhler's interpenetrating hexagons (Wittgenstein, 1980 §§ 641, 644, 645). In this example, as well, we do not see three juxtaposed areas but rather two interpenetrating hexagons.

At the core of figurative art lie not only forms of mental completion and integration (supported by imagination and fantasy) but also forms of amodal perceptual completion. Depending on the desired expressive result, a painting may exhibit factors that work in synergy or those that are in conflict with one another.

Amodal completion illustrates that visual perception operates according to rules independent of the conceptual categories of thought (Kanizsa, 1991; Metzger, 1954). While

Fig. 5 Note: This data is mandatory. Please provide missing figure caption

Fig. 6 Note: This data is mandatory. Please provide missing figure caption
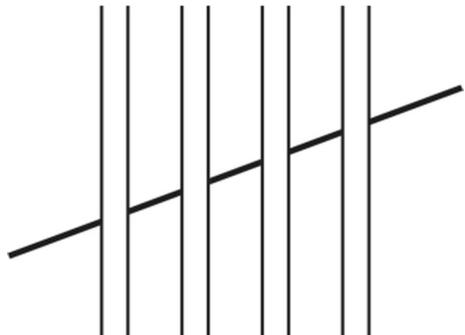
in everyday life thought and vision often overlap and cooperate in synergy, this does not imply that they are identical processes or that they follow the same "grammar" (Fig. 7).

n stark contrast to prior experience, Fig. 8 illustrates how amodal completion – given the meeting of the edges at a right angle – imposes a unified perceptual solution for the figure. It might have been more logical to perceive this figure as two distinct and partially hidden animals, rather than as the fusion of a single, nonexistent, elongated animal. However, amodal completion favors a solution that, while less intuitive on a conceptual level, proves visually effective.

Ubiquitous in both paintings and the world, amodal completion allows us to "see" the invisible (the absence of a stimulus), regulating the relationships of occlusion between objects. This type of completion is called "amodal" because it conveys a sense of "presence" even in the absence of the usual conditions for visibility.

The three figures represent three distinct modes of completion; however, only the last figure (Fig. 9c) illustrates a case of amodal completion. In the first figure, the ring is completed modally; in the second case, the completion occurs through mental integration, where the two autonomous rings can be joined through an imaginative act. The union of the two rings in the center can be imagined in various ways (cognitive integration), but we still perceive two autonomous and distinct units. In the last figure (Fig. 9c), however, unlike the previous cases, we perceive a single, partially occluded ring that maintains its own unity and phenomenal identity.

In the second figure below (Fig. 10), we see two partially occluded hexagons. We perceive them in their entirety – again, despite the absence of a complete distal stimulus – and then, separately and distinctly, we notice two small triangles on either side. In principle, we could describe these figures as they appear in the upper image, where the unifying factor of similarity leads us to group the five units into pairs. However, while this interpretation
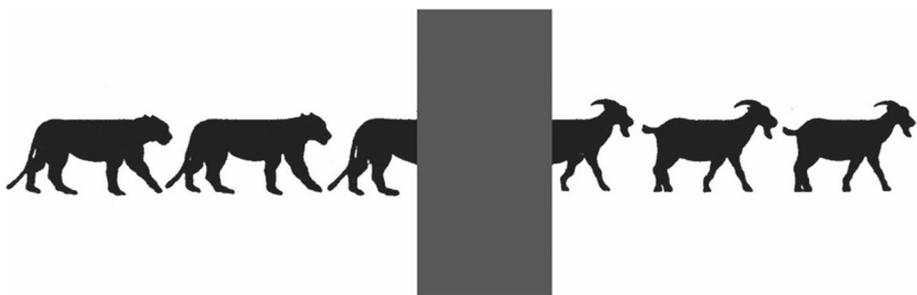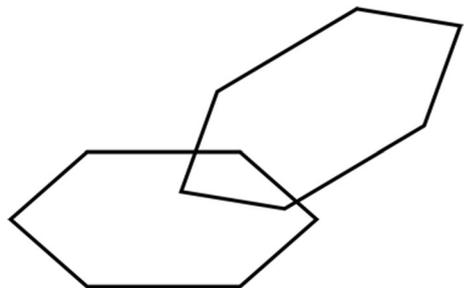
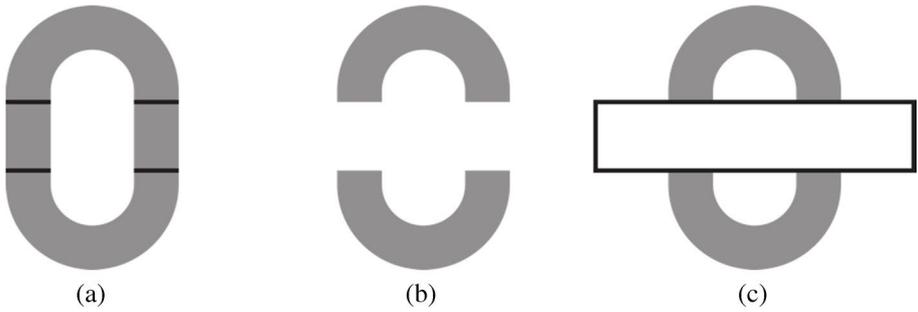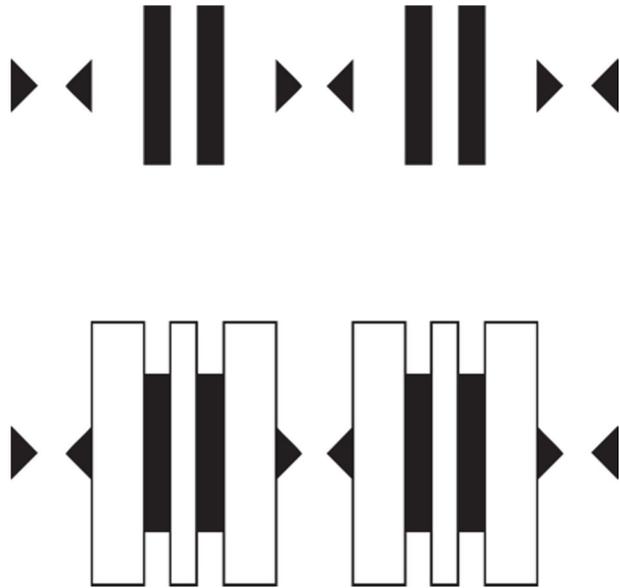**Fig. 7** (Wittgenstein, 1980: § 645)

Fig. 8 Kanizsa (1991: 74)

Fig. 9 Kanizsa (1991): Examples of modal presence (**a**), mental representation (**b**), and amodal presence (**c**)

Fig. 10 Kanizsa (1980: 56)

remains possible in the second figure, what we actually see are two partially hidden hexagons. The perceptual plane follows its own logic, resulting in self-organizing forms (*Gestalt*) within the dynamics of the perceptual field.

In *Le Blanc-seing* (1965) by Magritte (Fig. 11), we observe a lady on horseback, elegantly dressed, passing through the trees in a forest. What appears to be vegetation in the background suddenly leaps to the foreground, almost splitting the horse in two, while the tree behind which the lady passes seems to disappear at the top and bottom of the background. In this way, the painting is animated by an internal dynamic that prevents our gaze from settling into comfortable contemplation. The painting exemplifies the previously described case, as we again encounter the expressive and coercive effect determined by amodal completion. Magritte exploits the perceptual disorientation between figure and background caused by the discord between mental inference and amodal completion. We know that the woman in the painting cannot remain visible while the horse "passes behind" the tree, and yet the unity of the lady on horseback persists. The unity of the figure in the painting is visually interrupted and, at the same time, completed amodally. The
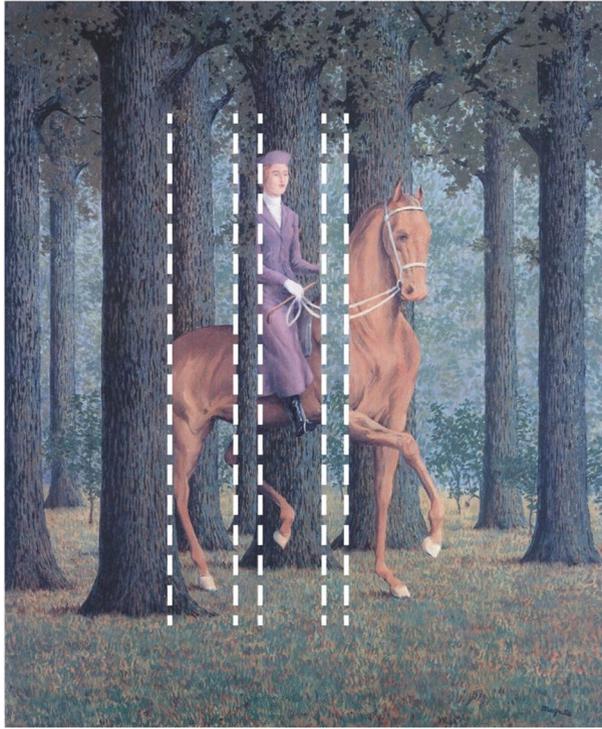
Fig. 11 Magritte, Le Blanc-seing (1965)

phenomenal unity of the image is evident in the direct experience of the painting, even as it contradicts our past experience: in no real-world scenario could we have ever encountered such a figure.

In cases of conflict between multiple factors, the perceptual aspect (i.e., the phenomenal data) often takes precedence over cognitive integration. The ease with which completion occurs in ordinary situations depends on the skill of the painter, who avoids conflicts between thought and perception. However, in some cases, the sense of ambiguity and disorientation resulting from the conflict between these two domains can be an intentional effect sought by the artist.

For example, consider the woman on horseback in the forest: her perceptual presence alternates ambiguously with the background. These instances of amodal completion suggest a degree of independence of the phenomenal data from higher cognitive activities.

The idea of a painting or a piece of music requires a perceptual dimension, involving the articulation of forms, colors, and sounds. If we have never observed Cézanne's paintings, writes Merleau-Ponty, an analysis of his work "leaves me with a choice between several possible Cézanne, and it is the sight of the pictures which provides me with the only existing Cézanne, and therein the analyses find their full meaning" (Merleau-Ponty, 2005, 174). Art not only draws from the world's meaning but also generates meaning: "It is a process of expressing" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a, 17).

Let us now examine a case of amodal completion (Fig. 12) to give tangible form to Merleau-Ponty's claim that it is the perception of the painting (for example, *La*

Fig. 12 Kanizsa (1991: 33)
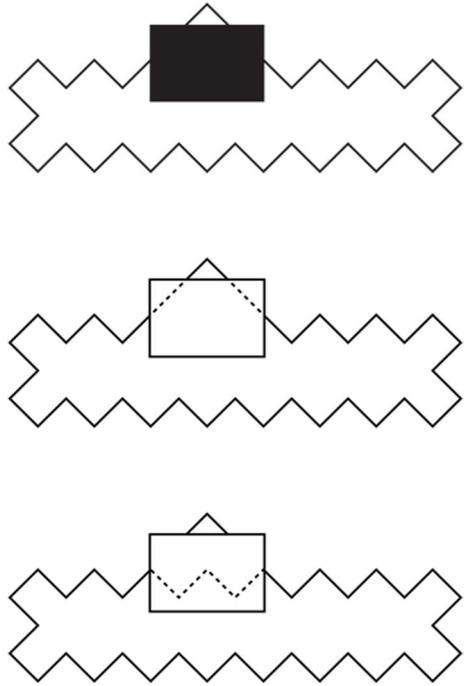
Montagne Sainte-Victoire) that offers us "the only existing Cézanne". The reference figure is the first one at the top (Fig. 12), and the task is to describe how we perceive the hidden part. The two figures below show two logically equivalent examples of how the figure could be completed; in fact, the bottom figure might seem "more logical", as it visualizes the completion – indicated by the dashed lines – following the structural coherence of the figure as a whole. However, among all possible completions, only one corresponds to the perceptual result (depicted in the middle figure). Even though we have several theoretically possible solutions, only one exists on the perceptual-phenomenal plane. Perception thus offers us "the only existing Cézanne". Perception cannot be imagined, narrated, or fully described: it must be lived and grasped *hic et nunc* (Fig. 13).

The "invisible" part, partially hidden by the rectangle, is not arbitrary. In theory, since it is invisible, we could imagine an infinite – or nearly infinite – number of logically plausible combinations. However, this is not an interpretative or imaginative activity, as it would be if we were tasked with inventing connections between the non-visible parts. Indeed, although many imaginable solutions are theoretically possible, we perceive only one, determined by the characteristics and relationships among the directly visible parts. The choice "between several possible Cézanne" disappears the moment we observe the painting, which offers us that particular view, a specific spectacle among the many possible ones.

Similar to what occurs in the electromagnetic field, invisible forces also operate in the perceptual field, determining the organization of forms. While working on the canvas, the painter plays with – or puts into play – these organizational forces, which Gestalt psychology has formalized. Cézanne's investigations reveal, "by remaining faithful to the phenomena, what recent psychologists have come to formulate" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a: 14).

Fig. 13 Cézanne, Mont Sainte-Victoire

4 Figure-Ground Relationship

The unity of an image is tied to the figure-ground relationship. This phenomenon was first analyzed by Rubin in his pioneering study in 1915 and later expanded by Koffka, who systematically integrated it into the theoretical framework of Gestalt psychology. Rubin identified several characteristics that allow us to distinguish the figure from the background: a) Unlike the background, the figure possesses a substantive, object-like quality; b) It has an epiphanic color; c) It is easier to locate spatially; d) It is more meaningful than the background, making it easier to remember.

Imagine being in a room filled with various objects scattered haphazardly. Not all them will attract your attention equally: what draws your gaze most will appear more significant, while everything else will seem less relevant. The part of the visual field that assumes this prominent configuration is the figure, while the rest of the scene becomes the background. Koffka attributes the quality of "thingness" to the figure: it has the presence and weight of "being a thing", while the rest of the scene takes on the "characteristics of a non-thing", becoming "somewhat evanescent" (Massironi, 1998: 82).

In *Eight Heads* (1922) by Escher (Fig. 14), we observe inverted faces in the background. When the painting is rotated 180 degrees, the figure-ground relationship reverses, altering the ease of recognizing the other figures as well. The figure-ground relationship is a fundamental precondition for the formation of phenomenal units. The painting aims to generate a specific expressive effect and is influenced by objective factors such as relative size, orientation, inclusion, convexity, symmetry, and articulation without residues. These expressive and compositional constraints can be used by the artist not only to assert the figure over the background but also to convey the very sense of ambiguity between the two.

As we observe the painting, we initially see only some of the heads that are actually present. The others, however, are not merely invisible; they are not even recognized as such. The difference between"objective space"(the subject of geometric investigation) and "lived space", to use Merleau-Ponty's terminology, becomes clear when we rotate a painting or photograph by 180 degrees: we do not simply see the "same thing" inverted; the meaning of the thing changes profoundly. The figure-ground relationship can be seen as a precondition for the formation of the phenomenal unity of the image. However, the question remains as to the principles by which these parts organize themselves into autonomous units.

5 Laws of Segmentation of the Visual Field

Phenomenal unity is based on principles of perceptual organization first identified by Wertheimer. These principles, which unify elements within the visual field, determine the unified constitution of an object and provide an alternative to classical atomistic associationism. This approach marked a departure from theories that regarded physical stimuli and their corresponding physiological processes as the foundation of perception, emphasizing instead a return to immediate experience. The main unifying factors are: Proximity, Similarity, Good Continuation, Closure, Structural Coherence (or Law of Prägnanz), and Past Experience. The interplay of these principles determines the force of aggregation, which can range from a maximum, corresponding to a coherent perceptual unit, to a minimum, resulting in the disintegration of the observed object.

Escher's *Metamorphosis II* (1939) offers some of the characteristics of phenomenal organization. The factor of similarity promotes a vertical perceptual reading: when isolating two columns of the figure, this factor becomes predominant. However, within the overall configuration, another perceptual principle emerges: directionality. Due to the figure-ground ambiguity, the factors of directional continuity, similarity, and common fate are reversed, enabling a dual horizontal reading: from left to right and from right to left (Fig. 15).

The presence of "structural invariants" favors a specific perceptual outcome. These aspects of the visible, such as principles of unification, emerge through observation and experimentation in the world and are always intersubjectively shareable. Painters use these principles as mechanisms governing the appearance of figures. The painter explores, experiments, and discovers worlds whose possibilities are already intrinsically contained within visual perception. The image, as such, is always a phenomenal image. When we depart from the modalities and rules of appearance to which we are accustomed – such as in Escher's paintings – an ambiguous situation appears. This effect may
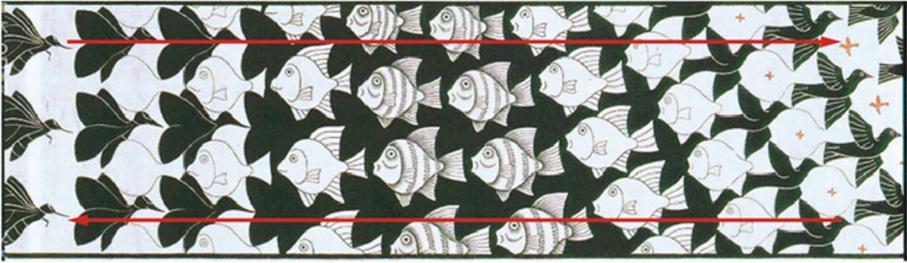
Fig. 15 Escher, Metamorphosis II, (1939)

be deliberately sought, following the internal rules of visibility. Wertheimer's principles can be identified both in things and in their representations, and they do not depend on our subjective disposition. In a visually complex context, such as observing a painting, various factors contribute to define the figurative units present in the artwork. In an experimental context, however, the structure is minimized to isolate the active factors or to determine the degree of their intensity when contrasted with one another (Fig. 16). This approach allows for the identification of the dominant factor, the one that most significantly determine the unity of the figure (Figs. 17, 18, and 19).

In Magritte's work *L'idée* (1966), the torso of a man and an apple can be interpreted as a unit – a man – but this solution pertains more to the conceptual plane than to the perceptual one. However, the unity of the image is still supported by the continuity of direction along the vertical axis: if the apple were entirely shifted to the right or left of the composition, the two figures would appear autonomous. The torso and the apple incline toward unity, encouraging us to see and interpret them as a man. This solution, however, becomes more challenging in *Le pèlerin* (1966), where the face is displaced to the left of the body. In this case, the hat seems to fall downward, favoring a vertical reading, while the face shifts horizontally, presenting itself to the viewer as a "missing part". Conversely, in *Paysage de Baucis* (1966), the eyes, nose, and mouth appear as a unit weakly connected to the man's face, as they are masked by the homogeneity of the background, without the closure factor of the face.
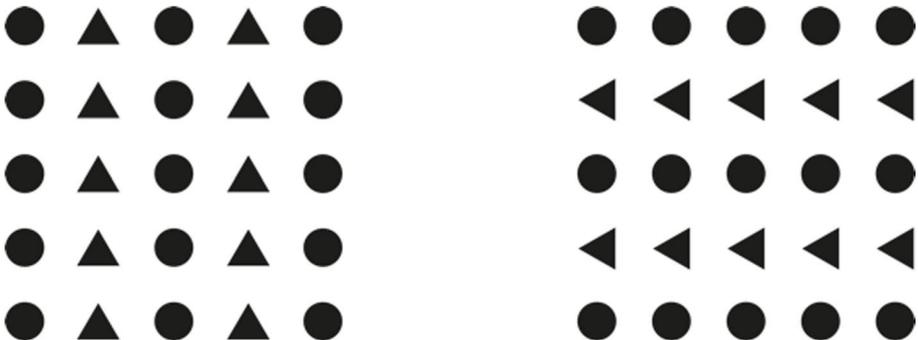
Now, let us compare the two rows of points a) and b):

Fig. 16 The Law of Similarity

Fig. 17 L'idée (1966)

Let us examine the principle of "proximity". In both rows, we see a sequence of nine dots. However, the two rows appear different: the second row (*b*) appears as four pairs of dots with a single isolated dot, whereas the first row (*a*) cannot be perceived in the same way. Alternative interpretations are possible: for instance, three groups of three dots or two groups of four dots plus one. These interpretations can also be extended to the second row, but in doing so, the notion of a "series" loses its meaning. Interpreting row *b* as four pairs of dots plus one makes sense visually but cannot be applied to the first row. We perceive a plurality of dots distributed in space according to defined distances. By shortening or lengthening the distance between the dots, we can form pairs or other discrete units of dots. As Wertheimer states, the smaller the distance between the dots, the stronger their perceptual grouping.

The unity of the observed object can be achieved solely through variations in the proximity relationships among the dots (Fig. 20). The principle of proximity is characterized by the segregation of minimal elements, establishing perceptual contiguity between them. Proximity has been isolated and described in its essential functions in experimental contexts. However, during our observation of the world, it becomes more challenging to recognize the modes of unification, as multiple factors act and cooperate simultaneously (Fig. 21).
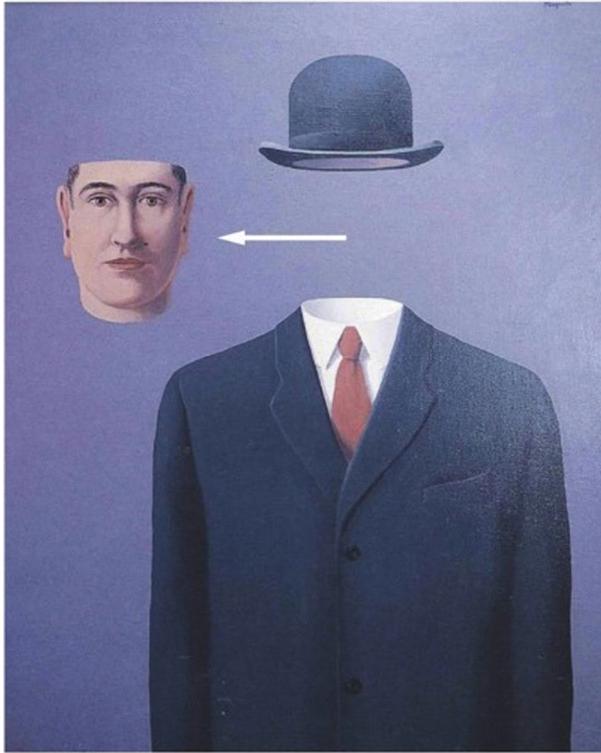
Fig. 18 Le pèlerin (1966)

6 Transparency

Transparency can also be classified as a case of anomalous surface. Consider how the transparency of water droplets (Fig. 22) is depicted in Magritte's painting *L'abandon* (1929). A physical description of the object's stimulus fails to explain what we actually see: only a phenomenological description captures the meaning of the painting. We see droplets, their transparency, and so forth. The sense of this experience can be coherently expressed only from a phenomenological standpoint, through our immediate experience of the observed object. In contrast, a physical-material description would identify several opaque, adjacent areas but would fail to grasp the meaning and unity of the represented object. One might argue that the image is not truly transparent, since it physically consists only of opaque areas; however, we *do* perceive transparency: "A painter cannot grant that our openness to the world is illusory" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a, 1964b: 186). Painting is not an illusion unless the world itself is also an illusion – both belong to the same "flesh".

To deny transparency simply because we know the object is solid and opaque implies the "*stimulus error*": confusing the plane of immediate experience with what we know about it (Köhler, 1929). This becomes evident when maintaining the proper viewing distance imposed by the painting itself. To observe it well, we must position ourselves neither too far nor too close. If we get too close, we might notice details such as the materiality of the paint and the canvas, but lose the overall sense of the work.

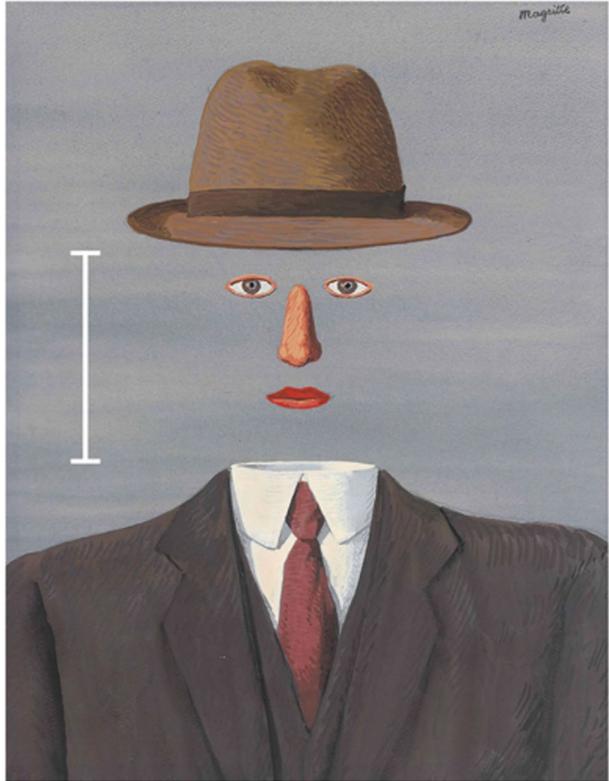**Fig. 19** Paysage de Baucis (1966)

Fig. 20 Wertheimer (1923): Principle of Proximity

The material transparency of an object is therefore not a necessary condition for the perception of transparency. Objects, like painted figures, appear according to specific modes of appearance, which are the factors (or "phenomenal invariants") required for the image and objects to appear transparent. Consider the following example (Kanizsa, 1980: 239):
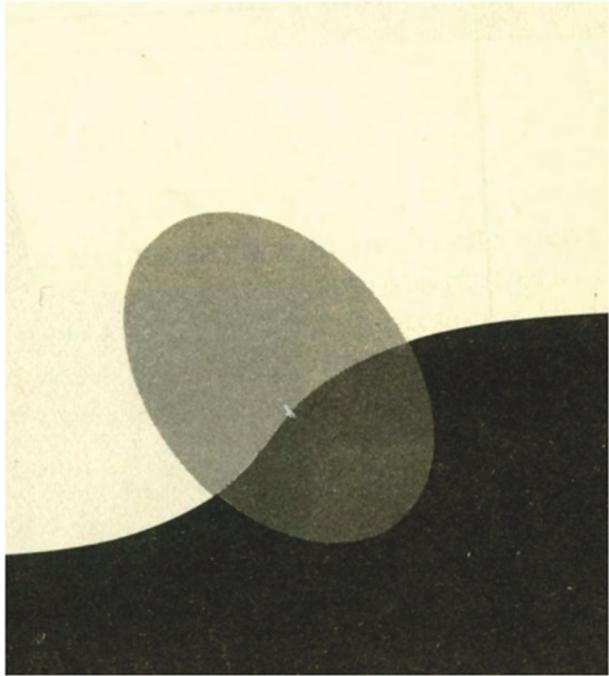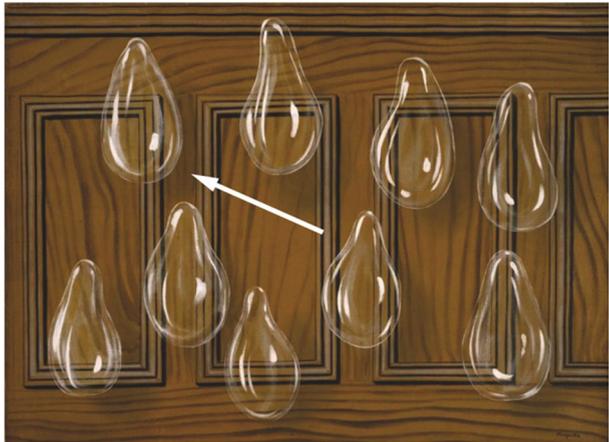
Fig. 21 Kanizsa (1980: 239)

Fig. 22 Magritte, L'abandon (1929)

in Fig. 21, the topological and figural conditions work together to create the effect of transparency.

In this figure, we can highlight the minimal conditions required for the phenomenon of transparency to be visible. Kanizsa identified three factors that determine the perception of transparency: a) topological factors, b) figural factors, and c) chromatic factors. These conditions must be met for transparency to emerge. In particular, the figural conditions of transparency must be perceived globally, in relation to the whole. These characteristics cannot be reduced to mere physical stimulation: the phenomenal areas present in the figure are two,

not three. The elliptical shape is perceived, according to the Gestalt concept of "good form", as a unified entity and is thus seen as transparent. Transparency is not a result of our past experience: we do not learn to see, at most we learn to look; consequently, we do not learn to perceive transparency. Rather, it is a phenomenally explicit fact, observed whenever the same conditions are present. The meaning of the depiction is given on the phenomenological plane and is part of the immediate experience of the external world. From a "physical" perspective (that of the physical stimulus), there is no transparency. However, it does not imply a dichotomy between physical reality and the phenomenal world. We cannot transcend our immediate experience in any way. The mode of appearance of things – the way we encounter a given phenomenon – determines their "degree of reality".

Although transparency is usually understood as a physical property of certain bodies, this usage is confined to physics and does not encompass the immediate experience of things. The meaning of the image must therefore be understood as a phenomenally explicit whole, whose properties are not reducible to its individual parts or distal stimuli. The unity of the figure must be embraced as it appears in immediate experience, independent of its physical correspondence to the object.

7 Depth

"Depth (…) is my participation in a Being without restriction, and primarily in the Being of space beyond every (particular) point of view" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a, 1964b: 173). Pictorial art is a "system of equivalences" internal to appearance; it is the phenomenon itself, together with the rules of its manifestation, that we share with the world. The meaning of this participation in the visible does not vanish within the image but emerges through it. The painter brings forth from the "raw material" of the canvas and colors "things, phenomena, in painting". In this niche of the phenomenal world, which we call "representation", we rediscover the sense of reversibility between our perception and the world, and vice versa: that sense of Being that Merleau-Ponty calls "flesh". "It is hence because of depth that things have a flesh" (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 219), encompassing both our vision and the thing in the same Being. The sense of depth in the painting acts as a "system of equivalences" with the world, a form of reversibility where the phenomenon is simultaneously world and painting. Depth is not merely another spatial dimension; for Merleau-Ponty, it is the primordial abyss from which all other dimensions derive: "Depth thus understood is, rather, the experience of the reversibility of dimensions, of a global 'locality' – everything in the same place at the same time, a locality from which height, width, and distance are abstracted, of a voluminosity we express in a word when we say that a thing is there. In search of depth Cézanne seeks this deflagration of Being, and it is all in the modes of space, in form as much as anything" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a, 1964b: 180).

By "system of equivalences", we mean that within the condition of the phenomenon's appearance, both the appearance of the world and its representation are inscribed. This allows the figure to also serve as an auxiliary function, referring to something else – that is, "resembling" something.

The sense of depth is embedded in phenomenal perception and depends on spatial depth cues and the three-dimensionality of the perspectival system. In this system, the relative size of objects, linear and aerial perspective, and texture gradients are elements that allow

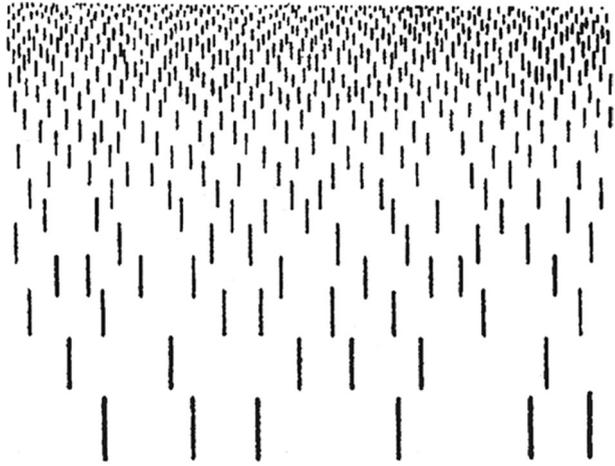**Fig. 23** Gibson (1986): Example of texture gradient

Fig. 24 Golconde (1953)

figures and objects to occupy a position both in the depth of the world and in the depth of the painting.

The texture of things, as it progressively becomes denser, suggests a gradual sense of distance, as seen in the plane of the figure where the vertical segments extend into depth (Fig. 23). The gradient represents how the texture of the surface appears and underpins both the appearance of the world and pictorial representation. It is defined by the following parameters: size, shape, and spacing, which together constitute the pattern of the texture.

In the painting *Golconde*, Magritte multiplies the figure of the man in a bowler hat across the entire surface of the work. The background consists of rooftops and a blue sky. In this simple scene, the silhouettes, all identical except for their size, appear to fall from the sky like raindrops. The "spectacle" unveiled by Magritte implicitly employs the "texture gradient" as a system of equivalence (Fig. 24).

We use the concept of "phenomenal invariants" to refer to the relationship between dependent and independent variables – that is, the conditions that experimental phenomenology has identified as the prerequisites for the appearance of a given phenomenon. These conditions

belong to the plane of direct observation. By "phenomenal invariants", we also mean what is common to both the representation and the thing represented. The painter works through these invariants, consciously or not, assessing the explicit result of their work as it takes shape. Their creativity is not constrained by preexisting laws, except insofar as achieving a specific expressive effect. The modalities of perception employed by the artist determine that particular perceptual outcome, whether it involves digital images or oil paints on canvas. In this sense, the type of medium is not decisive. Thus, the conditions of pictorial representation can be described on the basis of the phenomenal characteristics of the image as it appears, identifying them according to the same visibility criteria that govern ordinary perception. The "monocular depth cues" (perspective, occlusion, texture gradients, elevation relative to the horizon, relative size, and shading) allow us to perceive the spatiality of natural scenes. Similarly, these cues can generate an impression of spatiality in pictorial images as well.

Since the appearance of a thing must be embraced according to its modalities, the empirical-phenomenological plane is the only one where all the qualities of a thing (primary, secondary, and tertiary) are co-planar. It is only at this level of complexity that we find not only the meaning of the world but also that of pictorial representations – a level of analysis that cannot be reduced to the brain activity underlying immediate experience. The modalities of appearance can be controlled at the observational level. The conditions for the emergence of each factor – figure-ground, principles of unification, depth, and transparency – are, as Merleau-Ponty defines them, "branches of Being" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a, 1964b: 188) and can be grasped by identifying the variables that perceptually compose the structure of the event.

8 Doing Things with Phenomena

Consider this example from Putnam: "An ant is crawling on a patch of sand. As it crawls, it traces a line in the sand. By pure chance, the line that it traces curves and recrosses itself in such a way that it ends up looking like a recognizable caricature of Winston Churchill. Has the ant traced a picture of Winston Churchill, a picture that depicts Churchill?" (Putnam, 1981: 7). The role of intentionality, while significant, does not constitute the core of pictorial representation. When standing before a painting, we may attempt to reconstruct the original intentions of the painter, the content they wished to convey. However, that dimension is irretrievably lost, and the artwork itself remains as its only testimony (Fig. 25).

These figures illustrate how three "scribbles" transform into birds when specific parts are added under the following conditions: a) the distance and relative position between the circle and the triangle must remain unchanged; b) the triangle must touch a portion of the figure's perimeter with one side but always remain outside the figure; c) the circle must remain entirely within the figure without touching its perimeter (Massironi, 1998: 114). By modifying the figure, various expressions (*affordances*) and a range of possible interpretations are generated. Simply altering the position of the triangle and the circle restructures the meaning of the image: the animal appears to look in different directions, and the figure itself seems completely transformed. Returning to Putnam's example, we can say that if the ant had traced different lines, we would not have seen Churchill's face. Similarly, we might recognize the profiles of animals while observing clouds, but these profiles disappear as soon as the wind – devoid of any intention – changes their shape.

Fig. 25 Manfredo Massironi
(1998: 114)
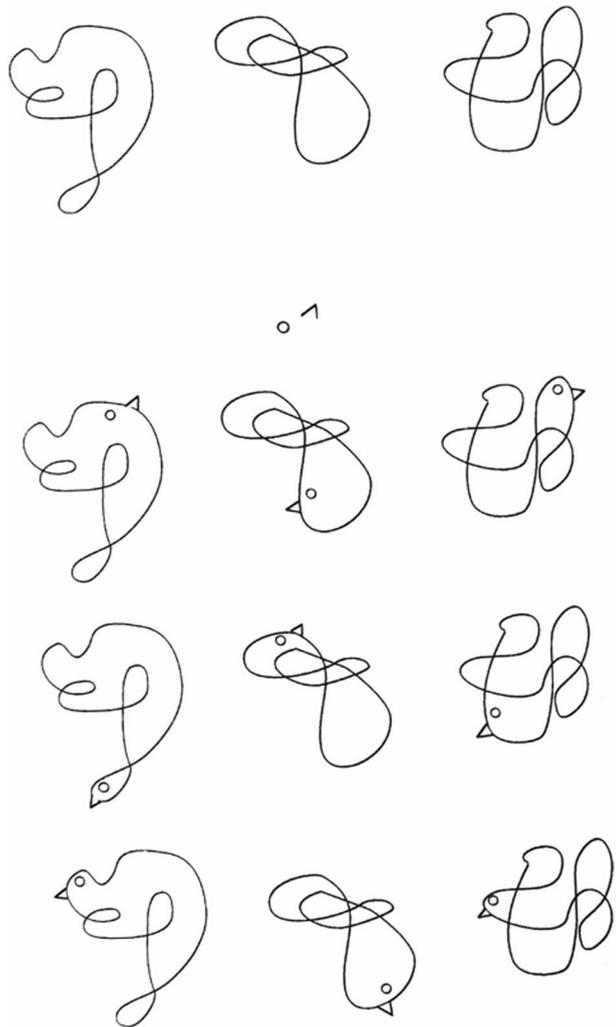
One might assume that an image truly exists only when those marks are recognized as the representation of something – that is, when we understand what they depict. From Goodman's perspective (1976), this recognition occurs solely through the assimilation of codes and linguistic schemas that allow us to interpret the image as a representation of an object. Following Merleau-Ponty's attempt to grasp the "primordial experience" means situating oneself within a dimension that precedes language, schemas, and cognitive codes: "Cézanne's difficulties are those of the first word" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a: 19). Creating images means establishing new relationships, combinations, and expressions through the modalities (i.e., the factors identified by experimental phenomenology) that determine phenomenal appearance. This process involves implicitly working with the nature of visual perception – that is, with the full range of factors that regulate its emergence.

An image becomes similar when the artist discovers expressive conditions akin to the object, conveying an invariant core of phenomenological origin. Even though we can freely create figures in different possible worlds, the phenomenon must conform to the principles of

phenomenal appearance to manifest as "such and such". Thus, we can identify a precondition for pictorial representation. An image is tied to visibility in both its production and its reception: the ability to produce and perceive images is inherent in the rules of visibility. Within this framework the "*chiasm*" between our corporeality and the world becomes apparent. Every relationship we establish with an image is indirect: "Resemblance is the result of perception, not its mainspring" (Merleau-Ponty: 171). The image's relationship with the world and its resemblance to it are intrinsic possibilities of the image, embedded in the modes of its appearance.

"It is an image only as long as it does not resemble its object" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a, 1964b: 170). Resemblance is neither a geometric fact nor a matter of correspondence; it is an expressive phenomenon. The nature of representation does not lie in resemblance, nor, as Goodman argued, in denotation. Rather, the representation of a thing replaces the thing itself in the sense that it recreates it: the image participates in the same rules of "givenness" as the object. The painter plays, experiments, and discovers phenomenal worlds whose possibilities are already intrinsically contained within perception. By employing the same phenomenal invariants that govern ordinary perception, the painter operates within the infinite horizon of possibilities of the visible.

Even within a new semantic framework, representation retains the intersubjective and ostensible character of any ordinary phenomenal datum of perception.

Every phenomenal aspect is determined by specific factors: the image constructed by the painter is aimed at optimizing a particular expressive effect and is therefore constrained by factors that phenomenally determine the result. For instance, the ambiguity effect in Escher's *Eight Heads* is bound by the modes of appearance of the phenomenon. These rules do not act as creative limitations but serve as the means through which the creative act manifests itself: the idea emerges through the modalities of phenomenal givenness, as if the painter were "immersing their hands" in the phenomenon, shaping and animating things through this manipulative gesture. Each artistic technique, in its specificity, engages the conditions of the phenomenal appearance of the object itself. Photography, cinema, and painting bring forth the phenomenon of the "thing" based on the same conditions of appearance, and the object "embodies" the nature of these conditions.

In summary: pictorial representation is defined by the same factors of phenomenal organization found in every other aspect of common perceptual experience. The configuration of marks produced by the artist involves playing with the very modalities of perception. The relationship between the subject, the painting, and the world is indirect: the image emerges from the same organizational modalities of the visible. The painter, Merleau-Ponty states, "while he is painting practices a magical theory of vision" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a, 1964b: 166), discovering through doing: in his very practice, he engages with phenomena to create. This creative "magic", this process of making, enables the painter to bring forth worlds imbued with meaning – traces of our subjectivity and the historicity of a lived consciousness embedded in a "system of equivalences, (…) a concept-less presentation of universal Being" (Ibid.: 182).

We do not look at a painting as we normally would at an object, fixing it in a defined place. When observing a painting, our gaze roams within it, as if in the "halos of Being. Rather than seeing the painting, I see according to it or with it" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a, 1964b: 164). Painters, through their works, teach us how to practice our gaze, to observe the world: "his vision in any event learns only by seeing and learns only from itself" (Ibid.: 165). They embody the reversibility of "flesh", that sense we find in the world as a mirror of our form of life. Painters evoke it through their corporeality: painting offers us a primordial world, a chiasm of soul and body. "There is no vision without thought. But it is not enough to think in order to see. Vision is a conditioned thought; it is born 'as occasioned' by what happens in the body; it is 'incited' to think by the body" (Ibid.: 175). The intertwining of visible and invisible, the becoming of Mont Sainte-Victoire, is revealed through Cézanne's painting as the "flesh" of Being. The concept of

"flesh" indicates how the thing, the entire range of its appearances, the subject, and its multiple gazes all belong to and intertwine within the same Being.

We can thus return to *Eye and Mind* and the question we posed initially: "What, then, is this secret science which he has or which he seeks?" The answer lies in perception. Perception represents a significant point of intersection between art and science. The different ways of conceiving perception also influence how we investigate the nature of pictorial representation. Painted objects, like those we encounter in the world, are perceived based on their modes of appearance: both are situated within the world of experience, aligned with our form of life and our *world-image apparatus*. In both cases, whether in perception or in art, the same functional relationships (conditions of appearance) apply; we never transcend the plane of empirical-phenomenological experience.

Even from an evolutionary perspective, we are the result of the interaction between our body and the surrounding physical reality, to which we have adapted. In this sense, there will be as many worlds as there are forms of life: the world is the experiential correlate of each form of life, and each is rooted and intertwined with the same reality. As we have sought to demonstrate, worlds can be understood as planes of emergence resulting from the interaction between the "lived body" and the surrounding physical environment. The body, in this sense, is a perceptual system. Merleau-Ponty compared the pictorial work to the "lived body", as neither can be reduced to the description of the underlying physical reality. Since Cézanne, pictorial art has aimed to reveal new worlds, new virtualities of Being through the multiplication of systems of equivalence (Ibid.: 182). Just as the meaning of an image does not coincide with the description of its physical medium, our lived experiences of consciousness (mental experiences) are not reducible to the brain. The full expressiveness and meaning that things hold for us – their condition or field of existence – unfold in the phenomenologically understood world, while painting "contributes to the definition of our access to Being" (Ibid.: 171).

Data Availability No datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

Declarations

Competing interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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