

# ***Transitions from Seeing to Thinking: On the Relation of Perception, Worldview and World-Disclosure\****

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ABSTRACT. The difficulties in determining exactly where seeing stops and where thinking begins are symptomatic of a problem. If someone notices something in someone else, they are not decoding sensory signs, but they are seeing and understanding at the same time. Nonetheless, this understanding is still a kind of seeing and not of hearing or imagining. In order to explain this state of affairs one has to assume that vision and understanding form a unit that can impossibly be taken to be merely metaphorical, but, rather, is to be taken quite literally.

## ***I. Introduction***

In contrast to other sensory abilities, a specific characteristic of the faculty of seeing is its closeness to processes of understanding, thinking and interpreting. Very often it is hard to say precisely what is sensory about seeing. When does noticing become judging or what are the limits of perception? Seeing is a Janus-faced activity between consciousness and the world that is open to both sides. This brings about a double difficulty of determining this relation: One issue is determining the relation of mind to nature, another determining the relation of mind to world. On the one hand, explaining how retinal and neuronal activity can become a way of hermeneutic world-disclosure is problematic. On the other, the question

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arises how much of the mind, respectively the world, a perception contains.

In what follows, I will not be concerned with the emergence of meaning from the corporality of seeing. Rather, I will be concerned with the relations of seeing internal to consciousness and their influence on external relations of reference to the world. In so doing I am not concerned merely with thinking in the narrow sense, but with the involvement of mental processes in sensory perception in general, be these attributable to memory, fantasy or the faculty of judgement. In all cases, something in the process of seeing goes beyond seeing.

For example, in order to see that my child is pleased or is not feeling well, it is not sufficient to assert what can be sensorily discerned. At the same time, however, I am dealing with a genuine form of seeing and not with hearing or dreaming. The child's happy demeanour or the frown on its face are sensorily perceptible properties of its visibility. It is impossible to recognize them without eyes. Such seeing literally, and not merely metaphorically, has features of understanding. I will conclude my paper with reflections on what, following Hans Blumenberg, may be termed the *absolute metaphor of seeing*.

Before going on, however, I want to take recourse to two central positions of 20th century philosophy.<sup>1</sup> By way of doing so, I argue that the relation between the visual and the mental is that of a complex network of interrelations inseparable in practice. Only in theoretical description do they come apart. Ludwig Wittgenstein and Martin Heidegger, to a large extent, arrive at similar conclusions in stating what a meaningful use of the term 'seeing' can be.

Separating processes of visual perception into a physiological and a mental level loses sight of the fact that the responsiveness and the interpretive nature of seeing in reality form a unit. This double sense cannot be grasped by concepts hermetically sealed off from one another, but only by mutually permeable transitions. An irreducible problem here is, of course, that one has to make use of the dualisms, even if one wants to argue for their inseparability. The dichotomies cannot be denied without, at the

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<sup>1</sup> On the systematic agreement between both thinkers despite different points of view cf. the comparison by Thomas Rentsch: *Heidegger und Wittgenstein*. Stuttgart 2003.

same time, presupposing them. Like the relation between mind and brain, the relation between the sensory nature of seeing and the sense it makes is marked by a tension that cannot be relieved by rubricating or hierarchising models of thought. Therefore the gap between the sensible and the sensory nature of seeing has to be bridged by maintaining it, i.e. showing up the interplay of the visual and the mental, while respecting their difference.

Seeing that my child is happy cannot be seen in the same way that one sees that it is wearing black trousers. The presence of something black in the sense of a phenomenon with a certain wavelength could be determined by a device for gauging colour. Being happy, however, could hardly be technically determined. So even if noting the trousers' colour can be taken, for the most part, as an unproblematic case of assertive seeing (without calling into doubt the possibility of such a thing), it is still not possible to thus explain all perception. What is still needed is an exploration of the transitional forms of further world-disclosure.

## ***II. Seeing and Ways of Seeing***

The close, at times inseparable, connection between seeing and thinking is intimately linked to the nature of seeing as a performative execution and its transformative capacities. As a performative practice, seeing is an activity situated in socio-historical and cultural contexts. It is an activity of determining as well as being determined and, as such, is neither purely receptive nor purely constructionist. Here perceptions are always accompanied by certain modal qualities: A certain way of seeing that is formed under the influence of what is present as well as of what is absent, for instance, in the form of expectations or memories. This makes seeing a feat of culturally and historically formed articulation. In individual cases the possibilities of perceptually disclosing the world are connected to a disposition specific to the person seeing. In supra-individual cases, it is the context of a practice that regulates what and how it can be perceived. What one might call a *worldview* of seeing is noticeable in the transitions from seeing to ways of seeing and, conversely, in the dependence of the former on normative presumptions and evaluative attitudes.

If, for example, in the 1930ies the sight of a woman smoking in public was seen as a repulsive common annoyance<sup>2</sup>, comparable only to the sight of someone picking their teeth, this not merely bears witness to the curious attitudes of the times, but it is evidence of how closely seeing is linked to ways of seeing.

What I have characterised as a movement beyond seeing in the process of seeing can also be described as a problem of the visible and the invisible. Instead of speaking of the invisible that, to some ears, might sound suspiciously metaphysical, one could also speak of ‘nonactual perceptions’, as does Strawson when describing the involvement of imagination in perception.<sup>3</sup> What is meant is that not only what is present is seen, but that a perception is linked to things already seen, that one is used to, that are remembered, desired or believed. In its sustained connection to the mental, seeing refers not only to things spatiotemporally present, but also to things sensorily absent.

Already simple experiments in the psychology of perception show that a faculty of imagination must be assumed to be involved in seeing, for instance, in order to explain the completion of incomplete visual input. The higher the degree of imaginativeness in an individual act of perception, the easier it is to see how right Kant was to count imagination as a “necessary ingredient of perception itself”.<sup>4</sup> If things imagined, expected, completed or interpreted affect the practice of perceiving, this means that something not present — i.e. something invisible — is mixed into the visible. Finding that seeing happens amidst the intertwinement of the sensory and the mental, between the actual and the latent, leads to a concept of the invisible containing all that seeing owes to other feats of consciousness, such as expecting and remembering, further to what is added in interpreting, desiring and believing. Just as pauses in music have a tonal value and become perceptible in contrast to notes, the invisible is mixed into the visible. Like a letter that conceals by omitting something and just like this omission can

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<sup>2</sup> H. Cason: Common annoyances: “A psychological study of every-day aversions and irritations” in: *Psychological Monographs* 40 (1930), 2. 1-218.

<sup>3</sup> P. F. Strawson: Imagination and Perception. In: L. Foster et al. (eds.): *Experience and theory*. Amherst, Mass. 1970. 41.

<sup>4</sup> I. Kant: *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith. London 1933. A120, fn.a.

be pregnant, the absent is there in what is present.

What Wittgenstein has described as ‘form of life’ and ‘worldview’, that which is unquestionably given in a cultural and linguistic community and has to be accepted, which “beyond being justified or unjustified”<sup>5</sup> is taken as clearly identified and certain, has an effect not only on language use, but also on a time’s possible perceptions and its horizon of interpretation. The totality of effective norms and dominant beliefs, customs, habits and moral ideals that characterise the practices of a culture and society form its worldview in the sense of “a system of what is believed”.<sup>6</sup> To my mind, there is nothing to be said in favour of restricting the influence of these factors to language and communication. It would be hard to explain how forms of life and worldviews can influence language use, but, at the same time, have no influence on what and how it can become visible and be seen.<sup>7</sup> The habits of perception established by worldviews and forms of life open up and obscure the relation between people seeing and the visible in a fundamental and supra-individual way. That is, neither aesthetic freedom nor moral obligation could be merely subjectively constructed affairs. Rather, they are fundamentally conditioned by the horizon of interpretation.

Worldviews in the sense of a normative background to speaking, perceiving and acting are, at the same time, preconditions and products of perceptual world-disclosure. Instead of worldviews one could also speak of *Weltanschauungen*, that are present in the attitudes, behaviour and normative orientation of a cultural community. In any case, we are dealing with evaluative presumptions that are often fiercely contested and preform sight before it is directed towards the world. As such, they are conditions of the possibility of creative as well as conventional world-disclosure.

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<sup>5</sup> L. Wittgenstein: *On Certainty*, trans. Denis Paul and G.E.M. Anscombe. Malden et al. 1975. § 359.

<sup>6</sup> § 144.

<sup>7</sup> On the interdependence of the linguistic and the non-linguistic in action-contexts cf. Joachim Schulte: “Die Hinnahme von Sprachspielen und Lebensformen” in: W. Lütterfels u.a. (ed.): *Der Konflikt der Lebensformen in Wittgensteins Philosophie der Sprache*. Frankfurt a. M. 1999. 156-170.

### **III. Wittgenstein on Aspect Seeing**

By means of the oft-cited figure the contours of which can be alternately seen either as a rabbit or a duck.<sup>8</sup> Wittgenstein described aspect seeing, which he characterised as „half visual experience, half thought“.<sup>9</sup> Aspect seeing is a semantic seeing-as; here I see something-as-something, i.e. the figure as a rabbit, respectively a duck. I do not simply read both meanings into the figure in the way that I can read maps into clouds. After all, I cannot perceive the figure as something amorphous without seeing either the one or the other shape in it. Much rather, there are two ways of seeing the picture: duck or rabbit. This amphibology and the oscillation from one to the other is constitutive of aspect seeing. As such, it exhibits a notable similarity to representational seeing. If one sees something represented in a representation, let's say, Greta Garbo as Mata Hari, seeing hangs in the same kind of balance that is also characteristic of aspect seeing. My visual impression does not change, my outlook, however, does.

Therefore picture puzzles are interesting not only for experiments in the psychology of perception, but also revealing of the relation between seeing and interpreting, perceiving and imagining. As Wittgenstein puts the question: “Do I really see something different each time, or do I only interpret what I see in a different way? I am inclined to say the former. But why?”<sup>10</sup> Wittgenstein is obviously not sure here, for if he is inclined to say that he really sees something different each time, seeing, too, must be a kind of acting, specifically a kind of acting in which the attribution of a meaning is intertwined with the visual impression. For the act of attribution is not a process distinguishable from perception. This, however, would be necessary in order to distinguish a discrete perceptual state from an inferential operation of thought. As such, aspect seeing is a good ex-

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<sup>8</sup> Wittgenstein knew this figure from the work of the American psychologist Joseph Jastrow who first published his ideas on it as early as 1899. The picture puzzle was first printed in the weekly periodical *Fliegende Blätter* (cf. J. F. Kihlstrom: “Joseph Jastrow and His Duck — Or Is It a Rabbit?” at: <http://listsocrates.berkeley.edu/~jastrowDuck.htm>; last updated 13.04.06, download on 07.06.06).

<sup>9</sup> L. Wittgenstein: *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe. Malden et al. 2001. Part II, 168

<sup>10</sup> 181

ample of the inseparability of perception and the act of making sense of it. Whether I see the contours of the figure as the shape of a duck or a rabbit is not a question of ex post judgement, but in visual apprehension the impression of the respective shape is given. In this respect, too, it is similar to representational seeing.<sup>11</sup> We „see it as we *interpret* it“.<sup>12</sup>

Also the context-dependence of seeing is brought out by the duck-rabbit example: If one sees the picture for the first time in a sequence of other pictures of rabbits, it is difficult to see the duck, because one expects further rabbits in the context of what one has seen so far. In this regard, the example saliently clarifies what seeing actually is, i.e. taking perspectives from which something appears as x and not as y. It can be assumed that in almost all cases of seeing, one would have multiple options. Things have and occasion different views. What they are and what they are not is necessarily rooted in a perspective and is dependent on an outlook. How they seem to us is by no means a necessarily deceptive appearance, but an in itself justified and irreducible way of their appearing perspectively. Of course, they never appear in their totality, but always only as aspects of what they could have been.

In contrast to arbitrarily many ways of seeing, duck and rabbit are equally given possible ways of seeing and, as such, are not arbitrary. This is further corroborated by the fact that what would, in the case of the rabbit aspect, be made out as the mouth region, that little irregularity in the contour, is an important detail despite its seeming irrelevance for the duck aspect. Without this detail, it would be very difficult to see the rabbit in the picture of the duck. This underlines the characteristic power of evocation by which the visible conditions its perception.

By searching for a criterion of what one might call ‘actual seeing’ Wittgenstein reaches the limits of language use: “‘But this isn’t *seeing*!’ — ‘But this is seeing!’ — It must be possible to give both remarks a conceptual justification. [...] In what sense is it seeing?”<sup>13</sup> The difficulties are those of the theoretical and analytical language of description. In order to describe this form of seeing-as one has to presuppose a primitive level of sensory perception, even if the point of aspect seeing is that the visual and the

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<sup>11</sup> See Richard Wollheim: *Art and its Objects*. Cambridge University Press 1980.

<sup>12</sup> *Philosophical Investigations* 165.

<sup>13</sup> 173-74.

mental do not exist in isolation. They are separate and not separate. They have to be separate because one can generally distinguish acts of responsive acknowledgement from acts of drawing logical inferences or acts of narrative interpretation. But, at the same time, they have to be indistinct because it is not raw sensory material that I perceive. Rather, I already have a meaningfully structured perception.

The constitutive closeness of seeing and understanding has also been called the *theory-ladenness* of visual perception. What is meant is the inclination of the perceiver to see according to theoretical insights and convictions.<sup>14</sup>

Ludwik Fleck's early investigation of thought-styles as preparedness for directed perception<sup>15</sup> is foundational in this regard. Wittgenstein uses the term 'thought-style' ("Denkstil")<sup>16</sup> in a similar manner, as a method of examination and justification<sup>17</sup> that begins with a way of seeing.<sup>18</sup> Thomas Kuhn has characterised abrupt paradigm changes in the history of science as a kind of seeing-as. After a scientific revolution the world is seen 'as something else'. "What were ducks in the scientist's world before the revolution are rabbits afterwards."<sup>19</sup> Accordingly, seeing something differently, in this context, is seeing it in the frame of a different theory.

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<sup>14</sup> John Rajchman splendidly demonstrated this connectedness in Foucault's philosophy: Foucaults Kunst des Sehens. In: *Imagineering: Visuelle Kultur und Politik der Sichtbarkeit*. Ed. by Tom Holert. Köln 2000. 40-63.

<sup>15</sup> "Denkstile als Bereitschaft für gerichtetes Wahrnehmen". L. Fleck: *Entstehung und Entwicklung einer wissenschaftlichen Tatsache*. Frankfurt a. M. 1980. 187.

<sup>16</sup> L. Wittgenstein: "Wieviel dessen, was wir tun, ist ein Verändern des Denkstils [...] und wieviel dessen, was ich tue, besteht darin, Leute zu überreden, ihren Denkstil zu ändern!" In: *Vorlesungen und Gespräche über Ästhetik, Psychologie und Religion*. Göttingen 1971. 56.

<sup>17</sup> J. Schulte: "Stilfragen" in *Chor und Gesetz*, Frankfurt a. M. 1990. 59-72. 61.

<sup>18</sup> cf. A. Nordmann: "'I have changed his way of seeing'. Goethe, Lichtenberg and Wittgenstein" in: F. Breithaupt et al. (eds.): *Goethe and Wittgenstein*. Frankfurt a. M. 2003. 91-110.

<sup>19</sup> Th. Kuhn: *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago 1970. III.

#### ***IV. Heidegger on Interpretation***

Heidegger has explicated the inseparability of seeing and thinking as interpretation. As he puts it:

But if we never perceive equipment that is ready-to-hand without already understanding and interpreting it, and if such perception lets us circumspectively encounter something as something, does this not mean that in the first instance we have experienced something purely present-at-hand, and then taken it as a door, as a house? This would be a misunderstanding of the specific way in which interpretation functions as disclosure.<sup>20</sup>

Already ‘mere seeing’ “bears in itself the structure of interpretation”.<sup>21</sup> Anything else would be to ‘stare’ without understanding. Grasping “free of the ‘as’” is neither an original form of perception nor a meaningful use of the term ‘seeing’. Rather, it is an empty abstraction, i.e. an artificially derived privative form of understanding and interpreting perception of the world. Interpreting is not an ex post endowment of meaning on something in itself meaningless. Rather, it interprets the relational whole (*Bewandtnisganzheit*) of understanding the world. Like any world-disclosure, interpreting is a process of understanding with circular presuppositions: Interpreting something as something is founded on an anticipation of a certain basic concept, on which it has always already decided, finally or with reservations.

“An interpretation is never a presuppositionless apprehending of something presented to us.”<sup>22</sup> ‘Pre-understanding’ denotes the hermeneutic structure of the respective culturally and historically conditioned disposition of the understanding individual. If one invokes something ‘presented’ (in Heidegger’s example, the text being interpreted) it is “nothing other than the obvious undiscussed assumption [*Vormeinung*] of the person who does the interpreting.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> M. Heidegger: *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson. New York et al. 2008. § 32. 149-50 (original pagination).

<sup>21</sup> 149.

<sup>22</sup> 150.

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*

Comparable to Wittgenstein's thought-styles conditioned by a world-view, in the hermeneutic tradition 'pre-understanding' determines how and as what something visible can be seen. The visible is always only visible under the conditions of the „fore-structure of understanding and the as-structure of interpretation“.<sup>24</sup> The as-structure is due to consciousness that perceives something as something as well as due to the visible itself, for it reveals itself as-something, that is, it is revealed in a situation and against a background of invisible framing factors as they are constituted by history, culture and society.

Which view I can have depends on pre-understanding: The circumspection of caring or, realising in hindsight, far from being merely figurative expressions, represent existential ways of seeing, syntheses of thought and outlook. What Heidegger calls interpretive seeing is a form of aesthetic world-disclosure that consists in hermeneutic and interpretive executions in which what is familiar is applied to what is new, it is classified into a horizon of interpretation; what is present is apprehended and complemented by what is added in imagination. As such, it is both receptive and projective.

### ***V. Seeing as an Absolute Metaphor***

So far we have found that Heidegger and Wittgenstein agree that thinking and seeing (and, with it, perceptual reference to what is present as well as absent) exhibit a closeness that borders on indistinguishability. Just like, for Wittgenstein, thought-style, worldview and form of life prefigure what can be seen and experienced, for Heidegger, it is the relational whole (Bewandtnisganzheit) of pre-understanding and interpreting being-in-the-world that contextually endow perception with meaning. Framing matters thus, both can be seen as criticising representationalist notions of thinking as well as perceiving. It is not for no reason that the linguistic use of 'seeing' and its related forms indicate an intelligibility of vision that cannot simply be brushed aside as faded metaphoricity. The scrutinizing observer seeks to get a general overview or reach an insight; a person's prestige (German: "Ansehen"; "prestige" derives from French and can

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<sup>24</sup> 151.

be literally translated as “illusion”, which is also a metaphor with a visual source domain) does not develop independently of the sight they offer; which view one takes of things depends on how good an overview one has of them or of what sight has been lost; someone casts an expressive glance at me that seems to say: Watch out! — If all these cases were to be disqualified as figurative manners of speaking, not only would one deny language any kind of philosophical inventiveness, but also one would be ignoring the inevitability and irreducibility of its metaphoricity. Of all processes described it cannot, in the narrow sense, be said what exactly is sensory about the activities of observing, overlooking or losing sight of something. Just as, for instance, German expressions such as ‘Augenblick’ or ‘Anschauung’ are difficult to translate into other languages, the saliency of expressions such as ‘insight’ or ‘point of view’ is quite irreplaceable. These expressions cannot simply be paraphrased and they are also not elaborations of what could be said in a simpler, more literal manner.

In many languages the word fields of processes of understanding and operations of thought point towards what we might call the visual nature of epistemic cognition or, alternately, the intelligibility of perception. It begins with the Greek term ‘θεωρία’ as an expression denoting both sensory and mental insight, continues with the Latin term ‘perspicere’, passes through French ‘voir’ in ‘sa-voir’ or Italian ‘guardare’ with its double meaning ‘to guard’ or ‘care about’, up to the modern English expression ‘I see what you mean’. In Greek the perfective form of ‘εἶδω’ — ‘I see’ — ‘οἶδα’ — ‘I have seen’ is equivalent to ‘I know’. The result of having-seen is knowledge, hence the importance of eyewitness accounts or visual demonstrations.

The visibility of processes of knowledge and understanding as embedded in language use concisely expresses what has already been mentioned concerning the theoretical nature of visual perception. Well beyond mere figurative comparisons, here are articulated systematic interrelations between seeing, understanding, interpreting, forming an opinion, believing and knowing.

Following Hans Blumenberg, one might take the liberty to characterise seeing as an absolute metaphor and say that the verba videndi stand in

where logical reasoning is at a loss.<sup>25</sup> This is the case when thought tries to elucidate the relation of sight and insight respectively seeing and ways of seeing. It is impossible to isolate a single clear or 'actual' concept of 'seeing' from metaphorical uses of the expression. Rather, figurative speech is indicative of a problem, the inevitability of which deserves attention.<sup>26</sup> After all, it brings to light that a reduction of seeing to sensory perception artificially isolates only an element of a holistic and interconnected human practice. The metaphoricity of the semantic field itself offers an obvious perspective on seeing. It connotes understanding and carries the movement of an in-sight that can be neither purely aesthetic nor purely mental. It is an aesthetic way of disclosing the world, the aesthetic and imaginative elements of which need to be examined in detail. According to a holistic understanding of the practice of perceiving activities, of watching out or of seeing through something cannot merely be figurative manners of speaking. Also they cannot be "simple", "pure" or "basic" perceptual processes, for assuming such processes itself already is a misleading use of the language. As ways of interacting with the self and others engaged in practice, such activities are aesthetic and epistemic at the same time, they are tied to activities of the eye without being reducible to them.

Of course there can be cases of a predominantly metaphorical linguistic use of 'seeing': In order to 'see' what you mean I need not have anything visible in front of me; the prestige of a person themselves is nothing sensorily given. But such comparatively clear cases, as against the complex intertwining of the visual and the mental, are the exception rather than the rule. More often it is the case that one can clearly see that someone wants to say something, that their prestige is tied to their visual appearance etc.

It seems not merely useful but necessary that it is not 'merely metaphorical' if one says that one is re-vising something, that something is revealed in a certain light, that something looks like this from a certain point of view

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<sup>25</sup> H. Blumenberg: *Paradigmen zu einer Metaphorologie*. Frankfurt a. M. 1999. 10 et seq. (first published in: *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte* 6 (1960). 7-142.)

<sup>26</sup> Ralf Konersmann has developed a similar idea for the metaphor of the mirror. Due to its terminological indeterminateness it is the appropriate medium of representation for the elusiveness of subjectivity in its mode of presentation inaccessible to the subject. *Lebendige Spiegel. Die Metapher des Subjekts*. Frankfurt a. M. 1991.

etc. (cf. Chladenius' 'Sehe-Punckte'<sup>27</sup> which were formerly called 'Standpunkte'<sup>28</sup>). The result of the present inquiry is that no actual concept of 'seeing' is to be had beyond these figurative uses.

What is more, this kind of view seems to receive support from the analytic camp, for instance, as what theorist of consciousness Colin McGinn has developed under the name 'mindsight'.<sup>29</sup> While he follows Sartre in listing criteria for differentiating percepts and images and assuming that they are not gradually, but fundamentally distinct, in the second chapter of his investigation he makes mention of 'the mind's eye', which is not to be taken as metaphorical: "I shall argue, that [...] the phrase 'the mind's eye' is not metaphorical. It is literally true that we see with our mind."<sup>30</sup> In the third chapter he discusses a hybrid form of "a 'with the body' kind of seeing" and "imaginative seeing". It includes "the seeing of aspects, the seeing of pictures, and imagination-driven perceptual distortions".<sup>31</sup> What is telling about McGinn's line of argument is that he turns against his initial assumption of the separability of perception and imagination and has to acknowledge that the dichotomies collapse in practice, for there is a visuality of imagination and a figurativity of perception that resists being separated.

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<sup>27</sup> J. M. Chladenius: *Einleitung zur richtigen Auslegung vernünftiger Reden und Schriften*. Leipzig 1742.

<sup>28</sup> cf. K. Röttgers: "Der Standpunkt und die Gesichtspunkte" in *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte* 37 (1994). 257-284.

<sup>29</sup> C. McGinn: *Mindsight - Image, Dream, Meaning*. Cambridge, Mass. 2004.

<sup>30</sup> 42.

<sup>31</sup> 49.