

The Transfiguration of the Real in Abstract Painting

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Abstract

This article challenges a series of assumptions associated with abstract painting, arguing that this type of art makes one understand a visual manifestation which does no longer refer to the visible world only, but also to an intelligible world, accessible to the senses. Non-figurative painting abandons the reproduction of the visible, in order to present us with the invisible, and in order to account for this phenomenon the author elaborates three types of philosophical decision to interpret the mode of being of the image. The comprehension of this original experience of abstract art is then compared to the relations between the visible and the invisible, as Christian theology delineates them. Christianity is defined first by the experience of the figuration of God, by His embodiment, which actually enables one to conceive of certain images, such as the icon of the Orthodox liturgy, but at the same time it also bestows, for the first time, an incredible status to the disappearance of the visible divine body, when it returns to the invisible, while remaining present in the visible.

Keywords: Abstract Painting, Representation, Reproduction, Invisible, Transfiguration

The emergence, in the early 20th century, of “abstract” art which gives up painting objects that are identifiable within the framework of empirical experience, represents an unprecedented stage in the development of plastic arts. What does a painter actually do when he puts together, on a material backdrop, lines, colours, rhythms, with no intention to represent

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the “real”? What can one still “see” on such a backdrop when there is nothing more to see, that is to name, or to identify? Are we dealing simply with a pure aesthetic experience, in which the artist, actively or passively, would enjoy the feelings liberated from their attachment to a world of objects? Or rather, shouldn’t one, on this occasion, conceptualise a mode of being, a sensitive phenomenality, which would be connected neither to the mimetic reproduction of the visible, nor to the unveiling of an invisible reality? Does not abstract painting constrain one to understand, anew, a visual manifestation which does not refer anymore to the visible world only, or to an intelligible world, inaccessible to the senses? Irrespective of the meaning given by an artist to his work, what is required to account for the manner of seeing which is no longer the result of a new perception of the real, but which is neither to be taken for pure unreality (illusion of the senses, fiction), since we accept to watch it with an intensity that is at least equally strong as when contemplating the very being of things? What should we then presuppose in order to give meaning to these images-paintings which are no longer images that really point back to visible models?

1. Towards a beyond of representation?

When one finds himself or herself in front of a representation that, strictly speaking, is non-figurative, such as in lyrical abstraction¹, the image-work seems first to fully accomplish the vocation of the artistic imagination, which is to substitute itself to the present real; an abstract painting is still an image, that is a real space which does not exist wholly in itself, because it exhibits another thing than itself. However, in this painting we are dealing less with the absence of an object, as if pictorial representation would ensure its substitution, but rather with an original view of a non-object, of a purely original appearance. By giving up the world of objects, the image-painting frees the place for the presence of a sensitive being, without a prototype, as if it would constitute itself for the first time. What stands on the material backdrop pretends to exist in its own mode, without a referent. How can we conceive of this way of donating the being?

The difficulty comes first from the fact that we are embarrassed by the categorical limits of language, which can help us, on its own, conceive of

this new phenomenality. How can one actually name this appearance in image of that which is no longer the image of something? In a first approximation, we are still, like in all previous art, in front of a “visual representation”: offered to the view, the pictorial image, as an ensemble of colours, forms and rhythms, we present a composition, a finite whole, that is framed, structured, and most often determined as a particularity through a denomination, which lends it a certain identity (even though the title of the painting is no longer descriptive, even totally arbitrary). Thus, a part of the possible world, understood as phenomenal totality, takes place in this painting; and this can still be understood “as a window”, an opening on a mundane and sensitive state, whose existence can always presuppose the exterior and anterior existence to painting. In this sense, as everything in abstract art generally features nothing that is actually seen or known, the image presents itself as a re-presentation. The image leads us, through its phatic and aesthetic reception, towards the thought that there could be a state of the world for which painting is its seizing, fixation and offer to our sight.

And yet this manner of accounting for the pictorial image can reveal itself as inadequate. Irrespective of whether the image expresses an affective state or a mental construct in the language of the sensitive world, everything in it actually resists this reduction to a status of “visual representation”. In fact, by freeing itself from any objectifiable referent in experience, it imposes itself to us as a presence of a new genre, which is no longer commensurable to the truth of the concept, nor to the evidence of the perceived object. The “subject” of painting is no longer a subject, nor an object, that is that which possesses in itself its own identity, which imposes itself to me and allows itself to be recognized and named. The painting no longer holds us through its intrinsic truth, or truth of the represented, but simply through an intensity of presence, which requires waiting, a slow domestication, to the same extent to which it tells us nothing but interpellates us as an enigma. For what presents itself to one’s gaze, being fully of the order of the visual, no longer sends back to a being that belongs to the visible world and is inscribed in a descriptive language. What emerges in the visual field seems to be, simultaneously, of this world, because it stands in the middle of things, and to originate in another world; it oscillates between a never seen and an in-visible, that is that which could

not take place in the visible, otherwise than through the artifice of this image. This is precisely why non-figurative painting is related less to a “visual representation” than to a “presentation of the ‘invisible’”.

But what should one understand by presentation of an invisible? What does it send back to when one assigns to creative imagination the task to explore a world hidden from our senses, to proceed to a change of gaze, to a discovery of new frames or of new meta-empirical structures, to arrive at the manifestation of an other-world? Don't we risk giving in to a flattering rhetoric by allowing all these different modalities to confound one another in the emphatic and equivocal term of “invisible”? In order to prevent such a tendentious, even mystifying use, don't we have to distinguish at least four occurrences, out of which two relate in fact rather to the in-vu, and two others to that which resists visualisation²:

- the invisible can designate first a sensitive being which has not entered the field of perception yet, because it is accidentally masked; however, by a horizontal change of point of view, it can become entirely visible, any moment; in this sense the figurative space of traditional painting involves, frequently, invisible, hidden, masked objects, that such or such specular device allows, in fact, to enter the visual field;

- the invisible can then relate to what the configuration or the organisation of the real refuses to our sight; it points to the depth, the inside of things, that we can make visible, we can bring to light, to the surface, only through a scopic artifice or, in the case of painting, through an expressive transposition (of emotions or affects); the invisible is that which refuses itself to the senses even though we can infer its existence, and even make it accessible, indirectly and partially, to sight;

- the invisible relates also to that which is opposed to sight through the impossibility for the observer to discriminate a visible determination in a perceptive field; this is the case in the perception of the diaphanous, of the transparent, of the void, or of the opaque, of the misty, which are environments in which we do not distinguish anything, anymore; the invisible emerges then from the same structure of the visible which holds in itself a part of its reality. We cannot hope then to accede to the immanent invisible except by imagining what it conceals in itself;

- finally, the invisible is, in a final meaning, that which is supposed to exist in an extra-sensorial world, which pertains to a supra-sensitive being,

that cannot be contemplated in this sensitive world. This invisible can only be revealed in a hollow, through the very insufficiency of the visible to give itself as totality of being. Such is the transcendent invisible presupposed in religious representation.

Does such a classification allow us to better distinguish the nature of the invisible which would become visible in an abstract painting? Just as much as the former two meanings point back to techniques of representation of the in-sight, which feed the provisions of figurative painting, similarly the latter two involve interpretative accompaniments, even beliefs, relative to the status of what is interior or exterior to the visible, but which stands on its borders. It is no longer an issue of better showing but of giving to the view what is extra-sensorial. Would not abstract painting be, at least sometimes (for we cannot exclude that abstraction is, in certain approaches, nothing but a subliminal manifestation of the hidden visible) an attempt to render sensitive, visible, these last categories of the invisible?

2. The meaning of the invisible

What meaning must one actually give to the abandonment of the reproduction of the visible, to the presentation of the invisible, which is proper to non-figurative painting? How can one account, reflexively, for this original conception? Schematically, we could elaborate three modes of intellectually understanding this idea or, to put it differently, three types of philosophical decision to interpret the mode of being of the image:

- one first reading turns to re-conducting a classical eidetic ontology, of a Platonic origin, by transposing it to a new artistic technique, which would come as if to complete a movement that representative art only came close to. Figurative painting, by disconnecting us from a relationship embodied in things themselves, which require the totality of our finite corporeality (the five senses), already allows us to accede, through the filtered gaze of the work, to a typification that resembles more the essence of things. The image delivers from the weight of a particular, contingent mode of existence, and comes to seize a vision of generative or noumenal Forms, which constitute the principle of the very being of things³.

In this sense we can consider that a non-figurative image has a more radical analogical function. Abstract art allows one to accede to a source of formation, no longer by pursuing the scale of analogies that lead us, by

resemblance, to the generating model; this implies the mediation of knowledge, but by direct vision, by epiphany: the archetypal being presents itself directly, almost in person, before it undergoes the fall in the finitude of visible forms; it is even grasped in this auroral passage which leads it from the inform, from the principle of information, towards a determined form. Colours, geometrical figures and rhythms are expressive of the “*Natura naturans*” and no longer solely of the “*Natura naturata*”. Abstract art penetrates the original concreteness, in the spatial-temporal upsurge which precedes the creation of our world⁴.

- At the opposite end, we could wish to bracket all metaphysical presupposition on Being, which is never more than an Idea of the reflection meant to unify the finite field of phenomena, but of which, according to a tradition rooted in Kantism, we cannot have any direct intuition. Thenceforth, a work, and non-figurative painting in particular, can be seized as a kind of passage on the threshold of the visible world: visual imagination extracts itself from perceptive conditions, from the limits imposed to the objects of the sensitive world, so as to enable the emergence, in the sensitive field, of the image of the unlimited, of the inform⁵. Thus an image comes into the world, which can make us feel (in particular, in the sublime) and conceive of the infinite, the absolute; yet the very being of this meta-visible cannot be confused with some supra-sensitive substantiality. The image gives itself as a presence which indicates the infinite, without ever leaving the level of pure semblance, that is of an appearance, of a phenomenon without noumen⁶. The work gives the seeming access to Being, without ever giving us its intuition, its vision. So, art does not presuppose any knowledge, it is literally agnostic, and the invisible suggested by the sight of a visual space is a pure “aura”, a phantomatic being, to which no ontological mode corresponds. The infinite is, in a way, an imaginative production starting from the disfiguration of the visible world, from its loss of face. The work does nothing but poses an unknown, which cannot be seized by any other image⁷.

- Can we not try to overcome this antinomy between gnosis and agnosticism? In the first perspective, aesthetics tends, actually, to be absorbed in an ontophany, a sacred revelation, a sort of ecstatic rapture in which we are called to enjoy a contact with the other world, or with “the

arrière-pays” (Y. Bonnefoy). In the second perspective, aesthetics opens the gate to a subtle iconoclasm: on the one hand, because the image finds itself deprived of all iconic function, to presentify a transcendence which, in fact, is just an immanence promoted to the limit condition; on the other hand, because the pursuit of the unlimited, without the aesthetic phenomenalisation of the infinite, leads, unperceptively, to a work’s sanitization from any interest in the image, suspected of becoming an idol, so as to consecrate, actually, pure poetics, ongoing creativity, the open work, which ceaselessly undoes that which it does. Henceforth, we are led to prefer the production to the work, and the ceaseless creation to reception; ultimately, this annihilates any figure at the expense of an infigurable and an irrepresentable⁸.

We can then understand the being of non-figurative image as a space of coincidence of opposites, an intermediary state, a being of a third type which, consequently, requires an antinomic and paradoxical language. In what sense? First, the image can be considered, as contemporary phenomenology confirms it, not as a likelihood of being but as an excess of that which exists⁹. However, this supplement of being given in the work is different from the idealisation of the real or from a descent in the visible of the substance or the world’s form in itself (eidetism); that which shows itself is neither a hieratic vision of the visible, nor a finite manifestation of the invisible absolute through an “opening”. The image shows a type of excrescence of being, which is, at the same time, an exhibition of being. Colours, figures, rhythms draw a presentation that is not unreal, fictional, but sur-real, in the sense of a proto-ontic reality¹⁰. The world is no longer seen in it as constituted, because, *stricto sensu*, there is nothing to see; it emerges from an extra-mundane origin.

The invisible is, therefore, to be understood as that which, entering the field of a visibility, does not find its meaning in the visible. It is a beyond of the visible which leaves only a trace in the visible. Henceforth the gaze is no longer invited to see, to focus on the visual, but to turn towards an inner border of the world, an abyss, whose edges we do not perceive¹¹. In this approach to pictorial art, that towards which we turn, is no longer, as such, offered to the view. It remains radically invisible, non-seen, because it only indicates towards. We are not facing the revelation of an alterity, in front of a vision of the sacred, in person, in the presence of a theophany; at

most, the space of painting leads towards a “punctum” (R. Barthes), a bottom without bottom, a blind spot, which makes one forebode or think of another imperceptible and unrepresentable dimension in oneself. The alterity or transcendence which announces itself, without ever being truly shown, unveiled, could not re-conduct any longer towards a hidden intelligible world (which is only an Idea of reason and not a category of our faculty for pleasure and pain, in E. Kant’s understanding).

What is there to say, if not that the work does not show Being but holds it hidden while indicating it, at the same time (in the sense of M. Heidegger). A work stages a game of apparition-withdrawal, of unveiling-distancing, which constraints one to grasp it solely as a transitional space, not as a space of revelation. The latter remains a mere possibility, for he who knows precisely how to break with the attraction by sight, who knows how to metamorphosise the external gaze into an internal gaze, and transfigure forms so as to resurrect them in a space which is no longer created by imagination, but which is “imaginal” to the extent that it accompanies our gaze towards the beyond of the visible. In this perspective, art orients towards transcendence but does not lead there as a path leads towards a place.

3. From void to transfiguration

The comprehension of this original experience of abstract art would gain, maybe, by being compared to the relations between the visible and the invisible, as Christian theology delineates them. If Christianity, in fact, is defined first by the experience of the figuration of God, by His embodiment, which actually enables one to conceive of certain images, such as the icon of the Orthodox liturgy, as an ongoing process of a hidden prototype’s embodiment¹², it also bestows, for the first time, an incredible status to the disappearance of the visible divine body, when it returns to the invisible, while remaining present in the visible. Such is, actually, the lesson of the death and resurrection of Christ, which can help us, correlatively, give meaning to the experience of the disappearance of the real in a painting and to its transfiguration.

For *abstract* painting does not emerge from the world in flesh and bone, from the life of things preserved as mummies against time’s erosion, and less so from a life ennobled by artistic beauty. On the surface of painting,

the real, always singular, non-duplicable, dies to itself. Abstract art registers what art can never really imitate, and whose life it can even less reproduce; it is aware that concrete perception is not condemned to be poorer than art, because art is not immediately an enriched or sublimated perception of the real, as the romantic myth of the artist conceived of it.

In a certain meaning, art is also a way of turning away from life, of facing death. But death is not, as the iconoclasts put it, the representation of the corpse of the world. Any painting re-conducts us rather to a limit-experience, which finds place in the heart of Christianity, that of the empty tomb: for on Easter morning, Christ deserted the space of the tomb to take a new shape in an immaterial body, the body of resurrection or transfiguration. Therefore, can we not suggest that the key of abstract art is found in a sort of aesthetic Easter? Pictorial space, for the abstract artist, would not be anything else but a tomb, where the incarnation of the absolute, that is the creation in flesh and bone of the concrete world (moment of Christ's incarnation), experiences passion up to the death of self. Therefore, the painting opens itself on a transfigured real which is dematerialised, freed from its emplacement in the physical space and time, but which leaves a visible trace, which continues to appear in our world in the guise of a void, white, translucent figuration, which therefore is also ungraspable, unnamable. Looking at a painting means, then, to discover that the tomb is empty, that the painting is void of reality; yet the void is not nothing, nor an illusion; it is the space in which the transfiguration occurs, the place of a manifestation that is both sensitive and supra-sensitive, both objective and subjective. The void (of reality) of abstract painting aims to distinguish both the ontophanic plenitude and the non-being attached to semblance (fictional unreality).

The void is a category of being which has withdrawn itself and has not withdrawn itself from the appearing being (which would imply deficiency of being), even less so from the non-existence of being (which would imply illusion). Henceforth the void space could become the sign, for those who know how to see with the eyes of the spirit and not with the eyes of flesh, of a sur-presence which is no longer of this world. In abstract painting, the real has made itself absent but it is not replaced by nothing. Henceforth the aesthetic gaze can be related to an apocalyptic attitude, which accomplishes itself in the revelation of the invisible. The proper moment of non-

figurative painting does not correspond to the existence of God the Father, withheld in the invisible, or to the position of Incarnation in the visible Son, or the penetration in the visible, but to the transfiguration in a sur-visible, which acts like the Holy Spirit, like a figure without place. For this new vision, far from being offered as a spectacle, is the ongoing work of the spirit, which must be interpreted as an ongoing hermeneutic aim and no longer as completed aesthetic jouissance. The image of the work can, then, be understood as mediation in an unending process, where the finite opens the space of an infinite, indefinitely tangential to the order of visible existence.

If an abstract work can thus, in light of the Christian theological analogy, take a new meaning, this can have numerous consequences, of which we shall indicate only two, one for art, the other for philosophy:

- first, art – especially contemporary art – promotes less the very being of the visible (that is the importance of the manifest content) than its meaning, which requires more than an operation of the gaze, but post-aesthetic hermeneutics. The image of abstract painting is an orientation towards meaning (“Bedeutungsrichtung”, according to Heidegger’s expression) and not the supreme term of the monstration. For a work’s search of meaning never exhausts itself in the gaze. With abstract painting, the gaze becomes the starting point not of a sensorial jouissance but of a spiritual adventure called to penetrate, in the invisible, that is never shown materially;

- consequently, such an interpretation of abstract art would enable the reordering of modalities of philosophical activity, by integrating art in it, legitimately. In the image of the Trinitarian structure of Christian theology, philosophy would be confronted to a trajectory in three moments: metaphysics or speculation on what is radically invisible would correspond to the position of “Deus absconditus”; the knowledge of the manifestation of Being or of the absolute in the order of finite things (cosmology and physics) would correspond to Incarnation; art, as return of the visible towards the invisible, would correspond to transfiguration, before spiritual or symbolic hermeneutics leads us towards Apocalypse, that is, a revelation of God, an existential theophany or ontology, that is no longer speculative.

Abstract painting, as long as it renounces the representation of objects, draws us from the ontic real, without fully unveiling for us the ontological reality of the absolute. It puts us in the presence of a sur-visible which remains invisible, but which, in cancelling the perception of the world, in opening up towards a void, allows the conversion of the gaze of the flesh in the gaze of a seer. By giving up figuration, by facing even the very death of the real, abstract painting inaugurates its own disappearance so as to make room for another gaze on another, imaginary space, of an ongoing waiting of that which still refuses itself to the face to face. Abstract art is a moment of conversion of the spirit, which abandons the finite so as to direct itself towards the infinite. In this sense, abstract art constitutes, maybe, the privileged medium of all “metanoia”, conversion of the spirit.

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¹ We have in mind, for instance, Hans Hartung, Georges Mathieu, Jean-Paul Riopelle, Pierre Tal Coat, Pierre Soulages, Olivier Debré or Nicolas de Staël, etc.

² On this topic, see L. Couloubaritsis, “L’art comme mode d’accès à l’invisible”, in *Art et phénoménologie*. Bruxelles : La Part de l’œil, 1991. N° 7. p 127 sq

³ On eidetism, see E. Panovski. *Idea*. Gallimard TEL. 1989; R. Klein. *La forme et l’intelligible*. Gallimard. TEL. 1983.

⁴ See R. Court. “L’art moderne et la crise de l’aura”. *Sagesse de l’art*, Méridiens-Klincksieck, 1987.

⁵ In this sense, J. L. Nancy argues : “Avec le sublime, il ne s’agit pas de la présentation, ni de l’imprésentation, de l’infini, posée à côté de la présentation du fini et construite sur un modèle analogue. Mais il s’agit, et c’est tout autre chose, du mouvement de l’illimité ou plus exactement de l’illimitation (die “Unbegrenztheit”) qui a lieu sur le bord de la limite, et donc sur le bord de la présentation.” (“With the sublime, we are dealing neither with the presentation, nor with the impresentation of the infinite, set next to the presentation of the finite and built on an analogous model. Yet – and this is a totally different thing - we are dealing with the movement of the unlimited or more exactly, of the unlimitation (die “Ungegrenztheit”) which takes place on the threshold of the limit, and thus of the presentation”). “L’offrande sublime”. in *Du sublime*. Paris: Belin, 1988.

⁶ On this interpretation, see E. Escoubas. *Imago mundi. Topologie de l’art*. Paris: Galilée, 1986

⁷ This notion of “unknown” can be brought close to that of “neutral”, in the sense used by M. Blanchot for literature.

⁸ This attitude was heralded, for instance, by Beckett in relation to Bram van Veld’s work “Bram van Velde is the first to admit that to be an artist means to fail like nobody else dares to, that failure constitutes his universe”. Such a stance, with an iconoclastic tendency, is defended by E. Levinas. See “La réalité et son ombre”. *Les Temps modernes*. October 1948, p 25 sq.

⁹ In this perspective, H. G. Gadamer differentiates copy-image (Abbild) from painting-image (Bild), which has an ontological valence that is superior to its referent. See *Vérité et méthode*. Paris : Seuil, 1976, p 63sq.

¹⁰ J. Garelli speaks in this sense of the painting which appears – “as the place of a progress of reflective thinking, whose paradox is that it exceeds all field that is objectively defined; actually, being irreducible to the order of objects, that a realist spirit could determine, it offers our sight something else than what is presented, in the same movement in which it makes itself seen.” “Métamorphoses du regard”, in *La part de l’œil, Op.cit.* p 123.

¹¹ See M. Loreau. La couleur et son espace propre, in *Voir : le procès métonymique de l’image, La part de l’œil*, Bruxelles, 1988, N° 4 ; and also J. L. Marion. *La croisée du visible*. La Différence, 1991.

¹² See B. Duborgel. *L’icône, art et pensée de l’invisible*. Saint Etienne : CIEREC, 1991.

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