

ILLUSION: LOOKING AT ANIMALS LOOKING

W.J.T Mitchell¹

The following theses are illustrated in this essay:

Illusion is a natural, universal phenomenon, transcending cultural boundaries and historical epochs.

Illusionism is a specific cultural practice, valued only at certain special historical moments.

Illusion must be sharply distinguished from illusionism.

Illusion is to illusionism as

forgery is to imitation

errore is to similitude

delusion is to illusion

“the real” is to realism

realism is to surrealism

ideology is to art

machine is to (self)conscious being

animal is to human

Illusionism cannot be sharply distinguished from illusion: surrealism parodies realism; realism mocks the real; forgery is imitation; art is ideology; consciousness is a machine; humans are animals.

Illusionism is itself an illusion of play, freedom, and mastery of illusion.

Illusion is possible in all the senses and media. Optical illusion is the fetish of illusion-theory.

The notion of a theory of illusion is the last illusion of theory.

Illusion isn't everything; and vice versa.

¹ Mitchell, W.J.T, “Looking at Animals Looking: Art, Illusion and Power”; in Burwick, F. ; Pape, W. (Ed.), *Aesthetic Illusion: theoretical and historical approaches*, Berlin and New York, De Gruyter, 1990, pp. 65-78, fig. 3 , Roger Bollen, “...Yep! Funny they don't go for realism.”, p.66. Direitos de reedição na Dobra nº 6 cedidos pelo autor e pela Chicago Press.

Illusion: An Illustration

The problem of aesthetic illusion may be brought into focus by an image that is neither illusory nor aesthetic (figure 1), a joke by cartoonist Roger Bollen that I'm not sure I understand.² We are shown a moment in the conversation of two rather bored looking fishes who are swimming past a highly ornamented lure. "... Yep! Funny they don't go for *realism*, though..." says the fish on the left. "That wouldn't be *fair!*" replies the fish on the right. The fish on the left is the art critic: he recognizes the lure for what it is, a sculptural representation in a particularly ineffective style (nonrealistic, nonillusionistic). The fish on the right is the moral philosopher. He says that realism wouldn't be "fair," that it would not, I suppose, be "sporting" to make a lure that was too accurate an image of a bait fish.

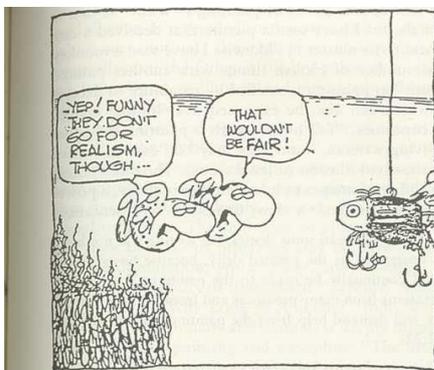
But what exactly is funny about this scene? Is it just the image of fish as intellectuals? Would it be as funny to reverse the metaphor and depict intellectuals as fish? Or is there something more, something in the content of what they are saying, something which takes the question seriously? Why is it "funny," that is, odd, strange that fishermen "don't go for realism"? What makes this remark truly odd is that, as any fisherman will tell you, they make every effort to go for realism. They don't want to give the fish a sporting chance, a chance to exercise choice, judgment, or intellectual discrimination of the kind we see here. They want the damn fish to bite, and they'll stop at nothing to tempt them — including the fabrication of highly artificial and expensive lures that look more like mobile chandeliers than fish. The baroque creation hanging in front of our two bored fish (who are themselves presented, by the way, with highly unrealistic eyelids) is some fisherman's conception of what he thinks will look realistic to a fish.

Bollen's cartoon is funny, I suspect, because it sends two absolutely contrary messages about visual communication and representational illusion. It says, on the one hand, that realism is universal and natural — that what looks like a fish to human beings will also look that way to fish and that a lure that isn't realistic enough to fool a person will have a tough time fooling a fish. On the other hand, it is saying that realism is absolutely conventional and artificial — that realism is a question of tricks, devices, and other lures and not of any universal standard. What is at issue in realism is how things appear, not how they are. Realism in this view becomes simply one style of representation, functionally related to a goal — in this case, the catching of fish.

Bollen's joke is hard to get, I suspect, because it is on *us* as beholders. It

²The cartoon ran in the *Chicago Tribune*, 17 February 1983.

lures us into the trap of a paradox, revealing us to ourselves as caught in contradictory attitudes about images. If we take the “naive realist” view of the image and replace the ornamented lure with a realistic imitation of a bait fish, we are “caught” violating the most ordinary, empirical commonsense lore of fishing — that fish have their own standards of realism, and those standards are not ours. (Try putting a realistic photograph of a worm on a hook and see how many fish bite at it.) If we take the “sophisticated conventionalist” view of the cartoon, we still have to explain why some conventions *work* and others don’t. And that question takes us away from our own values and goals, right back into a realm we can only call “nature,” a region which seems to impose independent constraints on our conventions.



Picture 1. Roger Bollen, *Animal Crackers Cartoon*. Reprinted by permission: Tribune Media Services.

Looking at Animals Looking

Roger Bollen is not the first to illustrate the paradoxes of pictorial illusionism by portraying animals looking at man-made images. Stories of animals responding to works of art are so widely disseminated that they seem to have a kind of legendary status, occupying a shadowy territory between fact and fiction that is uncannily like the problem of illusion itself. Leonardo da Vinci compiled a number of such stories to support his claim that painting is superior to poetry because it is a “natural” and scientific medium that produces true representations of the visible world. The proof of painting’s “truth” is that it “even deceives animals, for I have seen a picture that deceived a dog because of the likeness to its master... likewise I have seen a monkey that did an infinite number of foolish things with another painted monkey.”³ The “truth” in painting is verified by its

³ Leonardo da Vinci, *Treatise on Painting*, translated by A. P. McMahon, 2 vols. (Princeton:

ability to deceive animals, a power which can also be exercised over human beings “Men,” Leonardo continues, “fall in love with a painting that does not represent any living woman,” and they may be “excited to lust and sensuality” by the vivid illusion of lewd scenes. The most potent illusion of all is the ability of images to lure men into idolatry, a power which is unavailable, in Leonardo’s view, to textual representation:

If you, poet, describe the figure of some deities, the writing will not be held in the same veneration as the painted deity, because bows and various prayers will continually be made to the painting. To it will throng many generations from many provinces and from over the eastern seas, and they will demand help from the painting and not from what is written. (1:22)

The paradoxical relation of truth and error in visual images may seem to be unraveled by segregating the separate aspects of the image’s activity. The “error,” we want to say, is not the painter’s, but the beholder’s: the dog, not the master, is taken in by the illusion of the master. The monkey may do foolish things with a painted monkey, but it would take a more powerful illusion to make monkeys out of men.

The only problem with this distinction between the human painter’s truth and the animal beholder’s illusion is that the oppositions it relies on (human/animal; painter/beholder) are quite independent of the distinction between seeing an image truly (that is, “as such”) and being “taken in” by an image. Being an artist is no defense against falling for an illusionistic representation, as the Pygmalion myth reminds us. What does seem to be secure, or at least stable, in the relation between pictorial truth and illusion, is its mapping onto a self/other relationship characterized by inequality in power, self-consciousness, or self-control. Leonardo’s sequence of examples (dog versus master; monkeys versus men; lustful men versus chaste men) culminates in an implicit social distinction between the cosmopolitan Venetian and his others — the “foreigners” and “provincials” (“from many provinces and from over the eastern seas”) who will be taken in by the image and fall into idolatry. The paradoxical weave of truth and illusion is grounded in this structure of alterity: the Self is that which sees, not only the truth *in* an illusion, but that it is to be seen as an illusion; the Other is the one *taken in* by the illusion, failing to see it (truly) as an illusion and mistakenly taking it for the reality it (truly) represents.

I hope these examples have convinced you of at least two things: first, that the problem of illusion, aesthetic or otherwise, is not to be settled by a one-sided explanation based on either naturalistic or conventionalist accounts of

Princeton University Press, 1956), 1:22.

perception and representation; second, that this problem is deeply interwoven with structures of power and social otherness. The centrality of animals to the examples suggests just how radical this otherness may be, how deeply linked with motives of domination, enslavement, and violence, as indicated by the frequent metaphors of illusionistic “capture” and “taking in.” In his classic essay, “Why Look at Animals?” John Berger has argued that the relation of humans and animals is deeply inscribed in the mythical origins of both painting and metaphor: “The first subject matter for painting,” he notes, “was animal. Probably the first paint was animal blood. Prior to that, it is not unreasonable to suppose that the first metaphor was animal.”⁴

But what is the function of this painting and this metaphor, this doubling of visual and verbal likeness? At a minimum, the dominion of humanity over nature, figured in the animal-versus-human; at a maximum, the dominion of one human over another, expressed by the figure “man-as-animal.” Animals stand for all forms of social otherness: race, class, and gender are frequently figured in images of subhuman brutishness, bestial appetite, and mechanical servility. Animals have endured, as Berger shows, a history of progressive marginalization which parallels the history of political economy. This reduction of the animal is part of the same process as that by which humans have been reduced to isolated productive and consuming units.

Indeed ... an approach to animals often prefigured an approach to man. The mechanical view of the animal’s work capacity was later applied to that of workers. F. W. Taylor who developed the “Taylorism” of time-motion studies and “scientific management of industry” proposed that work must be “so stupid” and so phlegmatic that he (the worker) “more nearly resembles in his mental make-up the ox than any other type.” Nearly all modern techniques of social conditioning were first established with animal experiments. (p. 11)

As figures in scenes of visual exchange, animals have a special almost magical relation with humanity. Animals can see what we see; they can look us in the eye across a gulf unbridged by language: “a power is ascribed to the animal, comparable with human power, but never coinciding with it. The animal has secrets which, unlike the secrets of caves, mountains, seas, are specifically addressed to man” (p. 3). These secrets become accessible in the moment when the animal is caught in the act of looking at man-made illusions and responding to them as if they were real and natural. This moment provides humanity with a double revelation and reassurance — that human representations

⁴ John Berger, *About Looking* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), p. 5; further page references will be cited in the text.

are true, accurate, and natural (the animals “agree” and “comprehend” them of their own accord), and that human power over others is secured by mastery of representations (the animals are *forced* to agree, not of their own accord, but automatically).

Most accounts of aesthetic illusion keep these rather atavistic matters at bay by insisting on the radical difference between animal and human responses to images.⁵ Even Ernst Gombrich, who uses the conclusions of animal behaviorists extensively in his studies of illusion, always draws up short, denying indignantly that he is “reducing” the problem of illusion to the reaction of a fish snapping at a fly. But there is one writer I know of who is notoriously unembarrassed by the equation of animal and human responses to aesthetic illusion, and that is the Roman historian Pliny, who recorded probably the single most famous anecdote of animals looking at pictures. Parrhasius, a painter in Periclean Athens

entered into a competition with Zeuxis, who produced a picture of grapes so successfully represented that birds flew up to the stage buildings; whereupon Parrhasius himself produced such a realistic picture of a curtain that Zeuxis, proud of the verdict of the birds, requested that the curtain should now be drawn and the picture displayed; and when he realized his mistake, with a modesty that did him honor he yielded up the prize, saying that whereas he had deceived birds Parrhasius had deceived him, an artist.⁶

This scene is often cited as an example of what Norman Bryson calls “the Natural Attitude” toward images, a naive notion of mimesis that Bryson traces from “innocent or Plinian vision” right down to Ernst Gombrich.⁷ This naive view of pictorial representation needs to be replaced, in Bryson’s view, with a sophisticated, historical account based in semiotic conventionalism (“painting as an art of signs, rather than percepts” [p. xii]) and materialism (painting as a material practice rather than a system of ideal illusions). While I’m basically sympathetic to this agenda, I think it makes a crucial strategic error in bracketing off the tradition which links Pliny to Gombrich as a naive or innocent past to be supplanted by a

⁵ Jacques Lacan’s discussion of the mirror-stage, for instance, moves from a description of the behavior of a chimpanzee to that of a human child, but insists on the lack of a symbolic system in the animal. See *The hour Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, translated by Alan Sheridan (Hammondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1979), p. 107.

⁶ Pliny, *Natural History*, 10 vols., translated by H. Rackham (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1952), 9:310—11; [descendisse hie in certamen cum Zeuxide traditur et, cum ille detulisset uvas pictas tanto successu, ut in scaenam aves aduolarent, ipse detulisset linteum pictum ita veritate repraesenta, ut Zeuxis alitum iudicio tumens flagitaret tandem remoto linteo ostendi picturam atque intellecto errore concederet paltnam ingenuo pudore, quoniam ipse volucres fefelisset, Parrhasius autem se artificem.]

⁷ Norman Bryson, *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983), p. 34; further page references will be cited in the text. Bryson suggests that “the only significant difference between Pliny and Gombrich ... is that whereas for Pliny the encounter [with visual reality] is continuous, for Gombrich it is intermittent.”

sophisticated present and in figuring this methodological shift as a move from percepts to signs, idealizations to material practices. I suspect that this shift really isn't possible and that it has mainly a rhetorical function in the arguments of sophisticated commentators. More important, I think the commonplace notion of "Plinian vision" as "innocent" is based on a failure to attend to the nuances of the anecdote of the birds in the context of his *Natural History*.⁸

The anecdote is notable for the dignity afforded to those who fall into *errore* (illusion). Unlike Leonardo, for instance, Pliny presents "being taken in" as consistent with a kind of judgment. Zeuxis attributes to the birds a "verdict" (*iudicio*), and when he himself is taken in, he reacts judiciously, accepting defeat gracefully, with a "modesty that did him honor." Although Zeuxis suggests that there is an important difference between deceiving birds and deceiving an artist, there is no radical, incomprehensible gulf between the two deceptions: birds and men participate in the same contest, and the birds deliver a verdict. The difference between animal and human judgment is the difference between the grapes and the curtain: in the one case the lure is what is depicted, the illusion of grapes presented by the painting; in the other, the lure is precisely what is *not* depicted, what remains invisible in the illusion, forever concealed behind the curtain. Zeuxis does not reach out to feel the curtain, to verify it by touch: he asks for its removal, for the display of the picture beneath. Animals may be taken in by the illusions of humans, but humans are animals capable of taking themselves in. Does this make humans superior or inferior to animals?⁹ Zeuxis swells with pride (*tumens*) as he receives the verdict of the birds and yields with a "noble shame" (*concederet... ingenuo pudore*) at the discovery of his own error. The relation of artists to animals here is far too complicated to be summarized by the familiar oppositions of "brute" or "mechanical" nature to the self-consciousness of human beings, what Berger calls the "post-Cartesian" view of animals.

The dignity of the birds is consistent with their role as omens and prophetic signs in Roman culture (the word *avis* means "omen" or "portent" as well as "bird"), and Pliny will have them testify to the power of painting several times in his history. The birds not only fly up to Zeuxis' grapes, they try to alight on the

⁸ Indeed, one might say that Pliny's *Natural History* has scarcely been "read" at all, except as a storehouse of anecdotes and bad Latin, or as a "literary monstrosity," in the words of A. Locher. This situation is now beginning to change, at least with regard to the scientific and literary, if not artistic, material in Pliny's text. See Locher's "The Structure of Pliny the Elder's *Natural History*," in *Science 'in the Early Roman Empire: Pliny the Elder, His Sources and Influence*, edited by Roger French and Frank Greenaway (Totowa, NJ: Barnes & Noble, 1986), pp. 20-29.

⁹ Lacan's reading of this fable reinforces the distinction between human and animal, between the *trompe l'oeil* and the natural function of the lure. See *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, pp. 111-12, and Mary Ann Doane's excellent discussion in "The Moving Image," *Wide Angle* 7:1 and 2 (1985): 42-57.

roof tiles in Claudius Pulcher's scene-paintings, and they are frightened by the painted serpents of Lepidus. The most impressive display of animal judgment in Pliny is Apelles' triumph as a painter of Alexander the Great's horses. Apelles "had some horses brought and showed them their pictures one by one; and the horses only began to neigh when they saw the horse painted by Apelles" (9:331). This anecdote illustrates, not the *deception* of horses, but their good judgment, a form of equine connoisseurship responsive to the dignity of the artist's identity as well as his skill. As a member of the Equestrian class, the second rank of Roman aristocracy, Pliny was in a position to understand the dignity of horses, both their own and the kind they confer on men.

I take it as axiomatic that there is no way to disprove these stories: they are presented as fact, but they could very well be folklore. There are animal behaviorists engaged, no doubt, at this very moment in trying to ascertain just what sorts of pictorial illusions will stimulate responses from various kinds of animals, and it wouldn't surprise me to learn that some animals respond to the objects in some pictures as if they were really there. Our only recourse with Pliny is to take the stories as undecidably true and untrue, that is, as rhetorical illusions which, like pictorial ones, inhabit a dialectical realm of *illusionism*, on the boundary between fact and fiction. Our attention shifts, then, from the question of whether the stories are true, to the question of their function in Pliny's text. Why does he tell these stories? Are they supposed to support a view of the painter's work, as Bryson argues, exclusively oriented toward the "transcendent and immutable given" (p. 5) of nature, a realm that negates "history" (p. 3) and depicts that painter's work as "carried out in a social void" (p. 6)?

I think not. While Pliny suggests that painterly illusion may be *adjudicated* by the natural (in the form of animal testimony), its purpose and history is not determined by nature. Pliny repeatedly emphasizes the social and political function of illusionistic painting, its role in the continuity of the state and the social order. It is easy to forget that Pliny was writing about illusionistic painting as a cultural practice that had fallen into disuse and low esteem in his own time. "Painting," he says, is

an art that was formerly illustrious, at the time when it was in high demand with kings and nations and when it ennobled others whom it deigned to transmit to posterity. But at the present time it has been entirely ousted by marbles, and indeed finally also by gold. (vol. 9, p. 261)

For Pliny, the chief purpose of illusionistic painting is not the deception of birds or men, but the bequeathing of illustrious "nobility" from one generation to the next through the accurate portrayal of the face:

The painting of portraits, used to transmit through the ages extremely correct likenesses of persons, has entirely gone out. Bronze shields are now set up as monuments with a design in silver, with only a faint difference between the figures; heads of statues are exchanged for others, about which before now actually sarcastic epigrams have been current: so universally is a display of material preferred to a recognizable likeness of one's own self. And in the midst of all this people tapestry the walls of their picture-galleries with old pictures, and they prize the likenesses of strangers, while as for themselves they imagine that the honour only consists in the price... Consequently nobody's likeness lives and they leave behind them portraits that represent their money, not themselves. (9:263)

For Pliny, the history of painting is not explained by its relation to the natural, but to the progress of political economy. Illusionism begins at a precise historical moment, at the height of Athenian imperial power. "The first artist to give realistic presentation of objects" is Apollodorus, a contemporary of Pericles. Illusionism declines in Pliny's own lifetime: the emperor Augustus is the last to observe "the dignity of this now expiring art," which has been replaced by what we would now call a fetishism of materials — a new kind of illusionism in which money replaces men. The development of illusionistic painting doesn't simply "reflect" the bygone era of national and imperial greatness; it is the medium or apparatus for reproducing political and social identity in the individual and the collectivity. Pliny continually stresses the public function of art, its role in political propaganda and mass spectacle. "The dictator Caesar... gave outstanding public importance to pictures"; Agrippa gives a speech "on the question of making all pictures and statues national property" (p. 279); Hostilius Mancinus wins election to a consulship by "displaying in the forum a picture" of his role in the siege of Carthage (p. 277). The "ungracious Tiberias" and the immoral Nero, by contrast, allow the art to fall into disuse or outright abuse. Nero commissions a portrait of himself on a linen sheet 120 feet high which promptly receives its own natural verdict: it is struck by lightning.

Pliny's sense of the political authority of painting goes well beyond the propagating of noble genealogy or state propaganda. Painting is presented as a restraint and discipline of power as well as an instrument of it, a way of introjecting the master-servant relationship into the sovereign. A painting by Protogenes saves the city of Rhodes from being burned to ground by King Demetrius, and Apelles has "so much power" (p. 325) over Alexander the Great ("who was otherwise of an irascible temper") that he teaches the monarch to "conquer himself" and (in a rather unmagical version of the Pygmalion story) to give the painter his favorite mistress after she poses as his Aphrodite. So great is the painter's authority that it can be exercised, finally, without any actual deploy-

ment of illusionistic technique. The mere suggestion of the painter's power, as indicated in his characteristic line, mark, or signature, is even more potent than its actual exercise in a finished illusion. The most esteemed painting of Apelles is virtually empty:

on its vast surface containing nothing else than the almost invisible lines, so that among the outstanding works of many artists it looked like a blank space, and by that very fact attracted attention and was more esteemed than any masterpiece. (9:323)

Given this sort of power over men and monarchs, it is no wonder that it was "forbidden that slaves be instructed" in the art, that it "consistently had the honour of being practised by people of free birth, and later on by persons of station" (9:319).

The relation between master and slave translates into social terms the basic power relations Pliny discovers in the contrast between human and animal responses to painting. Animals are "taken in" by the image, enslaved by it at the same time they are brought closer to humans; they are in a paradoxical state of illusion as *errore* and *iudicio*, a mistake which is simultaneously a true judgment, a slavery which is based in a free, natural judgment. Humans, by contrast, "take in" the image with self-conscious awareness that it is only an image. At rare moments a masterful artist like Parrhasius may "take in" his fellow artist with a *trompe-l'oeil*; it is always possible for painting to turn humans into animals, to make them react to an illusion like slaves (or animals) to a master. But the proper use of painting among free citizens is as a "liberal science" (*liberalium*), an art of *illusionism*, not illusion, which frees the beholder's faculties, transmits power to the beholder so that he may "conquer himself," enslave himself. This is what we would call "aesthetic illusion," or (in Murray Krieger's terms) "self-referential illusion."¹⁰

What tends to be forgotten in accounts of aesthetic illusion that celebrate its freedom and "autonomy" as a cultural practice is the connection between this freedom and social power. "Connection" is too weak a term: the freedom epitomized in the aesthetic illusion is predicated on power over others, just as the truth of the illusion is predicated on its capacity to produce error in others. Illusion and illusionism stand in a dialectical relationship of absolute opposition and mutual mimicry. The opposition of illusionism to illusion is that of human to animal, self-conscious being to machine, master to slave. These relations of power and domination must be continually invoked to reinforce the sense of freedom

¹⁰ See Murray Krieger, "Literature as Illusion, as Metaphor, as Vision," in *Poetic Presence and Illusion* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), pp. 188-96.

associated with aesthetic illusion and simultaneously forgotten or repressed so that this freedom can be represented as autonomous, slavery represented as freely chosen. That is why Pliny's stories of the power of illusion are bracketed as "naive" and removed from their context in the history of Greek and Roman politics: they insist on bringing back together what we would like to keep apart — freedom and power, illusionism and illusion, aesthetic "autonomy" and social "discipline." Pliny forces us to read the "natural history" of art, that is, its history as an apparatus of ideology, a history where nature and convention, percept and sign cannot be kept apart.¹¹

Our modern Pliny, I want to suggest, is Ernst Gombrich. Gombrich inverts Pliny's priorities: instead of nesting the problem of pictorial illusion inside a densely woven material, social, and cultural history, Gombrich makes the history of pictorial illusion the framework through which all other history may be seen. What the two writers share is the conviction that illusion provides the link between history and nature. Like Pliny, Gombrich has two contradictory accounts of the meaning of pictorial illusion, one based in "nature," cognitive science, and experiments with animals, the other based in a conventionalist rhetoric which treats illusion as a historically specific cultural practice.¹² Unlike Pliny, Gombrich is not explicit about the political and social function of illusionism. In recent writings, however, as Gombrich has reacted more and more strongly against what he sees as the "relativist" and "conventionalist" consensus of contemporary criticism, he has tended to fall back more fully on the one-sided naturalist account and, in the process, to make the ideological implications of his position clearer. In his naturalist guise, Gombrich treats illusionistic images as a

¹¹ It is worth noting that Pliny's history not only embeds painting in a social, political history, but in a history of materials and technology as well. At least half of his discussion is devoted to the materials of pigment and painting technology. The history of painting emerges in the midst of a sequence of volumes devoted to the mining of minerals, gems, and rare earths. Alongside Pliny's celebration of painting as the ideological apparatus of Greek and Roman nationalism is a darker story which connects the mining of gold with the degradation of nature and the rise of luxury, a story in which painting figures as simply another wealthy, luxurious object: "We trace out all the fibres of the earth... marvelling that occasionally she gapes open or begins to tremble — as if forsooth it were not possible that may be an expression of the indignation of our holy parent!... Alas for the prodigality of our inventiveness! In how many ways have we raised the prices of objects! The art of painting has come in addition, and we have made gold and silver dearer by means of engraving! Man has learned to challenge nature in competition!" (9:5).

¹² See my essay, "Nature and Convention: Gombrich's Illusions," in *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), pp. 75-94. Murray Krieger also discusses the "two Gombrichs," an early "skeptical humanist" who treats pictorial illusion in terms of convention and a later "positive scientist" who privileges natural, biological explanations. See "The Ambiguities of Representation and Illusion: An E. H. Gombrich Retrospective," *Critical Inquiry* 11:2 (December 1984): 181-94. My view is closer to Norman Bryson's thesis of a single Gombrich whose argument "is in open contradiction with itself," (*Vision and Painting*, p. 33) from first to last, but I see Gombrich's deepest loyalties invested in the naturalistic account from the first, and I don't find the contradictions "open," in the sense of being transparent, or easily disentangled.

special class of representations grounded in biological, wired-in mechanisms of perception that are shared by all cultures and by the higher animals. These images can be more or less sharply distinguished from “conventional” images which approach the condition of language. The two classes of images are exemplified at various times by the difference between Western and Oriental painting, between ancient or primitive and “modern” (that is, from the Renaissance through the nineteenth century) painting, or between photography (the “scientific image”) and “hand-made” images like drawings and paintings.

As this list of paired examples suggests (and as Gombrich himself sometimes admits), the nature/convention distinction is a shifting and incoherent one; at best, it serves as a rhetorical trope to mark a distinction of degree between “more” and “less” illusionistic images, with illusionism understood as something like “ease of recognition” of the represented motif. At its “worst,” or most insidiously effective level, this trope reinforces a host of ideological oppositions that pit Western-ness, modernity, and scientific truth against the primitive, the non-Western, and the superstitiously archaic. The mastery of “*illusionism*” in Gombrich’s view, is directly proportional to the overcoming of “illusion” in the sense of false belief. Ultimately, this mastery over images is the basis for control over others — the creation of deceptive appearances in the *trompe l’oeil*, the perfection of a panopticon of surveillance and espionage, the deployment of effective “decoys” and “lures” in advertising, the instantaneous and effortless reproduction of visual reality in the service of voyeuristic gratification (pornography occasionally surfaces as Gombrich’s clinching example of the natural image).¹³

What this rather schematic recapitulation cannot capture is the remarkable rhetorical agility which permits Gombrich to carry off this argument, nesting it within other claims and positions that qualify and contradict it in myriad ways. The “shifting” of the nature-convention distinction, for instance, over a whole range of opposed examples (images and texts, photographs and paintings) prevents it from occupying a fixed ground from which it might be dislodged: any example of the “natural image” one finds in Gombrich will, within a few pages, be transformed into a relatively conventional image. Alongside Gombrich’s argument for the natural, illusionistic image is an equally powerful and equally compelling argument for the conventionality of all image-making, an argument which stresses the arbitrary making of “schematisms” as a precondition for any “matching” of images against visual appearances, which emphasizes the reliance of pictorial production and consumption on habits and conventions (pictures are made out of other pictures, not out of “reality”), and which appeals to

¹³ See “Image and Code: Scope and Limits of Conventionalism in Pictorial Representation,” in *Image and Code*, edited by Wendy Steiner (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1981), pp. 11-42.

analogies with language to explain the nature of pictures. These, in fact, are the arguments which made Gombrich famous, giving him a claim to be the Saussure of image theory, the creator of a “linguistics of the visual field.” To this title we might now add, the Pliny of modern art history, the natural historian of the visual field. If Pliny’s is a gloomy Tory history, lamenting the loss of an art that guarantees the continuity of the Roman republic, Gombrich’s is a Whig history of scientific, liberal progress, the emancipation of Western civilization from barbarism. That Gombrich’s accounts of illusion constantly hearken back to his experiences in World War II as a decoder and interpreter for British Intelligence, using his skills against the Nazi barbarians, is both the clinching rhetorical instance and the historical starting point for his work.

Let me conclude by returning to the theses with which I opened this essay. I cannot expect to have demonstrated any of them in this brief account, but I hope at least to have illustrated their sense.

The first two theses claim that illusion is to illusionism as nature is to culture: illusion is something built into the very conditions of sentience and extends from areas of animal behavior such as camouflage and mimicry right into *trompe-l’oeil* and ultimately, I want to argue, into the universal structure of ideology or false consciousness. This is illusion as *error*, delusion, or false belief. *Illusionism*, by contrast, is playing with illusions, the self-conscious exploitation of illusion as a cultural practice for social ends. We have a whole vocabulary of oppositions for keeping illusion and illusionism rigorously distinct from one another; at the same time, we have (as the fourth thesis argues) a whole set of metaphors and practices which tend to collapse them into one another: the phrase “aesthetic illusion” is one such conflation, since (on the logic of strict distinction) the phrase should really be “aesthetic *illusionism*.” The most dramatic form of this collapse is the one which suggests (as per thesis 6) that “illusionism is itself an illusion” in its pretence of freedom without power, its construction of an autonomous realm of play beyond illusion.

The visual fetishism of illusionism is, I hope, clear from the examples of Leonardo, Pliny, and Gombrich. There is nothing in theory to deny that illusion is possible in all the sensory, perceptual, and cognitive modes and that illusionism may be practiced in any medium or system of signs. We have produced, in fact, almost perfect aural illusions in laser disk recordings; phonography is capable of much more perfect simulacra than photography, or even holography. Yet it seems fair to say that aural fetishism is a relatively rare disease, confined to a few audiophiles, while visual fetishism in a culture of television, propaganda, and advertising is endemic, not to say an epidemic in advanced industrial societies.

How can we intervene critically, therapeutically in what is widely perceived

as the contemporary epidemic of illusion, the virtual collapse of all distinctions between the aesthetic and the nonaesthetic, the play of what Baudrillard has called “simulacra,” which undermine all distinction between illusion and illusionism? Not, my last thesis wants to suggest, by constructing a “theory of illusion” which claims to stand free of the phenomenon it criticizes. The postulation of this sort of theory in experimental psychology is what preserves the delusion that we might finally (as Gombrich puts it) find the “keys to the locks of our senses” by opening up the bodies of animals and probing their perceptual apparatus. (Recent experiments have involved such practices as injecting radioactive and electromagnetic dyes into animal nervous systems to trace the patterns of nerve impulses; “re-wiring” the visual cortex to the ears, and the aural cortex to the eyes of rats; stimulating the brain tissue of chimpanzees to produce hallucinations.) On the side of philosophy and “critical theory,” the notion Jean-François Lyotard puts it, of a “theoretical-critical *genre*... which claims as its object to tell the truth and to dissipate illusions is a particular case of those genres we usually term literary.”¹⁴ Its rhetoric of truth, transparency, and verism is just that, a rhetoric an art, and not a natural fact guaranteed by its (illusory) self-representation as beyond illusion. The question is whether the understanding of theory as rhetoric, as *illusionism*, can be taken as an enabling discovery, one which returns us to our positions in the world of illusion, as propagators of ideology who play continually across the boundaries of illusion and illusionism. This is a game for which the rules are now being invented. One rule might be that reality is ruled out: the only weapon against illusion is illusionism. Another might be that we have to learn once more how to look at animals. But perhaps most fundamental would be the rule stated as my final thesis: illusion isn’t everything; and vice versa.¹⁵

¹⁴ Jean-Françoise Lyotard, “Theory as Art: A Pragmatic Point of View,” in *Image and Code*, edited by Wendy Steiner, p. 71.

¹⁵ I would like to thank Bob Kaster, Lauren Berlant, Joel Snyder, and Arnold Davidson for their help with this essay.