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## **IMAGE, IDENTITY, REALITY: GNOSEOLOGY OF PAINTING**

### **Abstract**

The paper looks at the two main ways of discovering the notion of truth in fine arts: a model of ancient Egyptian fine arts and the principle of Renaissance painting based upon illusory qualities. Contrasting these two different painting principles, the author presents an analysis of relations between fine arts' truth and gnoseological truth, at the same time putting an emphasis on the subject – object problem and the problem of truth in art as such. Considering the fine arts' style of a particular nation, or a particular epoch, as an expression of its gnoseological and ontological perception, the author looks at the Renaissance view of fine arts' truth as an anticipation of modern gnoseological truth conception.

**Key words:** Fine arts' truth, gnoseological truth, Egypt, Renaissance, painting, anticipation of modern gnoseological truth conception.

“All men by nature desire to know”, Aristotle begins his *Metaphysics*. “An indication of this is the delight we take in our senses; for even apart from their usefulness they are loved for themselves; and above all others the sense of sight. For not only with a view to action, but even when we are not going to do anything, we prefer seeing to everything else. The reason

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is that this, most of all the senses, makes us know and brings to light many differences between things (Aristotle 2007:1).”

The problem of the relation between image and reality is as old as human thought itself. Democritus, the famous Ancient Greek philosopher and representative of Atomistic Philosophy, develops his cognitive theory as a theory of pictures. The picture of things, their essence, penetrates the soul through the senses. Pictures connect the object, senses and thought.

Some analysts refer to Plato’s ontology, his theory of ideas, as “the ontology of image”, which is a view that can certainly be supported. The key notion of Plato’s ontology with the most ontological weight is *eidōs* – the shape, the form, the image – the form which becomes *to on ontos* – the being, and *ousia* – the essence in Plato’s philosophy. On the other hand, the key relation in Plato’s ontology is the very relation between the essence – *eidōs*, and its reflection – *mimēma*, the image, that is, “shadows”.

This relationship between the essence and the image, that is the problem of pictures as the truth of being – which can be called a gnoseological function of pictures, is central for this paper and shall be explored further.

The style of painting adopted by a people or, in a broader sense, a certain epoch is, without doubt, a kind of gnoseological perception, that is, a way of perceiving truth and essence.

The ancient Egyptian painting style, or more precisely the style of the Old Kingdom, can be referred to as “the view from the edge of the cube”; in an attempt to view and offer to the viewers the image as the truth of the thing itself, the artists of this epoch painted in three dimensions: en face, profile and from above (bird’s eye view). For the Egyptians, a complete, real and truthful image of an entity (be it animate or inanimate) was precisely that – an entity viewed in three ways, from three aspects, analysed and dissected through this viewing.

The philosophy of the new age introduced the notional pair subjective and objective, which serves as a useful tool for our gnoseological analysis. Objective implies a way of being which is independent of the subject’s (man’s) consciousness and perceptive and cognitive apparatus, whereas subjective implies a way of being which is dependant on the subject’s consciousness, that is, directly conditioned and coloured by man’s consciousness and his cognitive and perceptive abilities. Using these categories, the old Egyptian painting style can be described as a particular (some would say naïve)

attempt at the objective representation of things, that is, an attempt at capturing the truth of being.

Their vision of the objective implies dissection and analysis, the visual section of the object, offered to the recipients in three ways, that is three dimensions. This vision of the objective also implies a complete distance from illusionism; the apathetic illusionary principles of representation are completely foreign to the ancient Egyptian painter.

Ancient Greek visual expression, however, is based on the principles of illusionism. The story of the painter Zeuxis, who painted grapes to such perfection that the illusion fooled the birds, is well known: the birds having attempting to peck the painted grapes. Apparently this made Zeuxis proud and happy, while Plato, a great opponent and critic of illusionism, used this story as an example of the uselessness of *mimesis* (reflection – representation) as such. Is this the essence of visual expression – to fool birds?

In his dialogue *The Republic*, a serious attempt at art criticism from an ontological point of view, Plato passionately attacks this apathetic quality and the illusionism of the third dimension and visual perspective representation in art, including both literature and painting in the term *mimesis*, which the Greeks had mastered to a large extent (according to the works of the doxographers).

In *The Republic* Socrates asks Glaucon:

“And what about the painter? – I would like to know whether he may be thought to imitate that which originally exists in nature, or only the creations of artists?”

And Glaucon answers readily: “The latter”.

“As they are or as they appear? You have still to determine this!”

“What do you mean?” Glaucon answers confusedly, demanding a more detailed explanation.

This is the point which is relevant to us – Plato’s rejection of illusionism, that is, a perspective representation of an entity. Socrates, the mouthpiece of Plato’s ideas, continues:

“I mean that you may look at a bed from different points of view, obliquely or directly or from any other point of view, and the bed will appear different, but there is no difference in reality?”

Yes, the difference is only apparent.

Now let me ask you another question: What is the art of painting designed to be – an imitation of things as they are, or as they appear?” And most importantly: “Is art a representation of appearance or of reality?”

“Of appearance”, answers Glaucon.

“Then all representative art is a long way off the truth... because it lightly touches on a small part of things, and that part an image”, Plato concludes, having striven to this conclusion from the very beginning of the dialogue (Plato 1976: 298 – 299).

What Plato obviously disliked about Greek painting at that moment was the predominantly subjective manner of visual representation. Why do we refer to it as predominantly subjective?

In the modern world we are used to perspective representation and perceive the illusion of a third dimension as the objective representation of things, the artist’s attempt to represent things as they really are. However, following Plato’s way of thinking and through analysis of visual perspective representation, we may phrase the question in the following way: Is a visual representation offered to the eyes of a viewer from one angle, at one moment, an objective one, and to what extent? According to the definition of subjective as conditioned by consciousness and dependent upon consciousness, illusionary perspective representation is subjective; the artist does not represent the object for what it really is but for its appearance to the viewer’s perception, that is, the viewer’s consciousness.

Plato rejects ancient Greek illusionism in art according to the criterion of truthfulness: in modern terms, the art of Plato’s time has no value precisely because it is subjective; it does not offer to our perception things as they objectively are.

It is interesting to mention within this context that Plato, although famous for his criticism of art as such, was an admirer to the art of ancient Egypt because of the longevity of that painting style (he was delighted by the fact that they changed nothing for several thousand years), and also because of the basic principle of the ancient Egyptian style – attempting to include things objectively by a view “from the edge of the cube”. All this is a lot more consistent and coherent than it may seem at first.

Plato's criticism of illusionism in visual art, and thus the introduction of the problem of artistic truth in terms of subjective-objective, is an anticipation of the way in which we think of the kingdom of visual illusionism – Italian Renaissance art.

Giotto di Bondone, although chronologically a representative of the Late Gothic, introduced the age of Renaissance visual perception and established the principles of Renaissance visual truth.

What does this visual truth mean? Giotto draws attention to the image he wants to represent by drawing it into the foreground of the lower half of the painting so that the viewer has the impression of witnessing the image, as if the artist had opened a kind of virtual window and allowed the viewer silent presence. The illusion of the third dimension is absolute, although at this time there is still no mathematical or atmospherical perspective. As viewers of Giotto's frescoes, we perceive space which opens up in front of us and moreover we become a part of that space on the level of perception. For the first time in the history of art, Giotto determines the viewer's position with precision: as witnesses of the image, we know exactly where we stand.

In aesthetic terms Giotto di Bondone managed to connect and unify the space of the painting and the space of the viewer, the space of artefacts and the space of reception. In this way the recipient is completely drawn into the image, approaching it from a precisely determined position and becoming a part of it. And what happens then?

By connecting the space of the painting and that of the recipient, Giotto connects the apathetic and factual space, the illusion and the reality; the painting touches and colours reality, reality touches and penetrates the painting, making the boundary between illusion and reality blurred, overlapping into each other's space, establishing a specific and unique spiritual space.

Giotto's "aesthetic of space", let us name it the aesthetic of the illusionism of the third dimension, is later complemented by the atmospheric and linear, i.e. mathematical perspective of the late Gothic and early Renaissance artists.

But Giotto's visual truth essentially remains a constitutive principle in art until Edouard Manet and his wilful and dramatic "closure of the window" to the recipient's view. Chronologically, the period between the fourteenth and nineteenth centuries, "the age of painting": the late Gothic, early Renaissance, High Renaissance, Mannerism, the magnificent and

varied Baroque, ending with Romanticism/Neoclassicism and Realism, developed within this creative-receptive model.

The Renaissance man (be it the creator or the recipient) sees this precisely mathematically defined illusion of the third dimension and “the open window” as the actual truth. This image is experienced as disclosing reality itself. Within the categories subjective-objective, the illusionism of the aesthetic of “the open window” is treated as the objective truth: the appearance corresponds to what really is.

But the dilemma Plato expressed in *The Republic* inevitably reappears: Is it possible, and to what extent, to speak about the objective truth when the image represents only one dimension of things, what a viewer can see from one angle, at one moment? That truth is evidently predominantly subjective. In other words, this visual truth is ontologically supported by the subject’s consciousness.

Based on everything discussed in this paper we may conclude that the visual truth of the Renaissance, the way it determines the relationship between image and reality, anticipated philosophical meditation on this problem in the new age, the age of Enlightenment; more precisely that it anticipated the forthcoming philosophy of the power of consciousness and the Kantian, gnoseological solution – that man’s consciousness is the creator of truth and that man perceives reality only in a way which his consciousness can receive.

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## ГНОСЕОЛОГИЈА СЛИКЕ

### Сажетак

Текст представља анализу два основна принципа конципирања појма истине у ликовној уметности: модел ликовне уметности старог Египта и принцип ренесансне ликовне уметности утемељен на илузионизму. Контрастирајући ова два различита ликовна принципа, аутор анализира однос између појмова истине у ликовној уметности и истине у гносеологији, акцентујући како субјекат-објекат проблем, тако и проблем уметничке истине као такве. Полазећи од тезе да је ликовни стил одређене нације односно епохе израз њене гносеолошке и онтолошке перцепције, аутор третира ренесансну концепцију ликовне истине као антиципацију модерне перцепције истине у гносеологији.

**Кључне речи:** ликовне истине, гносеолошке истине, Египат, ренесанса, сликарство, антиципација модерне перцепције истине у гносеологији.