

Allen Fisher

Close-viewing Painting of the Late Twentieth Century¹

In the next seven sessions you will be *Close-viewing* paintings from the late twentieth century. I have developed the idea of *Close-viewing* from early twentieth century writers involved in *Close-reading* literature.² Initially in *Close-viewing* the participant will focus on a particular painting with attention to seeing what is there. *What is there* may involve rhetorical features, structural elements, contextual references, patterns of connectedness and particular historical inferences. Subsequently the participant moves from observation to interpretation.

Seven Recurrent Concepts

1. VIEWER AS CONTRIBUTOR: EYESIGHT

As a viewer you contribute to the production of the painting. The painter factures the painting, the viewer momentarily completes the process and potentially completes the process each time the painting is viewed.

2. PHYSICAL EXPERIENCE: PERCEPTION, PROPRIOCEPTION: SYNTHESIS AND INVENTION

Your eyesight, and its relationship to your body and your brain, is mobile, involved in synthesis and invention from your physical experience in front of the painting. Your perception and proprioception is complexed by this mobility; for example, the eyes reconcile small areas of colour into a synthesis and the brain will sometimes invent what is seen based on an expectation.³

3. EUROPEAN READING EXPERIENCE: LEFT TO RIGHT IN FRONT OF RECTANGLES

Readers of languages written from left to right would also inherit the cultural tradition of viewing paintings in rectangles and initially read these from left to right. Our position is to stand in front of the paintings with

¹ These are the notes titled *Seven Recurrent Concepts* I produced for WEA participants in 2015 regarding some of the concepts used during the sessions for the course *Modernist Painting 1950-1970 in Britain and America*. An extension of the proposals and other elaborations of the seven concepts may be found in Allen Fisher. *Imperfect Fit. Aesthetic Function, Fracture & Perception in Art and Writing since 1950*, Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2016.

² For example, I.A. Richards. *Practical Criticism. A Study of Literary Judgement*, London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co. Ltd., 1929.

³ My summary booklet *Colour Theory and Practice*, 1999, revised 2019, provides more detail on the relationship of the eye and brain to colour.

already coded viewing habits and with prior expectations. Good paintings can challenge both positions directly derived from awareness of these positions.⁴

4. CONSTRUCTION: PATTERNS OF CONNECTEDNESS: STRUCTURE AND PROPORTIONS

Specific aspects of construction evident in a painting encourage recognitions that elaborate a pattern of connectedness, such as a recurrence of shapes. Patterns of connectedness are the basis of aesthetics and consciousness. Construction can involve structure and proportions, presenting rules and breakage from rules. In terms of structure we experience visual weight and stress, held by the edges of rectangular (as well as circular and oval) shapes, or left without ties, as if floating, in the visual plane. Paintings on cave walls, murals and scrolls provide for a different dynamical potential. Some aspects of construction will also encourage your viewing choices. A diagonal signal from the lower righthand corner will bring the eye back into the activity of the painting; the height of a horizon line can determine the visual perspective, determining the area of grounded activity in contrast to the represented distance. In terms of proportions we are influenced by the visual-cultural experience of having seen other paintings. The ideas inherited by Renaissance artists (ratified in book form by Luca Pacioli and the Leonardo da Vinci workshop in 1509) were already integral to the experience of design in buildings and codified in the works of Euclid and Vitruvius. Examples of using proportion, such as the Fibonacci series and Golden Section (1: 1.618...)⁵ provide a basis for traditional shapes (such as relations of height to width) and innovation from, or disruption of, that tradition.

5. EXTRINSIC AND INTRINSIC: REPRESENTATION AND REFERENTIALITY

Paintings provide a range of foci with regard to viewing options. Some paintings are overtly representational and referential and use extrinsic experiences to inform the meaning of the painting. This can be deceptive; referential works also rely on constructed or structural norms. Some paintings do not appear to rely on extrinsic factors, but appear to rely almost entirely on the integral experience of the artwork. The 'interaction of colour' (as Josef Albers named it⁶) appears to favour the integrated experience, but we could argue for the referential associations that some colours and shapes have, and which will also potentially vary with each viewer.

6. MEDITATIVE AND CONTEMPLATIVE: AFFECT AND EMPATHY

As viewers we have a multiplicity of choices that we make explicit, or are incidental, or we are unaware of them. A painting's evident flatness or its representation of depth affect our attentions in terms of meditative and contemplative experiences. The former is achieved from taking the flatness of the image into ourselves as an immediate presence. The latter is achieved by proposing to ourselves a distance and thus a future. Both of these responses interface personal experiences of affect and empathy.

⁴ Experiments in reading perception, for instance by Jon Oberlander with Keith Stenning and colleagues in Edinburgh, showed the reading speed variation across the width of a page and the return to the next line. Using multimodal reasoning and communication, they investigated the relationships between graphicality and expressiveness. Combining diverse research methods, they showed how differing multimodal presentations of the same material affected the ways that people with differing cognitive styles learn new formal systems; people are involved, as Oberlander put it, in 'the construction of formal models of the processes – perceptual, intellectual, and linguistic – by which knowledge and understanding are achieved and communicated'. Keith Stenning and Jon Oberlander. 'A Cognitive Theory of Graphical and Linguistic Reasoning: Logic and Implementation', *Cognitive Science*, 19 (1):97-140 (1995). See also, Zenon Kulpa. 'Diagrammatic Representation and Reasoning', *Machine Graphics and Vision*, Vol. 3, Nos. 1 & 2, 1994, pp. 77-103 and Janice Glasgow, N. Hari Narayanan, and B. Chandrasekaran (eds.) *Diagrammatic Reasoning: Cognitive and Computational Perspectives*, Cambridge, Mass.: AAAI Press and MIT Press, 1995.

⁵ The geometry for the 'Golden Section' can be seen in Euclid's *Elements* (300 BCE) and in Luca Pacioli's *Divine Proportions* (1509). The term 'Goldener Schnitt' can first be read in lesson-books on geometry and mathematics in Germany in the 1830s and in subsequent school books and books of instruction in the 1840s and '50s.

⁶ Josef Albers. *Interaction of Colour*, London: Yale University Press, 1963, reissued in anniversary edition, 2013. allenfisherstudio@icloud.com

7. MODERNIST DIFFERENCE: ABSTRACTION AND FIGURATIVE ATTENTIONS

An interaction or exchange of thoughts then rises. In the period 1950-1970 painters and viewers inherited critical changes regarding representation that started in Modernist painting in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁷ Put simply, the situation is that Abstraction and Figurative attentions are not mutually exclusive; they may appear to be quite separate, but they are not. This is partly because of cultural familiarity with the traditions of representation, but also because painters and viewers are involved in active experiences that renew at each viewing.

Allen Fisher, September, 2017, with revisions April, 2019.

⁷ My proposal is that Modernism begins as far back as paintings by Jacques-Louis David in the eighteenth century and is corroborated in T.J. Clark. *Farewell to an Idea. Episodes from a History of Modernism*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999. Different aspects of Modernism could also include paintings by Nicolas Poussin in the seventeenth century and by Piero della Francesca in the fifteenth.