



Noesis Becoming Noema

The role of pareidolia in naming the unnamed, an underdeveloped aspect of painting theory



Françoise Gilot relates a studio interaction between Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque in her memoir, [My Life With Picasso](#)¹. It has become one of my favorite stories to tell painting students, and it would seem appropriate to discuss relative to our conference topic, ImageWord, WordImage.



I remember one evening I arrived at Georges Braque's studio. He was working on a large oval still life with a package of tobacco, a pipe, and all the usual paraphernalia of Cubism. I looked at it, drew back and said, "My poor friend, this is dreadful. I see a squirrel in your canvas."



"Braque said, "That's not possible." I said, "Yes, I know, it's paranoiac vision, but it so happens that I see a squirrel. That canvas is made to be a painting, not an optical illusion. Since people need to see something in it, you want them to see a package of tobacco, a pipe, and the other things you're putting in. But for God's sake get rid of that squirrel."



Braque stepped back a few feet and looked carefully and sure enough, he too saw the squirrel, because that kind of paranoiac vision (as the Surrealists Dali and Ernst called it) is extremely communicable.

Day after day Braque fought that squirrel. He changed the structure, the light, the composition, but the squirrel always came back, because once it was in our minds it was almost impossible to get it out. However different the forms became, the squirrel somehow always managed to return. Finally, after eight or ten days, Braque was able to turn the trick and the canvas again became a package of tobacco, a pipe, a deck of cards, and above all a Cubist painting.



In hindsight, I can't help but think Braque and Picasso missed an interesting philosophical opportunity vis-à-vis the pesky squirrel. Indeed, other painters might have incorporated it into their work without considering the theoretical implications, simply delighting that the squirrel appeared—but not George, certainly not with Pablo looking on.

Insofar as painters seek to embrace the whole of visual consciousness, what my colleague Dr. Brian Winkenweder calls “*the very complicated process whereby the on-going instantaneity of phenomenological awareness slides into the unending barrage of semiosis*”ⁱⁱ, this incident represents to me as a painter a certain form of bad faith, however mundane the unwanted squirrel may have been. Mind you, the squirrel is no more mundane than a pipe or the contour of a guitar or a bottle of wine, it just didn't fit Cubism's nascent canon of pictorial representation.

Picasso and Braque were of course busy constructing a graphic language rethinking how to map dimensional and temporal experience, not spontaneous and fanciful interior visions, and certainly

2012 School of the Visual Arts National Conference on Liberal Arts and the Education of Artists, **WordImage/ImageWord**
Ron Mills de Pinyas, Professor of Visual Art, Linfield College, McMinnville, Oregon

not to a hybrid of the two, *even though* such is actually closer to our moment-to-moment lived experience. They wanted to purify the terms of their work, and we understand why. An inventory of what is actually going on in our consciousness would no doubt include normal sight, fragments of memory, optical afterimages known as *successive contrast*, visual fantasies, squirrels where they do not belong, and of course the named ImageWords we take to be unquestionable facts. To graphically compress aspects of all of that into a single painting was of course beyond the scope of their interests. Besides, it is messy and, however difficult such an attempt may be to paint it would be, it would astonishingly ambiguous to read or moreover to make sense of. I imagine it might look a bit like this 1993 canvas by David Salle entitled *Mingus in Mexico*.



Indeed, we artists are often undone by the emergence of real and sometimes unruly imagination. We resent that it strips and twists our will as it imposes itself, often counter to our intentions, supplanting control with the unexpected. One would think, however, that at some point painters might better accommodate—even theoretically—both sides of the interactions of eye and mind, looking inward and outward as we do in daily life.



Once we glimpse the squirrel we struggle to extricate ourselves. The uninvited visitor romps around in our carefully arranged sense of propriety; reality is rendered unmanageable. Such invaders, from what we take to be our own minds, would seem to have a nearly independence intelligence. It is as if the squirrel claims *being* by the simple fact of our having conjured it, an ImageWord made animate, nearly sentient. Braque's squirrel—really Picasso's invention based on Braque's fragmented and articulated surface, is not so much an "optical illusion", as Picasso called it, as it is an invention of his playful subconscious, exactly the sort of associative upwelling that I believe is useful in adding a new way in which we might elucidate how we name

and rename the world—and perhaps how it nearly insists on being named. In this light, one may even question the agency of creativity we perhaps vainly claim to be our own.



In the field of psychology, the term *pareidolia*ⁱⁱⁱ has recently been coined to refer to imagined patterns, images or what Wittgenstein might have called “aspects”^{iv}. Pareidolia neatly and generously escapes the stigma of the earlier term *apophenia*^v, defined as a psychosis, the *inability* to distinguish visions and reality.



One assumes that Dali and Ernst knew that their *paranoiac critical vision*^{viii} was perhaps not so much “paranoiac” as histrionic, as children commonly play games with themselves in this way.



However, had Dali or Ernst been possessed in some sense beyond their control, or had Braque been unable to eliminate the squirrel, apophenia might be appropriately used to describe these acts as something beyond the volition of the artist, not the product of creative will, per se; the power of the ImageWord understood in a more sinister light.



Apophenia is, however, surely apt in describing what fanatics continue to “see” and moreover believe. The popular press, particularly in the Third World, is full of miraculous “sightings” of the Virgin in the bark of trees, in water stains, even in half-melted chocolate drops on the factory floor.

2012 School of the Visual Arts National Conference on Liberal Arts and the Education of Artists, **WordImage/ImageWord**
Ron Mills de Pinyas, Professor of Visual Art, Linfield College, McMinnville, Oregon



Roadside signs in Costa Rica, for example, point to places where such sightings are available, readymade visions.



.....

More ominously, the devil is “seen” in smoke issuing from the burning towers of 9/11,



and other divinities and celebrities miraculously appear on the surface of grilled cheese sandwiches,



on tortillas and Pop Tarts, in patterns of lichen, mold stains and rock formations, all pre-existing beliefs and projections of faith or wishes confirmed through apophenic sightings, presumed proof in a tautological loop; a miracle leading nowhere save back into the mind of the delusional perceiver.

A confession: We painters are much more likely to *opportunistically* adopt and claim the products of *our* spontaneous imaginations—however weird and wonderful—however little we actually intended it. We happily take it into the sphere of our artistic identities, feeling secretly grateful for the gift our subconscious mind has given us. We know we are in this sense frauds, strictly speaking, even as others think us so clever and talented.



Paleolithic cave painters too were evidently in touch with the pareidolic impulse, in some cases clearly inspired by fissures and swells in rock formations as they rendered animals, both naturalistic and fantastic, in harmony with, and often composed of given rock features. One is left wondering if the swells in the rock surfaces were seen as bellies of beasts or the bellies of beasts seen as swollen rocks. To borrow terms from Aristotle and later alchemy, the *chaos* of natural wall surfaces may well have been treated by those early painters as psychic *prima materia*^{viii} giving way through artifice to *ultima materia*, the image-word.



In his *Treatise on Painting*, Da Vinci wrote, first quoting Botticelli:

...just by throwing a sponge soaked with various colors against a wall to make a stain, one can find a beautiful landscape. If it is true that in this stain various inventions can be discerned, or rather what one wants to find in it, such as battles, reefs, seas, clouds, forests and other similar things, then surely, this is like the ringing of bells in which one can understand whatever one wants to. But, even though these smears of color provide you with inventions, they also show you that they do not come to represent anything in particular.

Don't underestimate this idea of mine, which calls to mind that it would not be too much of an effort to pause sometimes to look into these stains on walls, the ashes from the fire, the clouds, the mud, or other similar places...

These will do you well because they will awaken genius with this jumble of things.

(All subsequent paintings in this presentation are mine)



The pareidolic impulse born of gazing at the “jumble of things” has much broader presence in

life than a studio trick to invoke artistic genius.



Naming the world and wanting to believe the inventions of the mind are, it would seem, closely related, sometimes blurring apophenia and pareidolia. A stick mistaken for a snake in the half-light is believed for an instant...and is then shaken off.



To use such occurrences as a painter, one merely suspends belief in favor of fascination, awe and wonder.



No matter how illusionistic a painter may intend their work to be, they work, by needs, with the half-seen, that which is incompletely known.



With an incomplete degree of sufficiency we struggle to stay awake with a brush in our hands, tenuously attentive in the narrow band of consciousness we seek to animate, through the ebb and flow of possible choices. Yet we choose; how do we choose?



It is through reflecting on this that I believe we may begin to describe what we mean by artistic inspiration, by doing what Merleau-Ponty would have described as a phenomenological “stepping back” (here he gets it right), a *heuristic reduction*, attending to how we come to

experience, to see, to perceive, to assign image-words to the flux in our minds, *noesis* becoming *noema*^{ix}, as Husserl termed it, the *object-as-it-appears* transformed into the *object-as-it-is-intended*, “bracketing” the attitude of *taken-for-grantedness* by awakening a profound sense of wonder in the face of the intersection of what is relatively undifferentiated and the nearly irresistible temptation to invoke the ImageWord, the closure that ends the reverie.



Noesis and Noema are twin sisters in our discussion. I wish to dance with both of them but I do have my favorite. I mean to assert that it is in the tension between unconscious fragments emerging through pareidolic imagination (*noesis*) and the naming mind (*noema*) that artistic intentionality is realized; that it is in this process that the mind is given full range, coming to know itself as a continuous coming to be; that “aspects” and “attributes” are provisional in the incessantly shifting gestalt underlying the image/word.



I contend that a painter’s stance relative to pareidolic impulses is formative in the development of artistic sensibility, indeed in the ability to talk about imagination *vis-a-vis* creation; that as we choose, we name what it is we are doing, attending to unconscious fragments of mental stuff around which patterns and images are constructed. Is in how we elevate figures above and against grounds that our minds and brushes complete the half-seen, the vague, the phantom^x, the provisional made inevitable, the squirrel that would not leave.

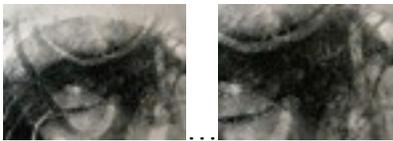


It is my thesis that the pareidolic phenomenon, by whatever ImageWord it succumbs, is an important mental reflex for artists and theorists to observe and respect; that it may very well offer a conceptual cornerstone, a working description of what painters and other artists do when they

experience awe, that special increase in undifferentiated consciousness found when Noesis approaches but had not yet become Noema.



Insight derived through looking at how the mind constructs ImageWords should clarify many issues, and while it should not be used to essentialize creativity, per se, it should help us understand the role image identification and mental name tags (and their undoing) plays in creative thought, in imagination, in improvisation, in the development of visual syntax.



In the famous essay *Eye and Mind*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty asserts “The painter’s world is a visual world, *nothing but visual*: a world almost *demented* because it is complete when it is yet only partial.^{xi}” It is convenient and I admit a bit charming to characterize painters in this way, but it is just not true. Painters are no more “demented” in this sense than we are pre-literate noble savages braving the wilds of precociousness without fig leaves to cover our passions or our ignorance, or even names for the beasts we find lurking in some exclusively visual world. Yes, many of us strive to regain wonder in the face of leaden normality, and that sometimes involves resisting pre-existing image/words^{xii} and conventional mental constructions, but we are fundamentally as burdened by what has been called *consensual reality* as anyone.



We painters are however *conjurers* to some degree, seeking to wrest clarity out of the phantasmagoria of the preconscious, the winsome from horrific confusion, from the sometimes delicate, startlingly complex beauty of undifferentiated background fields in which we are embedded, and with which we play as we create.

2012 School of the Visual Arts National Conference on Liberal Arts and the Education of Artists, **WordImage/ImageWord**
Ron Mills de Pinyas, Professor of Visual Art, Linfield College, McMinnville, Oregon



The pareidolic phenomenon constitutes what I consider to be a significant aspect of seeing the psyche and world melded together all at once, remaining in touch with what Merleau-Ponty called *the primacy of perception*, to wrench Something out of Everything, to hold up artistic trophies and to assert and to pretend provisionally, in full ironic awareness, that it has always been that way; the squirrel having at last been taken seriously.



As a painter, I am more and more inclined to not engage pareidolic issues fully, to a point of certainty, unlike the ancient cave painters, Botticelli, da Vinci and Ernst. Rather, in my recent work I seek a more detached view that harbors fewer squirrels. In this I confess that I dance more with Noesis than Noema. I seek to paint visual stimulus with many possible hooks but no attributes. Latent squirrels perhaps, but no squirrels born of my intentionality.



In this I work toward heightened, proto-pareidolic surfaces, if you will, partly structured fields, latent with forms in which the impulse is suspended, teased but not indulged, not ignored or resisted, per se, just not done.

In this I seek to sustain “aspect blindness” (to use Wittgenstein’s term) to not do “seeing-as”, leaving what Da Vinci called the “jumble of things” perhaps a bit less jumbled, but not defined either, open to the imagination of others but demanding of none. I court *noesis* but I merely flirt with *noema*. (One may not, I find, abandon either entirely.)



For me, there is sublime aesthetic pleasure in contemplating rich fields of possibility, free of associations. Like Braque and Picasso, I do not want squirrels building nests in my work either but for quite different reasons. By practicing not-doing, by not taking the pareidolic leap, I keep image-words in a tentative state of suspension. I prefer to gaze at my work, and that of others, as oceans of potential to be vivified, the eyes scanning half-formed gifts from the relative openness of what is just beyond the reach of my intentionality, ordered with a light touch, with optimistic appreciation for wonder in the face of a gracious and benevolent *lebenswelt*, whose aspects may be named this or that, but reluctantly, tentatively, if at all, as they seductively give me a partial contour here, a set of disconnected fragments there, an alignment, a shape, a hint at what could be if I choose to will it into existence—an analog taste (and no more) of what often feels, well, *better* than what the mind already knows.

ⁱ Life with Picasso. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964, pp. 76-77—

ⁱⁱ Dr. Brian Winkenweder, Private correspondence, October 7, 2012.

ⁱⁱⁱ Pareidolia (*pæriˈdɒliə/ parr-i-doh-lee-ə*) is a psychological phenomenon involving a vague and random stimulus (often an image or sound) being perceived as significant. Common examples include seeing images of animals or faces in clouds, the man in the moon or the Moon rabbit, and hearing hidden messages on records when played in reverse. The word comes from the Greek words *para* (παρά, "beside, alongside, instead") in this context meaning something faulty, wrong, instead of; and the noun *eidōlon* (εἶδωλον "image, form, shape") the diminutive of *eidos*. Pareidolia is a type of *apophenia*.

^{iv} Ludwig Wittgenstein's discussion of aspect perception in the latter part of the Philosophical Investigations is often credited with inspiring an important strand in contemporary explanations of depiction in which the visual experience of perceivers of pictures has a key role in the explanation. (Paraphrased from Jonanthan Fry's Wittgenstein and the Visual Experience of Depiction. <http://www.estheticatijdschrift.nl/magazine/2011/depiction/wittgenstein-and-visual-experience-depiction>. I agree with Wittgenstein but with one caveat, namely that artists may choose to behave as if they are blind if they so wish and that the mental ability to resist naming forms may be acquired through studio practice.

^v Apophenia is the experience of seeing meaningful patterns or connections random or meaningless data. The term was coined in 1958 by Klaus Conrad, who defined it as the "unmotivated seeing of connections" accompanied by a "specific experience of an abnormal meaningfulness", but it has come to represent the human tendency to seek patterns in random information in general (such as with gambling), paranormal phenomena, and religion.

^{vi} Dalí described the paranoiac-critical method as a "spontaneous method of irrational knowledge based on the critical and systematic objectivity of the associations and interpretations of delirious phenomena." "Paranoiac-critical activity organizes and objectivizes in an exclusivist manner the limitless and unknown possibilities of the systematic association_of subjective and objective 'significance' in the irrational..."

^{vii} Surrealist Max Ernst's dreamed up automatistic landscapes by working into rubbings, frottages. In his famous essay, The Surrealist Manifesto of 1924, and later his 1933 piece The Automatic Message (Le Message Automatique) Ernst expounded on the links between the unconscious, revealed through psychic automatism and paranoiac vision vis-a-vis the everyday rational naming mind.

^{viii} Prima Materia is, according to alchemists, the alleged primitive formless base of all matter, given particular manifestation through the influence of forms. The concept is sometimes attributed to Aristotle. The alchemical operation consists essentially in separating the prima materia, the so-called Chaos, into the active principle, the soul, and the passive principle, Mind-body dichotomy the body. They are then reunited in personified form in the coniunctio, the ritual combination of sol and Luna, which yields the magical child — *filius philosophorum* — the reborn self, known as the ultima materia. King, Hugh R. (June 1956). "[Aristotle without Prima Materia](#)". *Journal of the History of Ideas* (University of Pennsylvania Press) 17 (3): 370–389. doi:10.2307/2707550. JSTOR 10.2307/2707550. Retrieved 2008-01-27

^{ix} In *Ideas I* (Book One, 1913) Husserl introduced two Greek words to capture his version of the Bolzanoan distinction: *noesis* and *noema*, from the Greek verb *noéō* (νοέω), meaning to perceive, think, intend, whence the noun *nous* or mind). The intentional process of consciousness is called *noesis*, while its ideal content is called *noema*. The *noema* of an act of consciousness Husserl characterized both as an ideal meaning and as “the object as intended”. Thus the phenomenon, or object-as-it-appears, *noesis* becomes the *noema*, or object-as-it-is-intended. From the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/phenomenology/>. ...thus the phenomenon, or object-as-it-appears, becomes the *noema*, or object-as-it-is-intended. Dr. Brian Winkenweder, 2012, private conversation and email.

^{ix} <http://www.phenomenologyonline.com/inquiry/methodology/reductio/heuristic-reduction/>

^x In fact, the second root of *pareidolia*, *eidolia*, is the diminutive of *eidōs* means “like a phantom”, less than the fully realized *eidōlon* (εἰδῶλον "image, form, shape").

^{xi} *The Primacy of Perception, Eye and Mind*, edited by James M. Edie, Northwest University Press, 1964

^{xii} One of the key debates between Husserl and the later phenomenologist (Heidegger, Sartre, Levinas, Merleau-Ponty) was precisely around whether or not Husserl’s *presuppositionless transcendental ego* can be realized directly or whether, as the later phenomenologists thought, we are in some sense striving for it and yet never quite reaching it.