

Wittgenstein's philosophy of seeing-as: multiple ways to philosophical perspicuity

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Summary: 1. Introduction; 2. Seeing-as and categorization: Wittgenstein's approach in the first part of the *Philosophical Investigations*; 3. Wittgenstein's philosophy of the *Kippbild*; 4. Physiognomy, Language, *Kippbild*: Differences, Similarities, Asymptotic convergences.

Abstract: The article explores the broad issue of aspectuality in Wittgenstein's philosophy arguing that *Kippbilder*, aspect change, perception of aspect, aspect blindness and *Bedeutungs Erlebnis* are related to a meditation on specific forms of subjectivity. Analysing different grammatical configurations of ambiguous images in (visual, acoustic, sensomotiric) perception, in language and in art he also shows how aspectual structures combine simultaneous perception of two elements (et-et model, for exemple physiognomy and its expression) and mutually exclusive aspect perception (aut-aut model as in the duck-rabbit *Kippbild*). Wittgenstein seems to believe that this double model somewhat challenges classical rationality and that aspectual experiences should have a more relevant place in our form of life.

Keywords: *Kippbild*/ambiguous image, aspectuality, perception, language, perspicuity, Wittgenstein

1. Introduction

Why did Wittgenstein introduce *Kippbilder* and the connected experiences of seeing-as and aspect change in his meditation? A first answer could be that indicated by Ray Monk in his Wittgenstein-biography: in the last period of his reflection the philosopher would assume a pluralistic method focusing on differences.¹

Differences at this level would not refer to specific phenomena, but at first to the very philosophical use of *Kippbilder* and in particular to the possibility of analyzing them from opposite points of view and of identifying in ambiguous images a paradoxical dimension which is specific to philosophical inquiry.

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I would like to thank Christoph Holzhey who read a previous version of this article and Sandra Markewitz, who several years ago proposed me to publish this contribution in a collectaneous volume under her direction devoted to grammatical subjectivity in Wittgenstein's philosophy. Given the unscrutability of the book's publication date I decided to publish it here but I'm still grateful for her support and the article's revision she let do for the book.

¹ In the chapter "Changing aspect" Monk reminds us that Wittgenstein claimed that his motto could be Shakespeare's statement in *King Lear*: "I'll teach you differences", see Ray MONK, Ludwig WITTGENSTEIN. *The Duty of Genius*, New York: Penguin Books, 1990; already in the *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* Wittgenstein presents the Necker cube as *Kippbild* but doing so he seems to deny that the phenomenon of seeing the cube under two different aspects and of switching from one to the other aspect is a relevant one. According to recent interpretations of the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein's reductionist attitude should rather be considered ironical and provocative towards his readers.

More precisely, it is critical philosophy which is intrinsically forced to proceed through *Umkippungen* (Kant), the constant switching of points of view.² In this sense *Kippbilder* would contribute to the search for a perspicuous representation which Wittgenstein in the *Philosophical Investigations* connects with the introduction of intermediary members. At a self-reflective level – that of a critical meditation, the meditation of philosophy on itself – being an intermediary member for *Kippbilder* means 1) situating themselves between fields such as sensibility and reason or perception and language, 2) dissolving the illusion that these are domains with clear-cut borders, and 3) re-designing their reciprocal connections in a more connected and articulated form.

One also has to take into consideration the fact that the reflection on *Kippbilder* is neither unitary nor refers exclusively to images with the same structure; in fact Wittgenstein sketches a varied, open typology of ambiguous images. He associates all kinds of *Kippbilder* to a complex activity, namely to *seeing-as* (*Sehen als*) or aspect-perception, which links together different objects and images with specific subjective or rather intersubjective experiences. It is not by accident that Wittgenstein introduces the term “aspect” (*Aspekt*), for semantically expressing the link between objective and subjective dimensions: perception of different aspects in the same image and aspect-change (that is switching from one to the other aspects). The Latin origin of the term, “*aspectus*,” contains both subjective and objective elements, it is an enantiosemic word structured according to the diathesis active-passive: *aspectus* is on the one hand the look, the act of seeing, and on the other hand the object seen.

Another relevant meaning of the Latin word is physiognomy, as in the physical and expressive aspect of a person. Although the modern equivalents of “*aspectus*” lost the enantiosemic character of the Latin word, they still bear most of the polysemic senses and the subjective nuances linked to the meaning of “point of view” or “perspective.”

In this sense one could say that aspect or at least its etymological predecessor is itself a *Kippbild*, an ambiguous linguistic image linking together different elements or – in Wittgenstein’s terminology – precisely “aspects.”

Wittgenstein’s meditation on aspect-change, seeing-as and *Kippbilder* is imbued with an openness and radicality that goes beyond and questions classical philosophy and its metaphysical inspiration, while also showing a strong continuity with a certain philosophical tradition, the Kantian one. On the one side, the original character of Wittgenstein’s reflection consists in the fact that it cannot be attributed to a particular field – psychological, epistemological or in the field of aesthetics – but takes an intermediary position among all of them and ends up suspending a topological design of philosophy and rationality. On the other side, the multiperspectival character of Wittgenstein’s analysis is deeply

² Kant uses the expression “Umkipfung” in a letter from 1768 to Herder describing his methodological approach as consisting in constantly analyzing philosophical questions from different points of view. I explored the analogies between Wittgenstein’s reflections on seeing-as and Kant’s methodology in: Sara FORTUNA, *Wittgensteins Philosophie des Kippbilds. Aspektwechsel, Ethik, Sprache*, Wien/Berlin: Turia+Kant 2012.

rooted in the philosophical tradition of German philosophy at the end of the Eighteenth Century: in particular, the discussions and specific solutions concerning issues around human perception and bodily expression, language, and the role and interaction of faculties in the cognitive, linguistic, ethical and aesthetic fields.³

My contribution will be developed in three parts. In the first part, I will explore the historical and philosophical context in which one can situate the issue of seeing-as and aspect-perception (as different from that of *Kippbild* and aspect-change) showing that the first part of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* aims at critically confronting the classical gnoseological tradition on perceptive and linguistic categorization. In the second part, I will present Wittgenstein's broad exemplification of *Kippbilder*, including, on the one side, perceptive, linguistic, and aesthetic examples, and on the other side a reflection on the faculties at stake in the phenomenon of aspect-change and on the specific temporality which underlies this phenomenon. In the third part, I will describe the analogy which Wittgenstein draws between physiognomic phenomena and aspect-change in *Kippbilder* arguing that he presents hereby a double model, in which we have a structural opposition from the *et-et* model of physiognomy and the *aut-aut* model of the *Kippbild*. My hypothesis is that Wittgenstein's final goal in linking together the two examples/models is to question their difference and propose a scenario in which the borders between the two structures blur and produce a configuration that is beyond the classical model of rationality to which we are accustomed.

2. Seeing-as and categorization: Wittgenstein's approach in the first part of the *Philosophical Investigations*

Let's consider at first seeing-as and aspect perception as phenomena which are independent from aspect-change, which typically (but not exclusively) takes place in visual *Kippbilder*. Wittgenstein introduces the former issue in paragraphs 72-74 of the first part of the *Philosophical Investigations*. Wittgenstein speaks of a sample of green which is common to all the tonalities of green or of a form of a leaf which is the sample of all kinds of leaves. The perceiving of the common element could be considered an aspect, something we see as green or as a specific form. This analysis has first of all a critical goal, which is twofold. On the one hand, Wittgenstein wants to fight the representationalist position which identifies the aspect with something mental, a sample deposited in our mind. On the other hand, he would also like to deny that this approach correctly describes how categorization functions. In this sense, he seems to confront the gnoseological traditions – both the empiricist and the rationalist one – and their mentalist stance. Kant's doctrine of schematism presents itself as a way to

³ I also confronted this more general issue in Sara FORTUNA, *Wittgensteins Philosophie des Kippbilds. Aspektwechsel, Ethik, Sprache*, Wien/Berlin: Turia+Kant.

overcome the theoretical impasse of both traditional models of abstraction. Seeing something under a general aspect (form, color, etc.) means seeing it under a specific schema which mediates between sensibility and cognition.⁴ In paragraph 73 Wittgenstein explicitly mentions the notion of schema:

“But might there not be such ‘general’ samples? Say a schematic leaf, or a sample of *pure green*?” – Certainly there might. But for such a schema to be understood as a schema, and not as a shape of a particular leaf, and for a slip of pure green to be understood as a sample of all that is greenish and not as sample of pure green – this in turn resides in the way the samples are used.”⁵

In focusing on the particular use of the sample, Wittgenstein interestingly not only touches upon the classical Kantian issue of the application of the general concept to the individual case and its problematic character (one can indefinitely multiply the rules and still be unable to do the correct application); he also seems to refer to a conception of empirical schema which is not the static and pictorial one of the doctrine of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, but rather that of the *Critique of Judgement*, where the empirical schema becomes an example. The example, which is always given in a specific context, also exhibits the rules of its application, the technique of its use. Wittgenstein claims that this is so because rules are learned by training, by just being given practical examples, and they are mostly followed blindly when people play ordinary linguistic games. It is only from the point of view of the observer that different behaviours of a player interacting with an object could be explained by the fact that she is seeing it under different aspects. What is crucial is the connection between the behavior and the different ways of seeing something:

“Here also belongs the idea that if you see this leaf as a sample of 'leaf shape in general' you *see* it differently from someone who regards it as, say, a sample of this particular shape. Now this might well be so – though it is not so – for it would only be to say that, as a matter of experience, if you *see* the leaf in a particular way, you use it in such-and-such a way or according to such-and-such rules. Of course, there is such a thing as seeing in *this* way or *that*; and there are also cases where whoever sees a sample like *this* will in general use it in *this* way, and whoever sees it otherwise in another way. For example if you see the schematic drawing of a cube as a plane figure consisting of a square and two rhombi you will, perhaps, carry out the order, “Bring me something like this,” differently from someone who sees the picture three-dimensionally.”⁶

It is only by paying attention to what happens within a linguistic game that one could tell the specific aspect under which the image is used. And yet for the person who is playing the game, this aspectual dimension most frequently remains hidden. Significantly, Wittgenstein describes the relationship that

⁴ On this point, see Jean-Pierre NARBOUX, “Les usages de “als”. Entre le superlatif et l’ordinaire“, in: *Wittgenstein et les mots de l’esprit. Philosophie de la psychologie*, eds. C. Chauviré, S. Laugier, J.J. Rosat, Paris: Vrin, 2001, S. 225-262 and Sara FORTUNA, *Il giallo di Wittgenstein. Etica e linguaggio tra filosofia e detective story*, Milan: Mimesis 2010, S. 122-125.

⁵ Ludwig WITTGENSTEIN, *Philosophical Investigations*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1953, PU, I, § 73.

⁶ WITTGENSTEIN, PU, § 74, S. 51. IS “51”.

the person establishes with the objects and the entire context of her interaction by using the analogy of physiognomy, in which one first reacts spontaneously, in an affective way and without reflection. Wittgenstein's remark that "seeing aspects is built up on the basis of other games"⁷ could be understood in this sense. Whereas aspect-change seems to be closer to reflective, rational behavior and, as we will see, to language, the first forms of aspectual perception are not visual (although they are metonymically called seeing-as), but are rather a form of acting-as, like those of children's fiction games:

"How does one play the game "It could be *this* too"? What a figure could also be – which is what it can be seen as – is not simply another figure. Thus it made no sense to say: F could also be an F. Nor would this make sense: – this could mean several entirely different things.

But one could play that game, for instance, with a child. Together we look at a shape or at a random object (a piece of furniture) and then it is said: "That is now supposed to be a house."- And now it is reported, talked about, and treated as if it were a house, and it is altogether interpreted as this. Then, when the same thing is made to stand for something else, a different fabric will be woven around it."⁸

But even these are quite developed perceptive and symbolic interactions.⁹ Our ordinary habits and ordinary actions could not be considered as aspectual:

"Neither could one normally say "I take that to be a knife and fork".

One doesn't take what one knows as a knife and fork at a meal for a knife and fork; any more than one ordinarily tries to eat as one eats, or aims to eat."¹⁰

It is in the training and in the cultural scheme of the action "eating using a fork and a knife" that the recognition of these tools is embedded. Seeing them as different aspects would imply playing a completely different kind of game – practicing other activities like critical philosophy or art.

3. Wittgenstein's Philosophy of the Kippbild

Presenting the concept of aspect change and of "seeing something now as ... now as ...," Wittgenstein often makes use of artificial images, the so called ambiguous images, "*Kippbilder*" in German or "multistable images" (or "bi-stable" when they are composed of two aspects) as Gestalt psychologists suggest naming them.¹¹

⁷ Ludwig WITTGENSTEIN, *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*, 2 vol., Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980, BPP, II, 541, 96.

⁸ WITTGENSTEIN, BPP, II, 535.

⁹ Wittgenstein seems to consider in a similar way the concept of insight referred to animal behaviours as it is described in the famous experiment of Köhler, see BPP, II, p. 224.

¹⁰ WITTGENSTEIN, *Letzte Schriften über die Philosophie der Psychologie*, 2 vol., Oxford 182-1992, LS, 535-6.

¹¹ This is for example the linguistic proposal of Paolo Bozzi, a Gestalt psychologist, who was a pupil of Gaetano Kanizsa, in his analysis of Wittgenstein's remarks on seeing as; see Paolo BOZZI, *Vedere come. Commenti ai §§ 1-29 delle Osservazioni sulla filosofia della psicologia di Wittgenstein*, Milano: Guerini, 1998.

Visual *Kippbilder* form only a fraction of the numerous examples capable of illustrating the phenomenon of aspect-change. Acoustic patterns, musical and poetic compositions, ambiguous sentences are also present in Wittgenstein's description of the experience of aspect-change, which is mostly contained in chapter 11 of the second part of the *Philosophical Investigations*, in the *Remarks on Philosophy of Psychology*, and in the *Last Writings on Philosophy of Psychology*. And nevertheless, visual *Kippbilder* have indeed a prominent role in Wittgenstein's "album." Why? Probably because very simple graphic patterns such as the duck-rabbit and the Necker cube have the advantage of presenting in quite a dramatic way the phenomenon of aspect-change and the mysterious and paradoxical experience of aspect-switch: a picture remains identical, and at the same time it becomes something completely different. Wittgenstein's anti-dogmatic approach invites us to use *Kippbilder* as a conceptual tool which proves to be useful in bringing clarity into an ample range of philosophical questions:

"A main source of our failure to understand is that we do not *command a clear view* of the use of our words. – Our grammar is lacking in this sort of perspicuity. A perspicuous representation produces just that understanding which consists in 'seeing connections.' Hence the importance of finding and inventing *intermediate cases*."¹²

One could say that *Kippbilder* are such intermediate cases. But intermediate in relation to what? This question does not allow a single answer as Wittgenstein considers *Kippbilder* from so many different points of view. The perspectival multiplicity of these aspectual remarks becomes a mark of his anti-systematic method.

Let's start finding possible answers to that question. From the subjective point of view, that of the subject who is experiencing the aspect-change, the *Kippbild* is an intermediate field in which a sensorial and a cognitive dimension are deeply intermingled: "when the aspect dawns, can I separate a visual experience from a thought-experience? – If you separate them the dawning of the aspect seems to vanish".¹³ Wittgenstein stresses the fact that seeing-as is not a mere interpretation because we really perceive the image under its two or several aspects; at the same time he also recognizes the cognitive element of seeing-as: "One wants to ask of seeing an aspect: 'it seeing? Is it thinking?' The aspect is subject to the will: this by itself relates it to thinking"¹⁴ We can voluntarily produce the aspect-change, but at the same time what we experience here is a biased transformation, and the biases are again of a sensorial nature: "The aspect is subject to the will." This isn't an empirical proposition. It makes sense to say, "See this circle as a hole, not as a disc", but it doesn't make sense to say, "See it as a rectangle," "See it as being red".¹⁵

¹² PU I, § 122.

¹³ LS, I, 564.

¹⁴ LS, 544, 98.

¹⁵ LS, 445, 98.

Perceiving aspects also seems close to a schematic process that is driven by an act of imagination: “Wherein lies the similarity between the seeing of an aspect and thinking? That this seeing does not have the consequences of perception; that it is similar in this way to imagining”.¹⁶ Introducing simpler kinds of *Kippbilder* such as triangles or a double cross Wittgenstein emphasizes the active, dynamic role of imagination: “The aspect is dependent on the will. In this way it is like imagination”.¹⁷ This also means that the *pendant* of aspect perception is the production of a specific configuration: “The aspect dawns; it doesn’t remain fixed. But that has to be a conceptual, and not a psychological, remark. The expression of seeing an aspect is the expression of a *new* perception”.¹⁸ Seeing-as should not be considered as a mental act, nor as a specific form of representation, but rather as an activity which can assume different forms and give rise to different techniques: “The expression of the aspect is the expression of a way of taking (hence, of a way-of-dealing-with, of a technique); but used as a description of a state”.¹⁹ The description of a state is then dependent on the “way-of-dealing,” on the praxiological dimension.²⁰

Wittgenstein seems to adopt a double strategy: at the beginning of chapter 11 in the second part of the *Philosophical Investigations* he opposes ‘normal’ seeing to the perception of aspects, which he links to the analogic activity of finding similarities (first of all physiognomic ones),²¹ and yet this seems to be only a starting point: the field of sensoriality progressively appears to be much more complex and the borders between its different forms fuzzier than expected:

“Experiencing an aspect expresses itself in this way: ‘Now it is....’ What is the philosophical importance of this phenomenon? Is it really so much odder than everyday visual experiences? Does it cast an unexpected light on them? – In the description of it, (the) problems about the concept of seeing come to a head.”²²

Compared with many other experiences and interwoven with other human and animal capabilities, seeing-as ends up being much closer to many forms of ‘attentional,’ dynamic and multisensorial perception than to a mere contemplative, only visual sensorial activity.

And now let’s move to a second possible answer concerning the intermediate character of the *Kippbild*. From the point of view of its internal structure, *Kippbilder* such as the duck-rabbit seem to be suspended between two different ‘grammars’ which respectively correspond to an *aut-aut* and an *et-et*

¹⁶ LS, I, 177.

¹⁷ LS, I, 452.

¹⁸ LS, I, 518.

¹⁹ BPP, I, 1025.

²⁰ According to recent interpretations, Gramsci’s thought on the role of human praxis was the main source for Wittgenstein’s reflection on this matter. Piero Sraffa, a friend of Wittgenstein and a pupil of Gramsci, provided the fruitful link between the two thinkers, see Amartya SEN, SRAFFA, ‘Wittgenstein and Gramsci’, in: *Journal of Economic Literature*, vol. 41, 2003, S. 1240-1255, and Franco LO PIPARO, *Il professor Gramsci e Wittgenstein. Il linguaggio e il potere*, Roma: Donzelli, 2014.

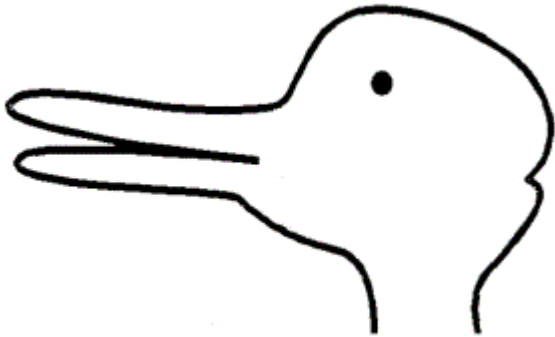
²¹ PU, II, xi, 431*.

²² LS, 171-172.

model. One could say that the experience of aspect-change gives access to the *aut-aut* model, that is, to the biased visual form which does not allow us to see a bistable image under its two different aspects at the same time. We can see the duck-rabbit now as a rabbit, now as a duck, but never see it as both in a sort of hybridization of the image. Nor can we see the *Kippbild* as an asemantic image, we always perceive one of the two meanings (duck or rabbit)²³; and in the two silhouettes, we also immediately grasp a specific physiognomic expression which cannot be separated from the two sketches.

Wittgenstein confronts this point:

“Ought I to say: “A rabbit may look like a duck”? Would it be conceivable that someone who knows rabbits but not ducks should say: “I can see the drawing



as a rabbit and also in another way, although I have no word for the second aspect”? Later he gets to know ducks and says: “That’s what I saw the drawing as that time!” – Why is that not possible?”²⁴

To recognize the duck in the picture does not seem to depend on the linguistic meaning, but is rather an act of a perceptive nature which is significant from the beginning. It also includes an expressive dimension:

“It is clear that only someone who sees the ambiguous picture as a rabbit will be able to imitate the expression on the face of the rabbit. So if he sees the picture in this way, this will enable him to judge a particular kind of resemblance.”²⁵

Perceiving the expression is equivalent to the mimic capacity: the first form of expressive perception is imitation. From this activity derives the capacity to grasp expressive similarities, which links different sensorial and symbolic fields, visual, acoustic, sensomotoric, poetic, pictorial, etc.

I would like to stress the fact that also in the case of the expression within a *Kippbild*, Wittgenstein argues that the meaning is directly perceived in the aspect and cannot be reconstructed in a mediated way through different steps or originate from the linguistic label for a concept:

²³ s. BPP I, 869.

²⁴ BPP, I, 70.

²⁵ BPP, II, 993.

“Or suppose someone said: This rabbit has a complacent expression. – If someone knew nothing about a complacent expression – might something strike him here, and he later on, having learnt to recognize complacency, say that that was the expression that struck him then?”²⁶

Wittgenstein’s argument connecting the perceptual and the expressive dimension in the *Kippbild* focuses on the *et-et* structure, that is, on the fact that the sensorial and the expressive element are always intermingled in the perceptive experience. At the same time experiencing images which have an *aut-aut* structure like *Kippbilder* allows us to understand that one can in fact, under specific conditions, produce a sort of separation of the elements, introducing a tension between identity and difference:

“The somewhat queer phenomenon of seeing this way or that surely makes its first appearance when someone recognizes that the optical picture in one sense remains the same, while something else, which one might call “conception,” may change. If I take the picture for this or that, let’s say for two wheels turning opposite ways, there is so far no question of a division of the impression into optical picture and conception – Should I say, then, that this division is the phenomenon that interests me?”²⁷

Here Wittgenstein differentiates between two different ways of perceiving the aspects of the *Kippbild*: a person could have the specific experience of the aspect change which implies that one is aware of the fact that the image remains the same while its aspectual organization changes, but one could also see the two aspects without having the experience of the aspect switch. Although it is not so likely that a person could perceive two aspects in a bistable image without realizing that they are aspects of the same picture and switching from one to another, Wittgenstein invents a specific pathology, that of aspect-blindness, which allows him to isolate these two possibilities (aspect-change on the one hand and perception of the two aspects of a bistable image without aspect-change on the other). But why is it so important for Wittgenstein to stress this difference? One reason is surely that he wants to make clear the specificity of seeing-as in comparison with other forms of perceiving-as which like imitation have an inter-active, dynamic character:

“Or let us ask this: What reaction am I interested in? The one that shews that someone takes a bowl for a bowl (and so also the one that shews that he takes a bowl for something else)? Or the one that shews that he observes a change and yet shews at the same time that nothing has altered in his optical picture?”²⁸

The first case refers to different interactions with the same object in which only the observer can say that the object is used according to different aspectual angles, whereas in the second case the observer is the very person who makes the experience of the aspect-change. The visual pattern seems to be the precondition to understand the connection between identity and difference in multistable images. In

²⁶ BPP, I, 71.

²⁷ BPP, I, 27.

²⁸ BPP, I, 27.

any other case one tends to ‘lose’ the side of identity, even in the case of hearing – that is, in the experience of acoustic *Kippbilder* – as the experience of aspect-change tends to hide the fact that the acoustic image remains the same:

“But now think of the aspects of the rotating drum. When they change, it seems as if the movement had changed. Here one doesn’t necessarily know whether it is the kind of *movement* that has changed, or the aspect. And therefore we don’t in the same sense have the experience of the change of aspect.”²⁹

In this respect, the visual *Kippbild* is sort of unique in the field of perception (and it is not by accident that Wittgenstein speaks of seeing-as and not more generally of perceiving-as).

4. Physiognomy, Language, Kippbild: Differences, Similarities, Asymptotic convergences

In the final part of this article I would like to explore a connection among three dimensions: physiognomy (as an *et-et* model), multistable images or *Kippbilder* (as an *aut-aut* model) and language as an ‘intermediate member,’ which not only shares characteristics of both models, but also allows an asymptotic convergence between them. The paradigmatic place where this asymptotic convergence becomes a crucial element is the aesthetic experience and especially the poetic use of language. The structure of visual bistable images bears strong analogies with the linguistic one. Wittgenstein explores the connection between visual and linguistic *Kippbilder* by presenting several examples of ambiguous words and sentences and showing that as in the case of visual *Kippbilder* one can correctly understand all meanings of a polysemic word or sentence without having the experience of the aspect-change.

Aspect-change is not required in most cases of ordinary uses of language and seems necessary only in (statistically) marginal uses as in jokes or in the aesthetic uses of aspectual organization.

And, according to Wittgenstein, a structural connection between *Kippbilder* and language is linked to the fact that seeing-as seems to be deeply embedded in a semiotic linguistic practice:

“Don’t I see the figure sometimes this way, sometimes otherwise, even when I don’t react with words or any other signs?

But “sometimes this way”, “sometimes otherwise” are after all words, and what right have I to use them here? Can I prove my right to you, or to myself? (Unless by a further reaction.)

But surely I know that there are two impressions, even if I don’t say so! But how do I know that what I say then, is the thing that I knew?”³⁰

On the one hand, Wittgenstein highlights the fact that seeing-as could be accompanied by different linguistic forms: one can invite another person to see a bistable image under different aspects saying to

²⁹ LS, I, 569.

³⁰ BPP, I, 15.

her, “Now see it as a rabbit, now as a duck,” or one could describe her experience using the words, “This time I have seen it as a rabbit, last time as a duck.” On the other hand, the experience of seeing-as seems to be merely perceptive and independent from those linguistic formulations. And yet at another, less evident level, the aspect shift in *Kippbilder* presupposes a double structure which is also characteristic of verbal language.

That becomes clear if we consider that Wittgenstein draws a peculiar analogy between a face – one could say: a highly aspectual device with the *et-et* form – and a word (and also between a group of faces and a sentence):

“While any word – one would like to say – may have a different character in different contexts, all the same there is *one* character – a face – that it always has. It looks at us. – For one might actually think that each word was a little face; the written sign might be a face. And one might also imagine that the whole proposition was a kind of group-picture, so that the gaze of the faces all together produced a relationship among them and so the whole made a *significant group*. But what constitutes the experience of a group’s being significant?”³¹

Wittgenstein’s remark lingers on an analogy whose character is considered somewhat special, exceptional. He stresses the fact that we don’t need to feel the physiognomic aspect of a sentence in order to be able to use it. This claim recalls, on the one hand, what Wittgenstein writes about the impairment of “aspect blindness,” which affects neither the ordinary uses of language nor the normal perceptual interaction with words. On the other hand, here he seems to refer to the experience he defines as *Bedeutungserlebnis*, that is, the experience we make of the meaning of a word or a sentence. Also the *Bedeutungserlebnis* does not seem to have an impact on normal communication. It is when we use polysemic words that we can try to experience the different meanings of a word which becomes a sort of linguistic *Kippbild*:

“Say “It is hard to still one’s fears” and pronounce the fifth word with the feeling of a connective! In the course of ordinary conversation, practice pronouncing a word which has two meanings with the inappropriate feeling. (If it is not connected with a wrong tone of voice, it doesn’t impede communication.)”³²

Even in this case it is the specific (syntactic and semantic) role that a meaning has within the sentence and not the feeling one has of it that allows the correct understanding of a homonymic/polysemic word. But if the context is the essential precondition for the aspect to dawn – to make use of Wittgenstein’s expression – a sort of double, twofold, ambivalent context can then allow two linguistic aspects to coexist at the same time:

³¹ BPP, I, 322.

³² BPP, I, 332.

“I can no more see the rabbit and the duck at the same time than I can mean the words ‘Weiche Wotan, weiche!’ in their two meanings.” – But that would not be right; what is right is that it is not natural for us to pronounce these words in order to tell Wotan he should depart, and in saying so to tell him that we prefer our eggs soft boiled. And yet it would be possible to imagine such a use of words.”³³

In the case of this joke two converging situations give different meanings of the same sentence (one is a sentence of Wagner' opera *Das Rheingold*, the other is the answer to the question asked to the singer playing Wotan: “Do you like your eggs soft or hard?”). Wittgenstein considers the sentence as a linguistic *Kippbild*, but also stresses the difference with a perceptive bistable image such as the duck-rabbit image. Whereas the latter is a silhouette without a context in which visual biases forbid seeing simultaneously the two aspects of the image, the former could be understood in a same moment in its different aspects/meanings as they are distributed in two different situations.

Nevertheless, Wittgenstein insists that in most uses of language the linguistic *Kippbilder*, though present in all languages, remain mostly hidden in the ordinary uses. That means that we are normally in the same condition as the aspect-blind: in different situations we understand homonymic and polysemic expressions under just one meaning, and using the different meanings of a word in different contexts we don't necessarily become aware that they are meanings/aspects of the same linguistic expression.

The arbitrary character of language is linked to this element. The meaning bears no iconic link with the signifier on the one side, and, on the other side, it is determined by its semantic and morpho-syntactic relations with other linguistic items with which it can be combined. However, such a way of looking at human language is just one among many: “Language can be observed from various points of view. And they are reflected in the respective concepts of ‘meaning’.”³⁴ Linguistic seeing-as and *Kippbilder* seem to offer another perspective which is normally not visible given that linguistic *Kippbilder*, according to the most common way of considering language, seem to be produced as collateral effects by the linguistic structure and to be excluded by the normal functioning of verbal communication. And yet considering linguistic *Kippbilder* in opposition to a normal use of language is again the effect of a specific conception of language – one in which the exclusion of contradiction plays a significant role: “Aristotelian logic brands a contradiction as a non-sentence, which is to be excluded from language. But this logic only deals with a very small part of the logic of our language.”³⁵

By closely connecting language and physiognomic expression, Wittgenstein proposes to look at language in a broader way, situating it in an intermediary position between physiognomic expression (*et-et* model) and seeing-as (*aut-aut* model).

³³ BPP, I, 77.

³⁴ LS, I, 816.

³⁵ LS, I, 525.

In particular, he explores the different connections between linguistic and physiognomic expressions. From the perspective of the ontogenetic development of language, the expressive dimension is the essential background which makes such an evolution possible: “If you ask yourself how a child learns ‘beautiful,’ ‘fine,’ etc., you find it learns them roughly as interjections.”³⁶ Wittgenstein also refers to a sort of natural physiognomic pedagogy that parents and caretakers spontaneously use with little children: “One thing that is immensely important in teaching is exaggerated gestures and facial expressions. The word is taught as a substitute for a facial expression or a gesture.”³⁷ But also for adults physiognomic expression remains linked to language and represents an effective symbolic resource to fill verbal meaning:

“Such words as ‘pompous’ and ‘stately’ could be expressed by faces. Doing this, our description would be more flexible and various than they are as expressed by adjectives. If I say of a piece of Schubert’s that it is melancholy, that is like giving it a face [...]. I could instead use gestures or [Rhees] dancing. In fact, if we want to be exact, we do use a gesture or a facial expression.”³⁸

The physiognomic, mimic and, more generally, bodily dimension seem more apt to express certain meanings than the verbal one. There is a disproportion between the two semantic potentials: “One may also say: “He made this face” or “His face altered like this,” imitating it – and again one can’t describe it in any other way. (There just are many more languages-games that are dreamt of in the philosophy of Carnap and others)”³⁹.

In this remark Wittgenstein implicitly extends the range of linguistic games and includes the mimic representation of physiognomic meanings which cannot be adequately expressed through verbal expressions. At the same time, he also stresses that it is often possible to find linguistic expressions to represent feelings that establish analogies with natural phenomena to which we have access through perception:

“It is important, however, that there are all these paraphrases! That one can describe care with the words “Ewiges Düstere steigt herunter” (“Descent of permanent cloud”, Goethe, Faust, II, V)”⁴⁰.

According to Wittgenstein, the genetic connection between the perceptual and the linguistic domain also allows more sophisticated narrative elaborations or correspondences of a single facial expression:

“[...] A *strong* expression I could easily connect with a story for example. Or with looking for a story. When we speak of the enigmatic smile of the Mona Lisa, that may well mean that we ask ourselves: In what situation, in what story, might one smile like that? And so it would be conceivable

³⁶ Ludwig WITTGENSTEIN, *Lectures and conversations on aesthetics, psychology and religious belief*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1966, 5, 2.

³⁷ LC, 5, 2.

³⁸ LC, 10, 4.

³⁹ BPP, I, 920.

⁴⁰ BPP, I, 853.

for someone to find a solution; he tells a story and we say to ourselves: ‘Yes, *that* is the expression which *this* character would have assumed here.’”⁴¹

On the one hand, the story which corresponds to Mona Lisa’s expression should necessarily refer to a broader context where a smile is situated within a specific interaction with other persons. On the other hand, the *et-et* model in the aspectual configurations could also explain Mona Lisa’s strong expression and the famous enigmatic character of the portrait’s smile: according to the analysis of a Swiss psychologist, what produces the enigmatic effect of Mona Lisa’s face is the combination of two opposed physiognomic patterns which respectively express modesty and arrogance.⁴² Leonardo’s portrait would be a sort of *Kippbild* in which, instead of the aspect-change between two aspects, we have a synthesis of them. Physiognomy is an iconic device in which the change of the face’s physical traits is always linked with a transformation in the expression: “‘A quite particular expression’ – it is part of this that if one makes the slightest alteration in the face, the expression changes at once.”⁴³ In this respect, verbal language is obviously different because of the arbitrariness of the link between signifier and signified. Nevertheless, Wittgenstein invites us to consider linguistic phenomena such as the polysemic use of words as cases in which we have a similar analogic relation linking together the different meanings of a word. All poetic uses exploit the iconic potential of language and succeed in connecting together different aspects and going beyond the experience of aspect-change as well.⁴⁴

A successful aesthetic experience relies on the possibility of obtaining a new configuration and the key for obtaining it is seeing-as: “For how have we arrived at the concept of ‘seeing this as this’? On what occasions does it get formed, is it felt as a need? (Very frequently, when we are talking about a work of art).”⁴⁵ To grasp the originality of a work of art is not as simple as it may appear. If it is true that “the expression of seeing an aspect is the expression of a *new* perception”,⁴⁶ aesthetically understanding a new configuration could imply an exercise which consists first of all in switching from one aspect to another. In order to explain this, Wittgenstein proposes the example of Cubism and of a music piece:

“I could say of one of Picasso’s pictures that I don’t see it as human. Or of another picture that for a long time I wasn’t able to see what it was representing, but now I do. Isn’t this similar to: for a long time I couldn’t hear this as of a piece, but now I hear it that way. Before, it sounded like so many little bits, which were always stopping short – now I hear it as an organic whole. (Bruckner).”⁴⁷

⁴¹ BPP, I, 381.

⁴² See Siegfried FREY, *Die Macht des Bildes. Der Einfluss der nonverbalen Kommunikation auf Kultur und Politik*, Bern/Göttingen/Toronto/Seattle: Huber 1999, p. 139-141.

⁴³ BPP, I, 340.

⁴⁴ I explored this poetic strategy analysing Dante’s use of the polysemic word “*aspetto*” in *Paradis*, see Sara FORTUNA, Manuele GRAGNOLATI, ‘Dante after Wittgenstein: *aspetto*, language, subjectivity’, in: *Dante’s Plurilingualism: Authority, Vulgarisation, Subjectivity*, eds. S. Fortuna, M. Gragnolati, J. Trabant, Oxford: Legenda, 2010.

⁴⁵ BPP, I, 1.

⁴⁶ LS, I, 518.

⁴⁷ LS, I, 677.

One starts focusing separately on the single elements of a new figurative or musical composition, switching from one to another, and yet the final goal is to be able to perceive the work as a whole. Art also seems to be one of the intermediate members whose interconnections contribute to the obtaining of a perspicuous representation; it makes us sensitive to different forms of seeing-as, aspect-change and multiple aspects' perception and stages a complex process in which the *Kippbild* (*ant-aut* form) and the coexistence of different aspects (*et-et* form) are in a differential relation, in a position of 'undecidability;' they seem to transform into one another, creating a sort of tensional threshold. What matters for Wittgenstein in exploring several forms of seeing-as is to question a form of rationality with which philosophy traditionally identifies. On the one hand, Wittgenstein's "antiphilosophical"⁴⁸ attitude is connected with his fight against the ever-resurging "metaphysical temptation."⁴⁹ On the other hand, it is linked with an ethical concern: his search for a perspicuous representation, his sketching of a complex field of interconnected members – *Kippbild*, physiognomy, language, aesthetic experience – also presents itself as a way out of a monologic, reductive conception of subjectivity and of a consequently solipsistic and unaffactive form of life.

Wittgenstein's Bibliographical References:

- PU** *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1953).
- BPP** *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*, 2 vol. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980).
- LC** *Lectures and conversations on aesthetics psychology and religious belief* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1966).
- LS** *Letzte Schriften über die Philosophie der Psychologie*, 2 vol. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982-1992).

⁴⁸ The expression is used by Alain Badiou in his essay *Wittgensteins Antiphilosophie*, Berlin: diaphanes, 2008.

⁴⁹ See Stanley CAVELL, 'Declining Decline: Wittgenstein as a Philosopher of Culture', in: *This New Yet Unapproachable America: Lectures After Emerson After Wittgenstein*, Albuquerque: Living Batch Press, 1989, S. 29-75.