

## ABBÉ DUBOS ON PICTORIAL ILLUSION AND RELATED IDEAS\*

Focusing exclusively on the concept of illusion and its development in eighteenth-century France, Marian Hobson asserts recently that Abbé Dubos is the first to dispense with illusion, but admits that «he introduces closely related concepts<sup>1</sup>». One of my aims in this paper is to account for this inconsistency from a different approach than Hobson's. More particularly I shall attempt to show: (1) that there exist two different views on illusion in Dubos' *Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et sur la peinture*, (2) that they rest on two different concepts of imitation both grounded on the neo-classical tradition of his age and (3) that they presage positions and perspectives which might be taken to be «up to date».

I shall begin my survey with the concept of imitation. The established view since the time of the Renaissance, which dominated for at least three centuries, is that painting should be an «imitation of nature». The term allows a variety of meanings<sup>2</sup> but I shall refer only to two of them, for my purposes. In its simplest and strictest sense, imitation is equivalent to mere copying of nature. According to the so-called copy theory of painting, which results in naturalism and is closely related to the concepts of resemblance and illusion, a painting —art in general— should so much resemble the model as to create the illusion of reality. So, the closer the resemblance the greater the illusion and the more praiseworthy the work of art that succeeds in deceiving the spectator.

Very popular among the French classicists is also a concept of imitation which includes the representation of dramatic actions and pathetic expressions, thus emphasizing the narrative and expressive element in painting and the need for the choice of significant subjects (usually drawn from history,

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\* An earlier version of this paper was read at the XI International Congress of Aesthetics in Nottingham (29th August - 2nd September 1988).

1. M. HOBSON, *The Object of Art, The Theory of Illusion in Eighteenth-Century France*, Cambridge U.P., 1982, p. 41.

2. See W. Tatarkiewicz, *A History of Six Ideas*, The Hague/Boston/London, Martinus Nijhoff, 1980, pp. 270 ff.





epics, romances and the Bible), which would both offer instruction and cause delight. This kind of imitation gives supremacy to the literary content of the painting, which is due to the invention of the artist and requires genius, erudition and taste<sup>3</sup>. Related to this is the *ut pictura poesis* theory which searches for analogies between the two «sister arts», poetry and painting. I shall from now on refer to this concept as «inventive imitation».

## I

In Dubos' *Réflexions* one can find both views of imitation described above as different but constituting well established strands in the tradition of his age. In this part I shall deal with his views on truthful imitation of nature, which favours illusion. I shall try to show that much of his thinking reflects previous art theory. The second part is devoted to his ideas on inventive imitation, which results in the rejection of illusion. My concern in both parts is to point out Dubos' own contribution to the idea of pictorial illusion by an attempt to clarify some aspects of his thought in the light of contemporary thinking.

In the first pages of the *Réflexions* Dubos, after taking for granted the imitative character of painting and poetry, implies that they produce copies of real objects. As the impressions caused are similar in kind to those of the real objects without, however, the impact and effectiveness of reality, they cannot make reason give way to illusion, but affect only the senses (l'âme sensitive), and soon disappear (1, 27, 28)<sup>4</sup>. It is easy to understand that Dubos' interest lies more in the impression produced on us by art in general than in art itself as an imitation or in the work of art as a copy. Anyway, one can assume that he accepts the idea of artistic imitation as copying but denies complete illusion.

In part I section XL, however, where he deals particularly with the subject of painting, in an attempt to differentiate painting from poetry, his position becomes clearer. At this point, after having shown the difference —and he is the first to do so— between the «natural signs» of painting which have a direct, sudden and strong appeal on vision and the «artificial» or «arbitrary»

3. See «invention» in *Dictionnaire portatif de peinture, sculpture, gravure et architecture; avec un Traité pratique des différentes manières de peindre* (par Dom Antoine-Joseph Pernety), Paris, 1781<sup>2</sup>.

4. All references to Dubos', *Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et sur la peinture* (hereafter *Réflexions*) are to the seventh edition, Paris, 1770 (Slatkine Reprints, Genève, 1967).





signs of poetry — words — which are conditioned by education and act on us only by degrees, he writes:

Je parle peut-être mal, quand je dis que la Peinture employe des signes: c'est la Nature elle-même que la Peinture met sous nos yeux. Si notre esprit n'y est pas trompé, nos sens du moins y sont abusés (I, 415).

The distinction between the awareness of the spirit and the seduction of the senses, made here explicit, is not due to Dubos. It goes back to literary critics in the seventeenth century (d'Aubignac and others), who had claimed that while our senses could be deceived by a theatrical performance, our mind maintains rational control over illusion, this being a basic condition of the pleasure we derive from the performance and a necessary requirement for our understanding the didactic purpose of the play. De Piles had also made use of the distinction in relation to painting in the same way as literary critics, before Dubos<sup>5</sup>.

We have seen thus far that painting has a direct effect on vision and may occasionally create the illusion of the senses — Dubos even refers to some painters who purposely use several methods and techniques to that end<sup>6</sup>. I shall now try to bring together the ideas, dispersed throughout his work, which show how illusion is conditioned.

Dubos asserts that in some cases a painting can please simply by its charms of execution, irrespective of the object represented. This is the case with still life paintings, where «nous donnons plus d'attention à des fruits et à des animaux représentés dans un tableau, que nous n'en donnerions à ces objects mêmes» (I, 69). Here «la copie nous attache plus que l'original», in contrast to his general principle that reality has greater effect than art. Dubos explains the case by saying that we admire the painter's brush for succeeding in imitating nature so well as to *deceive our eyes*:

5. See Th. PUTTFARKEN, *Roger de Piles' Theory of Art*, New Haven and London, Yale U.P., 1985, pp. 52-53.

6. *Réflexions* I, 426-7: «Enfin quelques Peintres des plus modernes se sont avisés de placer dans les compositions destinées, à être vues de loin, des parties de figures de ronde bosse qui entrent dans l'ordonnance, & qui sont coloriées comme les autres figures peintes entre lesquelles ils les mettent. On prétend que l'œil qui voit distinctement ces parties de ronde bosse saillir hors du tableau, en soit plus aisément séduit par les parties peintes, lesquelles sont réellement plates, & que ces dernières sont ainsi plus facilement l'illusion à nos yeux». Dubos also refers to Pliny's stories about animals, children and men who mistook paintings for real objects, and cites the well-known modern story of the portrait of Rembrandt's maid, which the painter had placed inside a window in order to deceive his neighbours (I, 454-5).





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Nous admirons le pinceau qui a sçu contrefaire si bien la nature. Nous examinons comment l'Artisan a fait pour tromper nos yeux, au point de leur faire prendre des couleurs couchées sur une superficie pour de véritables fruits (I, 71).

But he stresses that we are exclusively concerned with the art of the imitator who knows how to please us but not how to move us (ibid.).

The last sentence implies a distinction between two kinds of painting as far as their effect on the spectator is concerned; the one aims at pleasure merely, the other at emotion. This leads on to a second distinction between two kinds of pictorial composition. The first, called *composition pittoresque* is the arrangement of the objects in a painting in relation to its general effect. This is pleasant at first sight (I, 280), if everything in a painting, such as the composition of the figures, the distribution of light, and the disposition of colours, results in an agreeable harmonious whole (I, 281). Let us note here that these were all de Piles' ideas. He had already spoken of the harmony of disposition or order as «a wonderful effect, which the whole together produces» and of a satisfaction «au premier coup d'œil» as a result of the arrangement and harmonious distribution of light, shade and colour<sup>7</sup>. The second kind of composition, called *composition poétique*, is an arrangement of the figures in a painting which aims at making the action represented more touching (ibid.). Now, in part I, section XLIX Dubos asserts that some are more interested in poetic composition and expression, while others are charmed simply by the harmony and truth of colours. He thus seems to suggest that the difference between *composition poétique* and *composition pittoresque* basically corresponds to the difference between expression and colour.

To sum up: the *composition pittoresque* is related to a painting which gives preference to colour, pleases at first sight, produces a harmony which charms our eyes merely and when «le peintre est dessinateur élégant» [et] «coloriste rival de la nature» (I, 71), provokes the illusion of reality. The last statement needs some explanation, because it does not follow directly from the above.

One of the conditions of illusion is verisimilitude:

C'est à proportion de l'exactitude de la vraisemblance que nous nous laissons séduire plus ou moins par l'imitation (I, 195).

In relation to naturalistic painting *vraisemblance* is equivalent to an exact

7. PUTTFARKEN, *op.cit.*, p. 50; also pp. 80-83.



imitation of nature that could seduce our senses; this is achieved mainly through colouring:

Les tableaux de l'École Lombarde sont admirés; bien que les Peintres s'y soient bornés souvent à flatter les yeux par la richesse & par la vérité de leurs couleurs... (I, 71-72. Cf. also II, 71-72).

Concerning the role of colouring in pictorial illusion Dubos must have had, again, de Piles in mind. As a matter of fact he refers to his *Cours de peinture* (1708) and speaks of him with great admiration (I, 284). Now, it is well known that for de Piles, «tho' the perfect idea of the painter depends on design and colouring jointly», yet he —the painter— must conceive the idea of his art mainly through colouring; because it is colouring which makes him a perfect imitator of nature<sup>8</sup>, and the more truthfully painting imitates nature the better it fulfills its aim, which is to seduce our eyes<sup>9</sup>.

One has the feeling that Dubos' acceptance of truthful imitation of nature and illusion in relation to lower genres (landscape, portrait and still life), as well as his discussion concerning *composition pittoresque*<sup>10</sup> and colouring, do not express so much his own beliefs as they echo well-known ideas of his age, in particular de Piles'. This is confirmed by the fact that throughout the *Réflexions* the supremacy is given to paintings which are able to move us through their subject rather than to the visual effects of pictorial composition, in contrast to de Piles' ideas<sup>11</sup>. Dubos explicitly declares that when the subject represented is indifferent in itself, the painting is unable to move us. It can amuse us for a while; we admire the artist's talent of imitation, but we reproach him for having chosen uninteresting subjects (I, 53).

But let us pay a closer attention to the concept of illusion itself and see if Dubos repeats exactly de Piles' ideas. Puttfarken remarks that de Piles' concept of illusion does not exclude awareness of the work of art as such, in particular of its overall composition and disposition<sup>12</sup>. But, by insisting on

8. Roger DE PILES, *Cours de peinture par principes*, Paris, 1708, pp. 311-313. Cited by PUTTFARKEN, *op.cit.*, p. 43.

9. *Cours de peinture par principes*, p.3. Cited by PUTTFARKEN, *op. cit.*, p. 46, note 19.

10. Dubos accuses de Piles of not having distinguished between *composition pittoresque* and *composition poétique* (I, 285). PUTTFARKEN remarks that Dubos does not concern himself with the technicalities of painting and, having accused de Piles of neglecting the *composition poétique* as an essential part of painting, he himself proceeds without further regard for the *composition pittoresque* (PUTTFARKEN, *op.cit.*, p. 128).

11. PUTTFARKEN, *op. cit.*, p. 126.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 54.



both, illusion and awareness, de Piles «seems to ask us to perform two directly opposed visual activities at the same time: in order to achieve illusion we have to project painted objects into a three-dimensional pictorial world, in order to see the visual harmony and unity of the *Tout-ensemble* we have to keep the objects in a two-dimensional, planimetric relationship to each other<sup>13</sup>».

We have already seen that Dubos does not exclude awareness of the work of art as such and of the «art of the imitator», or his technique, in relation to truthful imitations of nature, since we admire how the painter's brush has achieved illusionistic effects. The basic difference, however, between the two art theorists is that whereas de Piles conceives illusion as the chief aim of the painter, associating it with pleasure («La fin du Peintre est de tromper agreablement les yeux<sup>14</sup>»), Dubos seems to discredit illusionistic painting and tries to argue, as we shall see later, that illusion is not the source of aesthetic pleasure. To put it in other words: whereas for de Piles the problem lurking behind his concept of illusion is how far the experience of a painting is possible in terms of visual perception, for Dubos it is how the experience of a painting is possible at all as an aesthetic experience. Dubos' problem, in other words, is: «If in seeing a painting the spectator has an illusion, then the art is transparent — he does not perceive it, but only the object the painting is of<sup>15</sup>». To elucidate Dubos' views from this angle, I shall need the light of some contemporary thinking.

Gombrich's model for the pictorial perception as alternating between «seeing canvas» and «seeing nature» has been refuted by Wollheim who points out that the value of pictorial experience is not accounted for. According to Wollheim, although Gombrich's view of perception may be true for the duck-rabbit hypothesis that can be seen either as duck or rabbit but not as both at the same time, it is no longer true for our experience of a painting, which «permits simultaneous attention to what is represented and to the representation, to the object and to the medium<sup>16</sup>». Wollheim argues on this idea by interpreting pictorial perception in terms of «seeing-as» (*Art and its Objects*, 1968) or rather in terms of «seeing-in» —as he modifies his position in the second edition of his *Art and its Objects* and in his *Painting as an Art*

13. *Ibid.*, pp. 88-89.

14. C. A. DUFRESNOY, *De Arte Graphica - l'Art de la peinture*, traduit en Français avec des remarques (by Roger de Piles), Paris, 1668, p. 133. Cited by PUTTFARKEN, *op. cit.*, p. 46, note 19.

15. HOBSON, *op.cit.*, p. 80. For an extensive analysis of the meaning of illusion in relation to the low genres in eighteenth-century France, see also pp. 67-80.

16. R. WOLLHEIM, *Art and its Objects*, Cambridge U.P., 1980<sup>2</sup>, p. 213.





— which means seeing something in something else. When seeing-in occurs, I am visually aware of a marked surface (a picture, Holbein's portrait, i.e.) and at the same time I can see something in it (Henry VIII). In any case, awareness that what I see is a picture (Holbein's portrait) and not Henry VIII is not only permitted but even requires that I attend simultaneously to object and medium<sup>17</sup>. It is a consequence of Wollheim's view that I can see X (a picture) as Y (e.g. a face) or Y in X, to borrow Schier's locution, without believing X to be Y, without mistaking, in other words, X with Y<sup>18</sup>. I quote Wollheim, now:

Surely when we admire the great achievements of naturalistic art we do so because we think of them as very lifelike representations of objects in the real world: but to think of them in this way is quite incompatible with taking them to be or seeing them... as the objects themselves. Indeed, if we took the picture of an object to be that object, it seems unclear that there is anything left for us to admire<sup>19</sup>.

Now Dubos' idea of pictorial perception thus far discussed seems to be in agreement with Wollheim's «twofold thesis» (the simultaneous seeing of the object and the medium) and with all that this involves<sup>20</sup>. But could we also argue that his view bears some analogies with Wollheim's seeing-in model?

Let us turn our attention to his phrase: «Il semble même que l'œil ébloui par l'ouvrage d'un grand Peintre, croie quelquefois appercevoir du mouvement *dans ses figures*» (I, 415). The question whether movement is directly perceptible or whether it can be depicted is an old one to which the Shaftesbury-Lessing theory of poetry and painting had given a negative answer<sup>21</sup>.

17. *Ibid.*

18. F. SCHIER, *Deeper into Pictures*, Cambridge U.P., 1986, p. 15.

19. R. WOLLHEIM, *Art and Illusion, Aesthetics in the Modern World* (ed. by H. Osborne) London, Thames and Hudson, 1968, p. 250. Cf. IDEM, *Painting as an Art*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1987, p. 73.

20. In his *Painting as an Art* (p. 360 note 6) WOLLHEIM declares that he has abandoned his earlier view on «twofoldness». He no longer conceives it as «two distinct experiences occurring simultaneously» but as «two aspects of a single experience» which are «distinguishable but also inseparable». They are not, he says, «two separate simultaneous experiences which I somehow hold in the mind at once, nor two separate alternating experiences, between which I oscillate — though it is true that each aspect of the single experience is capable of being described as analogous to a separate experience» (*ibid.*, p. 46).

21. WOLLHEIM, *Art and its Objects*, pp. 48-49.



Dubos himself admits that painting is limited by its means of imitation to one single moment in representing action (I, 87). So, movement cannot be depicted nor seen directly. How is it then that a spectator believes sometimes that he perceives movement in the figures of a painting? Dubos unfortunately provides no answer to the question but Wollheim does, in terms of seeing-in, as follows:

Seeing-in derives from a special perceptual capacity, which presupposes, but is something over and above, straightforward perception (the capacity «of perceiving things present to the senses<sup>22</sup>»).

Now, seeing-in applies not only to particulars (figures) but also to states of affairs (figures that are moving) and does not have to meet the requirement of localization<sup>23</sup>. I may see movement in the figures without there being an answer to the question whereabouts in the figures I can see movement, i.e. it must be then an impression the spectator has of seeing movement in a painting which presupposes but exceeds sense data; this impression is due to a way of seeing which is appropriate to representations and requires attention to the medium or «an aesthetic interest in the picture» rather than «an interest in the picture as a surrogate for its subject», to use Scruton's distinction.

Scruton nicely shows the difference between them by analysing the reasons that might be given for the interest, which might further elucidate Dubos' thesis. The reasons may describe properties of the subject which make it interesting, they may refer to properties of the picture (colours, shape, line, etc.) or they may be «reasons for an interest in the picture (in the way it looks)» even though they make reference to the subject. Such an interest leads to the use of the medium or «the way the painting presents its subject...». «Here it could not be said that the painting», however realistic it may be, «is being treated as a surrogate for its subject...». The interest lies in representation for its own sake. And it is this interest «that forms the core of the aesthetic experience of pictorial art<sup>24</sup>». This is, I believe, the interest that Dubos demands for a painting incapable of moving through its subject-matter, and it is revealing that only the painters or the connoisseurs are competent to discern the beauties of execution<sup>25</sup>.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 217.

23. *Ibid.*, pp. 210-211.

24. R. SCRUTON, *The Aesthetic Understanding*, London and New York, Methuen, 1983, pp. 109-110.

25. *Réflexions*, II, 357: «Il est vrai, que lorsqu'il s'agit du mérite des tableaux, le public n'est pas un juge aussi compétent, que lorsqu'il s'agit du mérite des poèmes. La perfection d'une partie



The above interpretation of Dubos' thesis which re-affirms the aesthetic character of pictorial experience runs counter to his assimilation of the experience of art with the experience of reality — their difference being, as we have seen, only one of degree. This is so, and I can really find no way to release Dubos from this inconsistency. Such inconsistencies, however, are not absent from his thought — this will become clearer as we go along — and some of them at least should be understood simply as a result of his moving between tradition and innovation. Anyway, here I only want to point out that he reformulates the old illusion theory, by an attempt on his part to dissociate illusionism from its correlative «recognition model». In other words, what Dubos wants to make clear is that, whenever we have representations of insignificant objects, we do not derive pleasure from the recognition of what is represented with an exact realistic copy. He breaks here with the Aristotelian tradition which associated pleasure with recognition and limited the pleasure of the execution only to unrecognizable objects (*Poetics*, 1448 b, 4). This is the clearest statement of the illusion theory of art, according to Osborne<sup>26</sup>, and this is, in my opinion, what Dubos wants to reject, by shifting the interest from the object to the medium. That this is a great step towards limiting representation in art to a mere correspondence by virtue of similarities, is something we have to admit.

We have been led so far to conclude that Dubos admits illusion in life-like representations of nature. But illusion, far from meaning delusion, is closely related to the skill of representation, which we must be able to admire, in order to feel aesthetic pleasure. Unless the painter deceives the viewer by trickery and makes him mistake the picture for reality (as Rembrandt did i.e. by placing the portrait of his maid inside a window), the viewer is aware of the work of art as such and derives pleasure from it. Although earlier literary critics had been aware of the problem which the concept of illusion involves in connection with the pleasure derived from a work of art, Dubos is the first to dispense explicitly with the concept of illusion.

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des beautés d'un tableau, par exemple, la perfection du dessein, n'est bien sensible qu'aux Peintres ou aux Connoisseurs qui ont étudié la Peinture autant que les Artisans mêmes». Cf. also II, 401-2: «...les beautés de l'exécution pouvoient seuls rendre un tableau précieux. Or ses beautés se rendent bien sensibles aux hommes qui n'ont pas l'intelligence de la mécanique de la Peinture, mais ils ne sont point capables pour cela de juger du mérite du Peintre.. Voilà ce que les gens du métier sçavent».

26. H. OSBORNE, *Aesthetics and Criticism*, Westport Connecticut, Greenwood Press, 1973, p. 52.



## II

We may now turn to the kind of pictorial imitation which rests on invention. For Dubos, invention is what distinguishes a genius from a simple artisan (II, 387). Since this kind of imitation represents dramatic episodes, it needs what is known as poetic composition, which contributes to the unity of action and tends to render the action more touching and verisimilar (I, 281). Dubos requires here *vraisemblance poétique*<sup>27</sup>, which is equivalent to the literary concept of *vraisemblance* as part of the well-known theory of *bienséance* or *decorum*. This consists in giving to «personnages» the passions which conform to their age, dignity, temperament and the part they play. Conformity to manners, habits, costumes etc. is also necessary (I, sect. XXX).

In his clearest statement of inventive imitation Dubos says in substance: One should do more than copy nature slavishly. Nature must be seen through the eyes of imagination even in non-existent circumstances. The painter sees only part of the model, while what is more important escapes his notice. He may see the subject animated by passion, but he does not see him in the state to which passion must have reduced him, which is precisely what should be depicted (I, 221-222). Moreover, as the painter can only represent a single moment of an action, he has to choose the one most appropriate and to complete the rest through his imagination. A painter who can achieve all this, far from being a copyist of nature or a passive recorder of sense impressions<sup>28</sup>, has also the capacity of discovering a number of differences among objects which in the eyes of others appear to be similar. These differences may be expressed in a way transforming any common subject to a completely new one:

Combien a-t-on fait de crucifiemens depuis qu'il est des Peintres? Cependant les Artisans doués de génie, n'ont pas trouvé que ce sujet fût épuisé par mille tableaux déjà faits (I, 232)<sup>29</sup>.

27. Dubos distinguishes between *vraisemblance poétique* and *vraisemblance mécanique*. The second requires conformity to the laws of statics, movement and optics (I, 267).

28. Cf. *Réflexions*, II, 89: «Un homme sans génie... se contente de copier ce qu'il a dessous les yeux... L'homme de génie devine comment l'ouvrier a fait».

29. R. DÉMORIS makes a distinction between «modèles-copies» and «modèles originaux». The first are objects denoted by common names; the second are unique, historical events. The representation of the first gives also copies, whereas the representation of the second gives originals in the sense that the second are products of the painter's invention. Here, many versions of the same scene are possible. Démoris' distinction helps us understand the difference between Dubos' two concepts of imitation (imitation as copying and what I have called inventive imitation). See





I shall examine now why Dubos rejects illusion and how his rejection is related to his idea of inventive imitation. In part I, section XLIII Dubos deals with illusion again jointly in theatrical performances and paintings. This indicates that the paintings he has in mind possess some common trait with theatrical performances, such as the provoking of emotion<sup>30</sup>. He speaks first of the theatre, asserting that whatever we see in the theatre contributes to the stirring up of our emotions; but nothing deceives our senses, because everything is seen as an imitation. When we go to attend a theatrical performance we are without any prejudice favouring illusion. We are prepared to see a representation, not an actual event, while numerous circumstances surrounding us remind us of where we are and who we are. A very sensitive young person may be emotionally involved to such an extent to let escape exclamations or make involuntary gestures; this, however, is only a momentary deviation, as the viewer, even in this state, does not really believe that he is witnessing a real event. Generally speaking, the spectator retains his good sense even under the most intense emotion (cf. I, 33).

The same can be said of painting. The merit of the painting of Attila depicted by Raphael is not due to his capacity of making the viewer believe that he really sees Attila surrounded by his troops. The viewer approves of this historical piece of painting as verisimilar, but in the sense of poetic verisimilitude.

...l'imitation est si vraisemblable, qu'elle fait sur les spectateurs une grande partie de l'impression que l'événement auroit pu faire sur eux (I, 454).

That Dubos has inventive imitation in mind is also suggested by the following: instead of the senses (eyes)-reason distinction already used in relation to naturalistic paintings, he now gives preference to the distinction between «bon sens» and «un naturel très sensible» (I, 452-3), between «la tête» et «le cœur» (I, 33)<sup>31</sup>. Illusion is due here to the sensitive temperament of a man

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R. DÉMORIS, Original absent et création de valeur: Dubos et quelques autres, *Revue des Sciences Humaines*, XL N° 157, 1975, p. 70.

30. LOMBARD justly remarks that Dubos' dominant preoccupation with the theatre and «the pathetic» led him to a literary appreciation of painting. A. LOMBARD, *L'Abbé Dubos, Un imitateur de la pensée moderne*, Paris, Hachette, 1913, p. 218.

31. I do not agree with Lombard who asserts that for Dubos the term «cœur» is equivalent to senses (*op. cit.*, p. 204). In my opinion «cœur» often means a sensitive temperament or emotion. This is evident in the following passage where Dubos uses the distinction between «la tête» and «le cœur»: «il est bien rare de trouver des hommes qui aient en même-temps le cœur si



who, when contemplating a verisimilar imitation, is inclined to be carried away by his emotions and to experience impressions almost similar to those which the object represented would have caused, if seen in reality. Again, this does not agree with art's chief aim which is to satisfy man's need to avoid boredom by stirring up his passions and emotions in a lesser degree than reality, however, and in a harmless way. To understand Dubos' insistence on this point we have to take into consideration that in his aesthetic theory the pleasure of art is principally the pleasure connected with pain<sup>32</sup>, and that the problem he wants to solve is the well-known paradox —first expressed by Aristotle— that the more painfully art affects us, the more pleasure we derive from it<sup>33</sup>. Dubos avoids the difficulty, to a certain extent, by considering illusion a momentary incident (un «égarement momentané» ou une «distrac-tion») (I, 453), limited to exceptional cases (I, 31-33) or to trompe l'œil paintings (I, 455)<sup>34</sup>.

The next question Dubos deals with is related to the source of our pleasure and here he shows himself to be absolutely positive: illusion is in no case the source of our pleasure and the proof is: (1) that the pleasure remains when there is no place for illusion and surprise. Illusion, in other words, can be created at first sight only. It comes as the immediate and sudden effect of

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sensible & la tête si foible;... notre âme demeure toujours la maîtresse de ces émotions superficielles que les vers & les tableaux excitent en elle» (I, 33-34).

32. LOMBARD, *op. cit.*, p. 209.

33. C. HOGSETT, Jean Baptiste Dubos on art as illusion, *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, LXXIII (1970), p. 153. Hogsett bases her interpretation of Dubos' views on illusion mainly on the paradox of the pleasure derived from a painful representation. She studies his views as expressed first in section 3 and later in section 43, showing that Dubos' contradictions are to be explained by the fact that he returned to the matter of illusion many chapters later and that in the process of returning he must have realized that he needed to reformulate his theory (p. 157). Hogsett's approach sometimes leads her to conclusions diametrically opposite to my conclusions. She maintains, i.e., that for Dubos the spectator does not react to the artistry of the imitation but to the object itself, in contrast to Aristotle's and to the classical critics' theories. This is grounded on the argument that in Dubos' theory the work must be recognized as a copy in order that it moves the reader less than reality itself; so there must be illusion, but it must not be total (pp. 154-5). Hogsett is not concerned with pictorial illusion in particular, and perhaps this is why she was unable to discern two different ideas of imitation and illusion in Dubos' *Réflexions*. She notes, however, that as long as he was discussing only painting, he admits the possibility of a complete illusion of the senses (p. 158).

34. See note 6. For the difference between illusionism and trompe l'œil, see M. L. OTRANGE MASTAI, *Illusion in Art, Trompe l'Oeil, A History of Pictorial Illusionism*, London, Martin Secker & Warburg Ltd, 1976, pp. 8 ff. Dubos uses both terms without making a distinction between them.





the work of art as a whole<sup>35</sup>, while the impression produced by this work is indistinct and limits us only to a general idea of its artistic value (2). The pleasure becomes greater at a second viewing, when we are able to direct our attention to the various parts of the painting and no room is left for the element of surprise and illusion.

These two arguments, however, tend to place illusion prior to awareness rather than having them appear simultaneously, in contrast to what has been stated in part I<sup>36</sup>. One can guess that Dubos has moved from an objective idea of illusion, which puts emphasis on the work of art as such and on its direct effect on vision, to a subjective idea of illusion, dependent on the viewer's sensitive temperament. It is also dependent on the nature of first sight contemplation by the viewer, which prevents him from discerning the beauties of the work of art and from deriving full delight and pleasure<sup>37</sup>.

To sum up again: in the second part of my paper I have found two claims on illusion: (1) In the case of inventive imitation the meaning of illusion consists in an emotional excess which is denied by Dubos; first, on the basis of experience, that it constitutes an exception to the general rule; secondly, on a theoretical basis, because it runs counter to the idea that art differs from reality only in a matter of degree. It is of interest to note here that this idea, originally introduced by Dubos to support the imitative character of painting, paradoxically led him to reject illusionism, which comes more or less as a necessary result of the mimetic theory during his epoch. (2) Illusion is also denied both in theatre and painting in terms of visual perception, not, however, for the same reasons put forward in part I. To make this point clear, I shall first need to appeal to Gombrich.

Gombrich has shown that «there is no such thing as objective likeness»

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35. Cf. DE PILES, *Cours de peinture*, p. 4 (cited by DÉMORIS, *op.cit.*, p. 77): «La véritable peinture est donc celle qui nous appelle (pour ainsi dire) en nous surprenant; et ce n'est que par la force de l'effet qu'elle produit que nous ne pouvons nous empêcher d'en approcher comme si elle avait quelque chose à nous dire».

36. According to Wollheim «twofoldness» is lost when one aspect of the complex experience comes to the fore while the other recedes or even evaporates. This shift from seeing something in the surface to seeing the surface itself, can take place in either direction; but, given that the surface is «adequately differentiated so as to permit seeing-in in the first place, it is unlikely that either of these successor experiences will prove stable» (*Painting as an Art*, p. 47). Seeing-in is considered to be one of the fundamental perceptual capacities «that the artist relies upon the spectator to have and to use» (*ibid.*, p. 45).

37. Cf. *Réflexions*, I, 456: «Notre esprit trop inquiet & trop en mouvement pour se fixer sur rien de particulier, ne jouit véritablement de rien. Pour vouloir parcourir tout & voir tout, nous ne voyons rien distinctement».



and that «what we call seeing is conditioned by habits and expectations<sup>38</sup>». This is also evident in our experience of art. We come to the works of art, he says, «with our receivers already attuned». «When we step in front of a bust we understand what we are expected to look for. We do not, as a rule, take it to be a representation of a cut-off head; we take in the situation and know that this belongs to the institution or convention called “busts” with which we have been familiar even before we grew up». «All culture and all communication depend on the interplay between expectation and observation» and «the experience of art is not exempt from this general rule<sup>39</sup>». This idea is used by Gombrich mainly to explain our reactions to styles and the development of art in history but, notice, the way it also applies to illusion:

When the cinema introduced «3-D», the distance between expectation and experience was such that many enjoyed the thrill of a perfect illusion. But the illusion wears off once the expectation is stepped up;...<sup>40</sup>

For Dubos too, we are not ready to fall victims of illusion when we go to the theatre; we do not expect to see Phedre in reality, because we *expect* to see a performance and nothing more. Other things immediately perceived, such as posters, suggest to our mind what we are going to see.

Now, in the case of paintings Dubos remarks that they give us pleasure without the help of illusion, «although we are aware that these paintings are no more than a canvas on which colours have been put in an artistic way» (I, 455). Here the part played by our expectations is not evident. We can only assume that as the eye passes over a painted canvas, across the frame and so on, «it cannot but become aware... of a discontinuity which is fatal to illusion<sup>41</sup>». The main reason, however, that Dubos can dispense with pictorial illusion is the following: illusion here rests on his idea of inventive imitation, and the paintings he speaks of are related to poetry, as far as the invention of subject-matter is concerned. Now, although subject-matter has to be easily comprehensible («...les tableaux ne doivent pas être des énigmes», I, 211), yet it calls for our attention and interpretation; it does not appeal merely to our senses but requires also the functioning of our mind and imagination; We are close to Poussin's demand here that his paintings should be attentively read, not simply looked at<sup>42</sup>. This is why our first overall impression of a painting,

38. E. H. GOMBRICH, *Art and Illusion*, Phaidon Press, 1977, p. 77.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 53.

40. *Ibid.*, pp. 53-54.

41. WOLLHEIM, *Art and Illusion*, p. 248. Cf. GOMBRICH, *op.cit.*, p. 234.

42. PUTTFARKEN, *op.cit.*, p. 10.



accompanied by surprise and rarely by illusion, is considered to be a hasty way of viewing the picture, since it does not help us grasp the inner meaning of its subject, nor appreciate properly the artistic value of the work, nor derive full delight.

Once more, this is counter to Dubos' principles: that we can appreciate paintings according to the impression they make on us (II, 339); that we judge them by our sentiment (II, 341) and we are attached to them «before reason has time to act and examine» (II, 343). The inconsistency is to be explained by the fact that, on the one hand, Dubos adopts the classical *ut pictura poesis* theory and the rational aspect of the aesthetic experience thus involved, and on the other, he tries to separate poetry from painting and undermines reason as the criterion of beauty.

I have tried to show through the above analysis of Dubos' views on pictorial illusion and related issues that they reflect a dramatic movement of ideas marked by contrasts between well established and fixed forms of thought, on the one hand, and bold trends towards new perspectives, on the other. This conflict is reflected in his thought, in a most ironic way. It is through the crude model of imitation and illusion, which he does not, as a matter of fact, accept, that he was led to show the most important role of the perception of the medium in pictorial experience. It is through the traditional view of imitation as invention, which he adopts, that he was forced to reject illusion and to establish a distinction, as a result, between art and reality; a distinction to which, however, his quantitative criterion rose as an obstacle. In any case, my interpretation of Dubos' views on illusion has shown —I hope— that they contain no negligible meaning even today.

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## Ο ΑBBÉ DUBOS ΠΕΡΙ ΤΗΣ «ΨΕΥΔΑΙΣΘΗΣΕΩΣ» ΣΤΗ ΖΩΓΡΑΦΙΚΗ ΚΑΙ ΑΛΛΕΣ ΣΥΝΑΦΕΙΣ ΕΝΝΟΙΕΣ

### Περίληψη

Ἡ «ἀπατητική» ἢ «ψευδαισθητική» θεωρία (illusion theory), στήν πιό ἀκραία τῆς μορφῇ, ὑποστηρίζει ὅτι ἡ ἀπόλαυση τοῦ ἔργου τέχνης ἀντλεῖται ἀπό τὴν ψευδαίσθηση τοῦ πραγματικοῦ ποὺ δημιουργεῖται στὸ θεατὴ μιᾶς ρεαλιστικῆς ἀπεικόνισης. Στούς *Κριτικούς στοχασμούς πάνω στὴν ποίηση καὶ τὴ ζωγραφικὴ* ὁ Dubos φαίνεται ἄλλοτε νὰ τὴ συμερίζεται ὡς ἓνα σημεῖο καὶ ἄλλοτε νὰ τὴν ἀπορρίπτει. Στόχος τῆς μελέτης εἶναι νὰ ἀποδειχθεῖ ὅτι ὁ Dubos ἐκθέτει δύο διαφορετικὲς ἀπόψεις πάνω στὴν ἔννοια τῆς ψευδαίσθησης σὲ σχέση μὲ τὴ ζωγραφικὴ καὶ ὅτι αὐτὲς στηρίζονται σὲ δύο διαφορετικὲς ἔννοιες τῆς καλλιτεχνικῆς μίμησης, διαδεδομένες στὴ νεοκλασικιστικὴ παράδοση τῆς ἐποχῆς του. Προβάλλονται ἀκόμα ἐκεῖνα τὰ στοιχεῖα τῆς σκέψης του ποὺ προεικάζουν προοπτικὲς τῆς σύγχρονης αἰσθητικῆς θεώρησης.

Ἡ ἀποδοχὴ τῆς αὐστηρῆς ἔννοιας τῆς καλλιτεχνικῆς μίμησης ὡς πιστῆς ἀντιγραφῆς τῆς φύσης, καθὼς καὶ τῆς ψευδαίσθησης ποὺ αὐτὴ συνεπάγεται, δείχνουμε ὅτι ἀπηχοῦν περισσότερο τὶς ιδέες τοῦ de Piles παρὰ τοῦ Dubos. Ἐνῶ πάντως καὶ οἱ δύο στοχαστὲς βεβαιώνουν τὸ φαινόμενο τῆς ἀπάτης τῶν αἰσθήσεων μπροστὰ σὲ ζωντανὲς ζωγραφιὲς ἀντικειμένων τῆς φύσης, χωρὶς νὰ ἀποκλείουν τὴ δυνατότητα τοῦ θεατῆ νὰ συνειδητοποιεῖ συγχρόνως ὅτι πρόκειται γιὰ ἀπεικονίσεις σὲ δισδιάστατη ἐπιφάνεια, ὁ Dubos δὲν συνδέει, ὅπως ὁ de Piles, τὴν αἰσθητικὴ ἀπόλαυση μὲ τὴ «ζωγραφικὴ ἀπάτη» ἀλλὰ μὲ τὴν ἀντίληψη τῆς μιμητικῆς τέχνης τοῦ ζωγράφου. Φαίνεται συνεπῶς νὰ ἀντιμετωπίζει τὸ πρόβλημα ποὺ γεννᾷ ἡ ἔννοια τῆς ψευδαίσθησης γιὰ τὴν ἐρμηνεία τῆς αἰσθητικῆς ἐμπειρίας, προδιαγράφοντας πάνω στὸ θέμα αὐτὸ ἀναλύσεις τοῦ σύγχρονου αἰσθητικοῦ R. Wollheim.

Ἡ ἄποψη πρὸς τὴν ὁποία μεταφέρεται ἡ προτίμηση τοῦ Dubos στηρίζεται σὲ μία πιὸ ἐλεύθερη ἔννοια τῆς μίμησης ποὺ ἀπαιτεῖ τὴ συμβολὴ τῆς δημιουργικῆς φαντασίας τοῦ καλλιτέχνη. Ἀναζητᾷ ἀναλογίες ἀνάμεσα στὴν ποίηση καὶ τὴ ζωγραφικὴ καὶ θέτει σὰ σκοπὸ τῆς ζωγραφικῆς τὴν ἀπεικόνιση σπουδαίων θεμάτων (ἱστορικῶν, θρησκευτικῶν κ.ἄ.) ποὺ διδάσκουν καὶ συγχρόνως συγκινοῦν. Μιλώντας ἀρχικὰ γιὰ τὸ θέατρο, καὶ συγκεκριμένα τὴν τραγωδίαν, ὁ Dubos ἀρνεῖται οὐσιαστικὰ τὴ δημιουργία τῆς ψευδαίσθησης, θεωρώντας τὴν μία στιγμιαία, ὑπερβολικὴ συγκινησιακὴ κατάσταση ποὺ προκαλεῖται σὲ ἐξαιρετικὲς περιπτώσεις. Ἡ θέση τοῦ αὐτοῦ





εὐθυγραμμίζεται μὲ τὴν κατευθυντήρια ἀρχὴ τῆς αἰσθητικῆς τοῦ θεωρίας ὅτι ἡ τέχνη, δημιουργώντας ἀντίγραφα πραγματικῶν ἀντικειμένων, ἐπιδρᾷ λιγότερο ἔντονα στὰ συναισθήματά μας ἀπ' ὅ,τι τὰ ἴδια τὰ πραγματικὰ ἀντικείμενα. Ἀρνεῖται ἀκόμη τὴν ψευδαίσθηση γιὰ λόγους ποὺ ἀνάγονται στὶς συνήθειες καὶ στὶς προσδοκίες μας καὶ οἱ ὁποῖες καθορίζουν τὶς ἀντιλήψεις μας, ὅπως ὑποστηρίζει ὁ σύγχρονος ἱστορικὸς τῆς τέχνης E. H. Gombrich. Στὴν περίπτωση τῆς ζωγραφικῆς, ὁ θεατὴς ἐνὸς ἔργου μὲ «σημαντικὸ περιεχόμενο» δὲν ἀρκεῖται σὲ μία πρώτη συνολικὴ ἐντύπωση τῶν αἰσθήσεων, ποὺ συνήθως εἶναι βιαστικὴ καὶ ἐπιπόλαιη καὶ συνοδεύεται σπάνια ἀπὸ τὴ δημιουργία τῆς ψευδαίσθησης, ἀλλὰ προσπαθεῖ νὰ συλλάβει τὸ βαθύτερο νόημα τοῦ θέματος, γιὰ νὰ ἀξιολογήσει σωστὰ τὸ ἔργο, ὅποτε ἐδῶ δὲν ἔχει καμιὰ θέση ἡ ψευδαίσθηση. Ἡ σύγκρουση τῶν ἀρχῶν τῆς θεωρίας τοῦ Dubos ποὺ ἐπισημαίνεται τόσο στὸ σημεῖο αὐτὸ ὅσο καὶ σὲ ἄλλα σημεῖα τοῦ ἔργου του, μπορεῖ νὰ ἐξηγηθεῖ ἀπὸ τὸ γεγονὸς ὅτι ἡ σκέψη τοῦ ἀντανακλᾷ μιὰ τολμηρὴ προσπάθεια μετάβασης ἀπὸ τὴν παλαιότερη στὴ νεώτερη αἰσθητικὴ.

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