

**I speak Italian to my mistress, Latin to  
my God and German to my horse**

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## Introduction

*Have you ever felt odd? Perhaps an odd feeling came upon you one morning at the market. You saw the piles of vegetables and the cuts of meats covered in clear plastic. You noticed, with particular attention, the little signs above the individual fruits giving their names and prices. Suddenly, it seemed unaccountably odd that any of this should make any sense to anyone. How very strange that these numbers and words and pictures and physical objects are all related, you thought. It was a warm morning and you walked out into the sunlight with a beating heart and a sheen of sweat on the palms of your hands. For a few more moments you trusted neither sun, nor earth, nor sky. All aspects of reality seemed as arbitrary to you as those signs above the fruit in the market. And then the feeling faded and you were back in the world again. You proceeded to go about your day.<sup>1</sup>*

I actually have no idea whether this is an epiphany which everyone has sometimes (I hope so because it is very interesting to experience). I have this experience quite often. Even to the point where I sometimes look in the mirror and this person I am looking at all of a sudden seems completely unfamiliar and strange to me. I look at myself as I would look at someone whom I know nothing about.

This experience is like a kind of a facade which opens up every once in a while and very unexpectedly, without you having control over it. After a while it goes back down again like a veil that covers everything with meaning. This way you do not feel a need to question anything anymore and you wonder why you just looked at yourself seeing a stranger because you now seem so familiar.

I often wonder about how things get their meaning and if this is really fair to the thing(s) itself (if it really does it justice). Are we, humans, depriving ourselves of experiencing our surroundings because we have “labeled” everything? With labelling I mean to say that human beings construct the world in such a way that it becomes comprehensible to us. I think this labelling has everything to do with human survival and development. This excites me because it gives me the sense that there is another way of experiencing reality beyond our construction/understanding of it.

A kind of floating ground where you do not know what is what but that’s ok. We can just try to imagine the existence of it and after a short while snap back into the reality we know and understand. The one filled with meaning and clarity.

I don’t want these sudden moments of doubt to vanish and so I am sometimes afraid that I hold on to what I “know” and “believe” too much. I cherish the moments where, for a couple of minutes, I lose all control over what surrounds me. Where I simply do not understand.

Language is a tool with which we construct the world. With language we create and express knowledge, we can communicate, share information and we can talk about things we cannot see or touch like the past, the future or time.

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<sup>1</sup> Morgan Meis, *Don't trust the painting*, 2013, New York, <https://www.thesmartset.com/article11061301/>

We create signs and meanings and we attach these onto our physical and non-physical world. Language is acquired through culture which makes it so that different languages do not only sound different or use different-looking signs, they can be based on a whole different idea of reality. A different (way of) understanding. As there are countless different languages around the world, this would mean that there is not one true way of experiencing reality, but countless variations of it! I think this is something very interesting to be receptive of.

I want to know more about different ways of experiencing reality and how language acts as a tool which controls our thoughts and our perception.

This thesis will start with looking at different linguistic studies. How does language shape thought? What are the structures behind language which decide upon the given meanings? What is the link between these meanings and reality?

After which there will be a shift to the artworld as there have been different artists and art critics working with this questioning of reality through (the shift of) art. The world of art automatically invites us into the realm of the perceptive world in which there seem to be countless ways of seeing. The invention of the camera has multiplied meanings which has ultimately created a kind of language through images. Images have the ability to bring us further from reality than ever before.

The first chapter will have a theoretical approach and deals with language and thought. I will discuss scientists and philosophers who have dealt with (and contributed to) the philosophy of language.

The chapter starts off with Benjamin Lee Whorf (1897-1941). He advocated the idea that languages (each containing different structures) shape how their speakers give meaning to and even see the world. This would mean that speakers within different languages give different meanings to their surroundings and might even perceive it differently.

A present-day scientist dealing with this theory is Lera Boroditsky who is continuing this idea of language shaping thought and perception. Within her studies, she makes use of very clear empirical examples and she incorporates as many different languages (and its speakers) throughout the world as possible. The latter makes her studies quite unique and very important in examining more closely cognitive differences between different languages.

To create a context around the theories mentioned above, I will focus on contributors to the philosophy of language. Starting with Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) and his theory of the structure of language and how, within language, meaning and reality are not connected by anything other than some kind of social convention. Continuing with Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) who has reflected on how social constructs decide upon the meanings we connect to language and how this can be cause for misconception and misunderstanding within language. Then completing this chapter with Michel Foucault (1926-1984) who explains that and how meanings have changed throughout history and with that the structure of language. This way a language can tell a lot about the place and time it is in.

In the second chapter, my approach will be different. In this chapter my focus will be on perception and not so much on the theory of language anymore. The chapter starts with perception of the arts as told by John Berger (1926-2017). He introduces the effect the invention of the camera has had on the art world and how the ability of reproduction creates a new kind of (visual) language, new ways of seeing.

James Bridle (born in 1980) talks about the role of images in the 21st century and how technology is now playing an increasing role in shaping how we see the world.

As a result of developing technology, images operate more and more like a language. Images acquire the ability to shape our understanding of things.

Constant Dullaart (born in 1979) makes works in which he communicates how images have become weapons in a new kind of power structure on social media. He puts a magnifying glass on how images can be used as a manipulation tool (by using Photoshop, for example). This way a greater distance is created, like with language, between the images we see and the reality behind them (which we do not see).

Floris de Lange focuses on our cognition within the field of behavioral sciences. He makes clear that precognition can influence what we see by making predictions.

Ultimately I want to clarify how language and perception are intertwined. They have the ability to influence and shape each other and, with that, us.

I am writing this whilst being aware that I am in a one-way conversation with you (or rather, at this moment, with myself), in an effort to make you understand what I am trying to get through to you. At the same time I am trying to be aware that I will never fully succeed and I might not want to either, because there is no dialogue here (it is just me, telling you what I find to be so very interesting). The fact that there is no dialogue makes my writings feel a bit like convincing which is something I want to prevent from happening. I would not want you to read this as truth, but just as another (extra) way of seeing/understanding how things could possibly be.

John Berger (who I will address later on in the thesis) lays out perfectly what I am trying to say; *“I hope you will consider what I arrange, but be sceptical of it.”*

## Chapter 1, Language and thought

### 1.1 Whorf

I will start off this thesis by telling you about Benjamin Lee Whorf and his work. Whorf was an American linguist and a fire prevention engineer who lived from 1897 to 1941. His theory was that thought and action are entirely determined by language as language influences thought. He named this theory *Linguistic relativity*. Now, he wasn't the first to write about these ideas, but instead of just using hypotheses he applied very specific, empirical, examples of how certain grammatical categories of languages related to conceptual and behavioral patterns of its speakers. These studies are still used now by scholars in the name of the *Sapir-Whorf studies* (named after Whorf and his mentor, Edward Sapir, whom he studied with at Yale University). Although his findings were doubted a lot in his time, he has had a big influence on the cognitive and linguistic sciences. He has set this idea of language influencing thought in motion.

Whorf was originally educated to be an engineer but his interest in linguistics later in life made him decide to study at Yale University. The last ten years of his life (from around 1930 until his death in 1941), Whorf focussed on Native American languages in the US and Mexico. His work on these native languages has made him very controversial since this work has shown that the structures of these languages are truly different from other popular western languages which were, until then, the only ones extensively studied by linguists.

Most importantly, Whorf has written many articles which were published in linguistic journals in which he dealt with what he is now most known for; the ways in which he recognized that different languages/linguistic systems directly affect the cognitive systems (thought) and, with that, also behavior of speakers of different languages (which is called the theory of *linguistic relativity*). I find this a very interesting statement which automatically brings up more questions. When different language-speakers behave differently, then do their ideas about reality also differ?

Like mentioned before, Whorf applied very clear empirical examples to his theories. An important example Whorf used is about the word "snow". While the English language has one word to describe it, being; "snow". The *Inuit* language (spoken in Alaska and northern parts of Canada) has at least five, describing snow falling, laying on the ground, snow packed hard ice, slushy snow, wind driven flying snow, etcetera. Having only one general word would seem unthinkable to people speaking *Inupiaq* (*Inuit* language). To english speakers and lots of other western languages on the other hand, having one word for snow is very normal and there is no necessity for adding more.

Whorf stated that this (*Inuit's*) extensive vocabulary on snow enables its speakers to experience snow more richly. This connection between language and experience enabled Whorf to empower his statement that language determines thought and action.

Whorf's views have often been incriminated to exaggerate the depth of cognitive differences between different language-speakers. His view that when a language doesn't have a word for something, therefore it cannot be experienced, is one often disputed.

In the end, *Inuits* and their *Inupiaq* language have way more words for snow than the English language does.

This difference raises a fundamental question; When the Inuit relation to snow is very different from the relationship English speakers have to it, what does this imply for all of our other experiences that exist besides just that of snow?

After disappearing into history for a while, Whorf's ideas and researching methods are now being brought back up by modern scientists. A lot of them are now stating that language does in fact influence thought and therefore plays a big role in constructing one's world, one's reality.

Amongst these people is cognitive scientist and professor in the fields of language and cognition, Lera Boroditsky. Currently working on the theory of linguistic relativity she is, as well as her predecessor Whorf, stating that language shapes the way we think. When having what Boroditsky teaches us in mind, Whorf might not have been over-exaggerating about the cognitive differences between speakers of different languages.

## 1.2 Boroditsky

Boroditsky was born in Belarus in 1976 and moved with her parents to the United States when she was twelve years old. The English language she learned then was, at that time, her fourth language. Still very young, Boroditsky started thinking about how differences in language can have an effect on arguments and how it exposes differences between people. Now, 32 years and a professor's degree later, she is studying language and cognition, making use of many other fields of science like linguistics, psychology, neuroscience and anthropology.

Her research sheds a light on the theory of Linguistic Relativity and shows that and how the human mind is not universal but very much dependent on language (and the culture it emerges from). She is moving forward with the ideas brought up by Whorf, using examples of syntactic (arrangement of words) and lexical (meaning of words) differences between languages as well as the defining of abstract domains in different languages, with which people construct the world around them.

It is important to understand that, up until now, cognitive research has mostly been done in the United States by English speakers and published in English. The studies done on cognition best known in the Western world have mostly been done by and of people who are to be called "weird" (Western, educated, industrialised, rich and democratic). This excludes almost all of the world. Boroditsky brings this realisation to our attention, showing that in order to truly understand human cognition, we must include the whole world and not just the English speaking part of it.

I would like to introduce a nice quote by Frederick the Great (King of Prussia in the 18th century) in which you might recognize the title of this thesis; "I speak English to my accountants, French to my ambassadors, Italian to my mistress, Latin to my God and German to my horse." Suggesting that particular languages are best suited for particular use.

Boroditsky says; "The beauty of linguistic diversity is that it reveals to us just how ingenious and how flexible the human mind is," and "Human minds have invented not one cognitive universe, but 7,000."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> TED-talk, Lera Boroditsky, *How language shapes the way we think*, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RKK7wGAYP6k>

If we are to believe what Whorf and Boroditsky have to say, language has a larger effect on our cognition than we might have thought. Boroditsky often quotes Charlemagne (the 7th century roman emperor), saying that knowing another language is like having a second soul. Language can decide where you place yourself in your surroundings and how you will describe and see yourself. The same counts for how you decide upon and measure your surroundings in general, your reality.

Seeing the same thing does not necessarily mean giving the same meaning or even perceiving the same. Knowing that this applies to many different words and languages, you could try to imagine what this means for the perception of general surroundings between the speakers of different languages. These can be totally opposite from each other.

For Boroditsky, grammatical gender is an important example. Although seeing a flower as something feminine seems very normal when you are a French-speaker, a Russian speaker would describe the same flower as being masculin. As the French speaker uses different words to describe the flower than the Russian does, you can say that a French-speaker gives a different meaning to the flower than a Russian-speaker does.

The genders linked to words are different in different languages. Some languages do not apply gender into their language at all. But amongst the speakers of languages that do apply genders in their language, you can see this making its way into their physical world.

### 1.2.1 Constructing the non perceptible world

Understanding how speakers of different languages give meaning to their surroundings becomes even more extensive when we now think about the parts of our cognition with which we try to construct the world. For example, the way one thinks about the term space depends on what language you speak and even for how long you have been speaking this language.

An interesting example Boroditsky uses to clarify this difference in constructing the world is her research of an Australian Aboriginal tribe speaking *Kuuk Thaayorre*.

*Kuuk Thaayorre* uses cardinal directions (north, south, east, west) in daily language instead of the Western “left” and “right”. These people are constantly aware of where they are situated. For them, just using left and right (and front and back, etc.) would be useless because these are locked onto the body, not on the landscape. For people speaking *Kuuk Thaayorre* this doesn’t get you oriented in the landscape that surrounds you. When an English speaker would try to explain “left” to someone speaking *Kuuk Thaayorre*, this would be of no interest to the latter. When you are facing one way, left would imply northeast to a *Kuuk Thaayorre* speaker. But when facing another way left all of a sudden means southwest. For one language group, using something basic like left and right to orientate on a daily basis will withstand. To another it can be completely non-functional.

The whole existence of *Kuuk Thaayorre*-speakers is based upon getting oriented. This includes their language and so people speaking this language and others similar to it stay oriented really well, better than we thought humans ever could. Boroditsky explains; “The way that you say hello in *Kuuk Thaayorre* is you say “which way are you going?”, and the answer should be (for example) “north north east in the far distance, how about you?”.



“This is a big difference in cognitive ability across languages where one group, a very distinguished group even (in the West for example), doesn’t know which way is which. But in another group (This Aboriginal tribe for example), I could ask a five year old and they would know.”<sup>3</sup>

Our physical experience of space can differ quite a lot. We create this experience through the language we speak within a language group and this way we visualize and express directions. What would this mean to our (differences in) physical experience of time? Well, as you might suspect this, as well as space, can have immense variations throughout different languages.

To make use of the *Kuuk Thaayorre* speakers again, they align time horizontally, based on where they are standing physically in space. Time doesn’t belong to their body, it belongs to the landscape and it goes from east to west. So when you are facing south, time goes from left to right, when facing north it would be organised from right to left, facing east time comes towards you, etc. An English speaker aligns time horizontally and from left to right (just as the writing direction). A Hebrew speaker aligns time (and writes) horizontally as well, but from right to left. But a Mandarin speaker will align time vertically, just as the writing direction, and from right to left. All three of them (the English, the Hebrew and the Mandarin-speaker) will base the placement of time on their own body for, like said before, directions will be locked onto the body and not, like with the *Kuuk Thaayorre* speakers, on the landscape. To the English, Hebrew and Mandarin speaker, it doesn’t mean where they are situated physically to align time. To *Kuuk Thaayorre* speakers, it is vital.

Time and space are quite vague terms, but the understanding of them has a big influence on our perception. This becomes clear when you visually align time in different languages or when the space around you starts to define where you are or the other way around. To make the difference in perception between different language-speakers more clear, Boroditsky also demonstrates examples of languages that do not count (at least not with numbers) and languages differing in how they divide up the color spectrum, making a clear shift to our perceptive world, our reality. With all these examples showing how our cognition can differ and with that our understanding of reality, Boroditsky says; “It’s my hope that as people learn how things could be different, that inspires them to ask for themselves if there are different ways to see these things, makes them curious about other possibilities, and makes the world a bigger place for them.”<sup>4</sup>

I cannot continue now before first disclosing something about the distinction between the language one can *speak in* and the language one can *think for*, which Boroditsky has determined and written about in a paper<sup>5</sup> containing her research on this topic. Hebrew is an example of a language that is not international (although it has a lot of speakers). It is a revived dead language and its speakers can be found all over the world with the United States having the second-largest Hebrew-speaking population, mostly originating

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<sup>3</sup> Boroditsky, 2018

<sup>4</sup> Katherine Matthews, *Language shaping thought: An interview with cognitive scientist Lera Boroditsky*, ridingthedragon.life, 3/3/2017

<sup>5</sup> Boroditsky, *Does Language Shape Thought?: Mandarin and English Speakers’ Conceptions of Time*, Stanford, Stanford University, 2001

from Israel which has the largest population. Because its speakers are scattered around the world, they have often been taught to speak other languages as well.

What happens now is that a Hebrew speaker living in Israel can have a different physical experience of time than a Hebrew speaker living in the United States might have.

Boroditsky has studied this phenomenon of people with the ability of speaking different languages (bilinguals) and how they experience the world around them.

She determined that habits in language encourage habits in thought and these habits can operate regardless of the language that person is thinking for at that moment<sup>6</sup>. For example, a Mandarin speaker living in the US with the capability of speaking perfect English can still have the thinking habits of a Mandarin speaker while speaking in (and thinking for) English. “Acquiring thinking habits promoted by a language appears to depend primarily on how early one starts to learn that language and not on the amount of exposure to that language.” and so Boroditsky is able to conclude that “One’s native language appears to exert a strong influence over how one thinks about abstract domains.”<sup>7</sup>

Boroditsky speaks and writes about how speaking a certain language can make you experience things differently from someone speaking a different language and that our ways of perceiving and giving meaning can vary quite a lot within different language groups. This idea stems from the linguistic-relativity theory but this theory itself also has its predecessors within Western philosophy and cognitive sciences. I am now going to introduce some of these predecessors.

### 1.3 Philosophical studies

There are lots of people, studies and works to talk about but the ones I will address have all contributed something different. Together they form a sort of basis of what intrigues me and on which Boroditsky is now continuing.

Starting with De Saussure, father of the study of linguistics in the Western world. He was the first to separate language from reality and focused on the structures that lie beneath the languages we speak (of what is being said and what is being meant by it).

Then proceeding with Wittgenstein who dove deeper into the everyday use of language. And ending this chapter with Foucault who talks about the structures we have created within language. With these structures we create our idea of knowledge which generates a kind of power-play because it decides upon what is common sense.

#### 1.3.1 De Saussure

Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) was a Swiss linguist, semiotician and philosopher. He is considered to be one of the founders of semiotics and the father of 20th-century linguistics within the Western world.

Semiotics studies how meaning is formed and reality represented, in short it can be called the study of signs wherein a sign is anything that communicates as a meaning (so for example a word or an image as well as a symbol or a symptom).

De Saussure’s ideas were revolutionary in his time because it changed the whole theory of language that has existed before. All of a sudden language and reality could be seen as

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<sup>6</sup> Boroditsky, 2001

<sup>7</sup> Boroditsky, 2001, p.18

two separate things. Language could be understood as merely a structure which is capable of giving itself meaning.

His most influential work is a book, published after his death in 1916, called “Cours de linguistique générale (Course in General Linguistics )”<sup>8</sup>, which was published by former students of his. The book consists of notes made from lectures given by De Saussure between 1906 and 1911.

De Saussure sees language as a system of signs with an underlying structure (of rules or norms) which makes it understandable (within a certain society). Within this structure there is an arbitrary relationship between the sign (which he calls “the signifier”), and its meaning (called “the signified”). So what he is saying is that within language there is no inherent link between what we say and what we mean other than that, as a society, we have decided that a certain word has a certain meaning which is the only glue, keeping them together. For example; we have decided that when putting the letters D, O and G together or producing the sound “dog”, we mean this four-legged animal wiggling its tail. This has nothing to do with the being itself. The word is merely a concept. When describing our own dog to someone we would have to refer to this broad concept in order to make clear what you are talking about while actually, you are talking about a very specific creature. This is something language cannot really cover.

Language according to De Saussure can be seen as a product of the collective mind of a linguistic group. Within speakers of the same language (a society, a culture), “all will reproduce - not exactly of course, but approximately - the same signs united with the same concepts.”<sup>9</sup> The meanings that are connected will be in agreement with each other.

So to summarise; De Saussure attempted to clarify that reality is something independent from human interpretation and therefore he finds that the existence of meaning (ones interpretation of reality) can be seen as something futile, stating that; “meaning is not ‘transmitted’ to us, we actively create it according to a complex interplay of codes or conventions of which we are normally unaware.”<sup>10</sup> Our reality, in this sense, can be seen as a construct created by language rather than something that exists outside it.

A philosopher important to mention now when talking about societal structures creating language, is Wittgenstein. De Saussure emphasized on the arbitrariness of meaning since each language is a structure with its own rules. Wittgenstein focussed on the different ways of using/communicating language in order to convey meaning. He dove deeper into the inner works of these “structures” and “rules”. He saw language as a social product and found that society and its ruling ideas determine the meanings within language.

### 1.3.2 Wittgenstein

Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889 - 1951) was an Austrian-British philosopher working with logic as well as the philosophy of mathematics, mind and language. During his lifetime he has published one article, one book review, a children’s dictionary and one book,

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<sup>8</sup> De Saussure, *Cours de Linguistique Générale*, Genève, Bally et Sechehaye, 1916

<sup>9</sup> De Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (1st translation, Wade Baskin), New York, Philosophical Library, 1959, p.13

<sup>10</sup> Daniel Chandler, *Semiotics, the basics, second edition*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2002, p.11

called *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*<sup>11</sup>. After his death his manuscripts were published as a book, called *Philosophical Investigations*<sup>12</sup>.

In these manuscripts, Wittgenstein attempts to tackle the difficulties of language and meaning.

He gives his interpretation of the word “meaning” as; “the meaning of a word is its use in the language.”<sup>13</sup>

He tried to get rid of the old fashioned attempts in philosophy to analyse language in which one would take apart a sentence, analyzing it word for word. Wittgenstein found that this approach was way too rigid for language is not a logical system, it has many influences.

In Wittgenstein’s opinion, the meaning we give to words, depends on the (social) context they are used in. Meanings can differ enormously, depending on the social (or; language) group in which it is given to something.

To further clarify this idea of context creating meaning, Wittgenstein refers to language games which is a philosophical concept he has come up with in order to clarify that there are innumerable ways in which language can be used. When used or interpreted incorrectly, language can create misunderstanding and chaos.

For example; When you are seated in a dentists ‘waiting room and the receptionist says “miss Sherley”, this means that the person with that name can get up and enter the dentists’ room. But when this same person would go to the bank and the employee asks for her name and she answers “miss Sherley”, this means that she identifies herself as “miss Sherley”. In the first example, “miss Sherley” is a way to clarify that an action may be performed while, in the second example, “miss Sherley” is a way for someone to designate herself and it also answers a question. These are two different language-games, using the same two words in the same order.

Another example could be the sentence; “don’t forget to buy apples!”. It would be understood completely different when used as an order then it would be, blasted through a speaker in the supermarket. The language game at play can be determined by who says it, to whom it is directed, where it’s located and many other factors.

Once the language game is determined, it defines the meaning linked to the word(s) it contains at that moment. Until the language-game is clear, a word or a sentence has no meaning (because there is no basis on which it can be determined) and can hardly be understood. This is where language comes short. It cannot exist on its own, it needs context and meaning.

Like said before, Wittgenstein sees language as a social product. Society and culture determine the context in which a certain type of language game is used.

We cannot see or understand language outside of our own (cultural) context(s). A word is not just a reference to something. Wittgenstein considers it more than that. It can contain lots of different aspects, depending on the context.

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<sup>11</sup> Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, London, Kegan Paul, 1922 (translated from the original German text from 1921)

<sup>12</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1953

<sup>13</sup> Wittgenstein, 1953, p.20, §43

Take the word ‘game’ for example; There is not one universal understanding of what a ‘game’ entails exactly. This doesn’t seem to be a problem because in our everyday life we *know* that a football match and Pac-man are both games. We are not bothered by the fact that there are lots of differences and only a few similarities between the two games. In the Western world we do not consider it strange to categorize them under the same name.

This doesn’t bother us as long as we know the context of use of the word. Within a society we have a mutual understanding of what language-game is used and therefore we know in what way to understand a certain word even though it could be used in countless different ways. Wittgenstein explains that we cannot study language scientifically, by taking every word apart, we need to look at the context that surrounds it. “When philosophers use a word – ‘knowledge’, ‘being’, ‘object’, ‘I’, ‘proposition/sentence’, ‘name’ – and try to grasp the *essence* of the thing, one must always ask oneself: is the word ever actually used in this way in the language in which it is at home?”<sup>14</sup> An “understanding” of language can only exist when we consider the context, its use, in everyday life. There is not one understanding, there can be multiple. We aren’t always aware of this because it seems so normal to us that we know a context and, with that, the meaning of a word. We do not tend to think beyond the words we use.

About this, Wittgenstein says, “A ‘picture’ held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably.”<sup>15</sup>

Both De Saussure and Wittgenstein talk about structures and/or systems within language that create meaning and reality. But where do these structures come from? Wittgenstein talks about culture having social structures but how do these structures come into being? Another, and the last, philosopher I will talk about within the field of language in this chapter is Michel Foucault. Foucault has talked and written about the hidden structures behind the languages we use, which exert a kind of social control (a power-play). So, not the structures we have talked about before which were more evident and on the surface but the structures that are behind the ways in which we give this much-discussed meaning.

### 1.3.3 Foucault

Michel Foucault (1926-1984) was a french philosopher, historian of ideas (study on the history of human thought), writer, political activist and a literary critic.

In his works he has focussed on what lies beneath what humans do, think, perceive and feel within Western culture. He did this by looking at history using archeological methodology. This implies seeing what were the existing structures within Western societies throughout history (What was the general idea of knowledge and what was its effect). According to Foucault, one should be aware of these structures and learn from them in the context of their own time instead of looking at history in relation to the present. The latter would have little to do with history itself and more with the present time.

I want to share a few things about Foucault’s book *The Order Of Things*<sup>16</sup>. Order being defined as the unconscious, normalized way things are structured or arranged, and ‘things’ being history, knowledge, man, or what Foucault calls the human sciences.

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<sup>14</sup> Wittgenstein, 2009, §116

<sup>15</sup> Wittgenstein, 1953, §115, p.48

<sup>16</sup> Foucault, *The Order of Things*, Paris, Editions Gallimard, 1966

In this book Foucault explains how each period in history has its own nature of knowledge which he calls an *épisteme*. The *épisteme* determines what was truth and how to talk about certain subjects in that time in history. An *épisteme* can be described as a form of power which forces certain knowledge upon its subjects. It compares people and things, measures differences, it establishes a norm.

So to be clear, these *épistemes* (or structures) of thought shape everyone and everything within a certain time and culture. It creates the underlying structure with which we create meaning and a way of looking at the world. It determines what is found to be common sense. An *épisteme* can be seen as a system through which knowledge is constructed and performed. Foucault himself describes an *épisteme* as something that; “defines the conditions of possibility of all knowledge, whether expressed in a theory or silently invested in a practice.”<sup>17</sup>

This common knowledge that is created in an *épisteme*, constitutes our assumptions in a specific time and society. Order (or classification or taxonomy) is made up out of assumptions. Foucault describes this order as “The tale upon which, since the beginning of time, language has intersected space.”<sup>18</sup>

To show the reader that the ways in which we order the world around us can differ quite a lot, depending on the *épisteme*, Foucault starts off *The Order of Things* with an example from a book he has read which quotes a “certain Chinese encyclopedia”<sup>19</sup> which tells about the division of the animal world. This encyclopedia’s classification is one totally strange to the Western classification of the animal world (in that time as well as now).

This shows that, what is the norm in one *épisteme*, can be completely unthinkable and strange for another.

“In the wonderment of this taxonomy, the thing we apprehend in one great leap, the thing that, by means of the fable, is demonstrated as the exotic charm of another system of thought, is the limitation of our own, the stark impossibility of thinking *that*”<sup>20</sup>. Foucault says that, when reading about this “strange” classification, you can recognize your own *épisteme* limiting you to comprehend other realities. Language has created a kind of unthinkable space within our cognition.

### 1.3.3.1 Las Meninas and Magritte

Foucault has explained that an *épisteme* constitutes the assumptions we have. Above I have used the example of the Chinese encyclopedia to tell you about these assumptions within language. But this is not where the influence of an *épisteme* and its assumptions ends.

In the first chapter of *The order of things*<sup>21</sup> Foucault talks about the painting *Las meninas*, made by Diego Velázquez (the image can be seen on the next page) in 1656 and its relation to the subject of reality versus myth. Inside this painting, there is a lot we cannot actually see but which our assumptions create automatically. Velázquez manages to direct where your eye goes and what you think you are seeing. For example; we “know” that there is a window on the right side of the frame because we can see the light that shines through it.

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<sup>17</sup> Foucault, 1966, p.168

<sup>18</sup> Foucault, 1966, preface XIX

<sup>19</sup> Foucault, 1966, preface XVI

<sup>20</sup> Foucault, 1966, preface XVI

<sup>21</sup> Foucault, 1966

But this window is not actually painted. What does this tell us about our idea of reality, when we think we know something is there, when it actually isn't. It reminds me of an optical illusion.

The painting consists of many elements Foucault uses as examples to show that, when looking at the work, we create a kind of story, a reality. But we are actually fooled. Fooled because of the way Velázquez has organised the space within the frame.

“We are observing ourselves being observed by the painter, and made visible to his eyes by the same light that enables us to see him. And just as we are about to apprehend ourselves, transcribed by his hand as though in a mirror, we find that we can in fact apprehend nothing of that mirror but its lusterless back. The other side of a psyche.”<sup>22</sup>

The work plays with the idea of reality. Is the painter who is painted inside the frame, painting what is in front of him, outside of the picture? Then is this image outside of the picture (where we are, in reality), not also a painted reality?



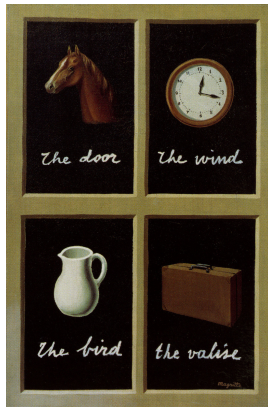
*Las meninas*

Another commentary by Foucault worth mentioning as a follow-up of his commentary on *Las Meninas* is one on the artist René Magritte's work. Like De Saussure, both Foucault and Magritte critique language and state that signs are arbitrary. Magritte recognized a linguistic element in painting (this image represents that thing..) and has tried to show that a painting/painted image is nothing other than itself. Foucault has talked about how Magritte's works play with the supposed importance of words by (for example) showing them in combination with images that do not correspond. Like with *La clef des songes* and *La trahison des images* (depicted on the next page).

These works make language implode under the weight of its own meaning. The words themselves become part of the depiction. They are intended to be seen, not read. When reading them they do not make any sense. Foucault refers to this work as being an “unravelling calligram”<sup>23</sup>, a calligram being an image, formed by the words which describe it, which Magritte has unravelled by separating the image from the text. This is how Magritte ultimately reveals the arbitrariness, the artificiality of language.

<sup>22</sup> Foucault, 1966, p.7

<sup>23</sup> Foucault, *This is Not a Pipe*, Paris, 1968



*La Clef des Songes*



*La Trahison des Images*

What we can take out of all this is that according to Foucault (amongst others like De Saussure, Wittgenstein as well as Magritte and Boroditsky), meaning and reality seem to be subjective and ever changeable within language and perception. Concepts are visualised differently between different language-speakers. These differences depend on the cultural differences which are expressed through language. Therefore people throughout the world can have completely different understandings of the same thing.

This is hard to imagine because you designate your surroundings through the realisation of language you are acquainted with, created through the épisteme you live in.

I think a lovely addition would be this quote by Boroditsky; “I hope that when we see how the language we speak shapes the way we think, this allows us to turn the mirror on ourselves, instead of just thinking about how other people elsewhere think in such a different, “weird” way about the world. Instead, you’re able to say, “It seems to me that this is reality, but in fact it’s been constructed by all these features of my language and my culture.”.”<sup>24</sup>

Until now I have talked mostly about creating meaning through language and the other way around but what about that other important thing through which we identify everything around us? What effect does all this have on our perception? When seeing, we know what is really there. But do we? Or is this perception, like language, largely determined by the underlying structures that define the context in (and with) which we see what we see? With Foucault’s contemplation of *Las Meninas* and Magritte’s work finishing off this first chapter, I will now continue to dive into the world of perception and how language, thought, meaning and perception influence each other.

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<sup>24</sup> Katherine Matthews, *Language shaping thought: An interview with cognitive scientist Lera Boroditsky*, [ridingthedragon.life](http://ridingthedragon.life), 3/3/2017



## Chapter 2, Perception

Where the first chapter consisted of different language-theories, this second chapter focuses on perception. The topic of language as discussed before will still play a large role. The idea of this chapter is to learn more about how images as well as language can decide upon perception, upon our ways of seeing. I will explain how language and perception are intertwined.

In light of Foucault's contemplation on Magritte's work, and in order to introduce this chapter, someone well worth mentioning is John Berger. Berger (1926-2017) was an English art critic, novelist, painter and poet who has had (and still has) a lot of influence on how we view Western art (history), politics and the act of thinking itself today. Firstly I will talk about his interest in René Magritte's work.

Berger's view is that seeing comes before words, "The child looks and recognizes before it can speak"<sup>25</sup>. Another important thing he has tried to make clear is that there is often a disconnection between what you see and what is there (so again, relativity of meaning and reality in perception as well as language). Berger had chosen to put one of Magritte's works, *The key of dreams* (shown on the previous page), on the front cover of his book *Ways of Seeing*<sup>26</sup>. The problem is that in order to decode what we see we use language, which got us in trouble to begin with. This is what the artist Magritte's work is about, says Berger. "The Surrealist painter Magritte commented on this always-present gap between words and seeing."<sup>27</sup>

What Berger has told us about perception is, firstly; that looking is an act of choice and so we only see what we look at. And, secondly, that what we see when looking is affected by assumptions we have. The latter because of the surrounding factors (like actual visual surroundings as well as social and political climate), which has a big influence on our perception. These factors create the context which partly decides upon what you perceive. Berger mainly focuses on this process of (changing) context influencing perception within the arts and he thinks that when we learn about this, we can also learn about how we perceive in general.

### 2.1.1 Ways of Seeing

John Berger has produced a lot of works during his lifetime. Amongst them the two I will mention which is a television program<sup>28</sup> which consisted of four episodes and a novelization<sup>29</sup> (a book consisting of written and visual essays) of this program, both called *Ways of Seeing* (produced in 1972).

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<sup>25</sup> John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (book), London, BBC and Penguin Books, 1972, p.7

<sup>26</sup> Berger, 1972.

<sup>27</sup> Berger, 1972, p.7

<sup>28</sup> John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (Broadcast), London, BBC, 1972

<sup>29</sup> Berger, 1972 (book)

These works have become well known partly because they consist of Berger's introduction of the idea of the male gaze<sup>30</sup>. This explains the way in which women, and the rest of the (art) world for that matter, are being and have been depicted in the visual arts as well as literature. This is from a masculine and heterosexual perspective (depicted for the pleasure of the heterosexual male viewer).

This is a good example of Berger's work in which he looks at the Western art world and the idea of the visual image in general. He recognizes the popular understanding of a certain subject within the art world and distinguishes the existing patterns that influence our gaze. By understanding how we see artworks, we can understand something about ourselves. "The process of seeing paintings or seeing anything else is less spontaneous and natural than we tend to believe. A large part of seeing depends on habits and conventions"<sup>31</sup>

The television series *Ways of Seeing* (broadcasted on BBC in January 1972) consisted of four episodes. In each episode Berger himself (serving as the presenter) tells the viewer about perception and how our ways of seeing have changed and will remain ever changeable. He demonstrates this very cleverly by using the screen of the viewers' television. The screen had become the frame in which he was apparent and which he had full control over. The first episode starts with the introduction spoken by Berger himself, saying; "This is the first of four programmes in which I want to question some of the assumptions usually made about the tradition of European painting. That tradition, which was born around 1400, died about 1900. Tonight it isn't so much the paintings themselves which I want to consider, as the way we now see them. Now in the second half of the 20th century, because we see these paintings as nobody saw them before. If we discover why this is so, we shall also discover something about ourselves and the situation in which we are living."

In the beginning of the book *Ways of Seeing*, Berger writes; "It is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain that world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it. The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled."<sup>32</sup> He also introduces the idea that we are taught how to look and see. "The way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe."<sup>33</sup>

Beliefs and assumptions have the ability to create the context in which we see. What we see might not have that much to do with what is really in front of us but rather more with what our minds are thought to recognize in order to process what it perceives. This is where I would like to remind you of the épistemes mentioned by Foucault, which decides upon what is general knowledge and common sense in a certain time and place.

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<sup>30</sup> Berger, 1972, chapter 3

<sup>31</sup> Berger, 1972, episode 1

<sup>32</sup> Berger, 1972, p.7

<sup>33</sup> Berger, 1972, p.8

### 2.1.2 The camera multiplying meanings

Art in the Western world has gone through a big transformation. The shift of the arts from only for the elite to art for everyone. It has become more flexible, more ephemeral.

In *Ways of Seeing* (book), Berger tells his reader about how we are now seeing the past as nobody did before. Our way of seeing has changed. Especially with (and because of) the invention of the camera. Before the camera existed everything was depicted as if out of the perspective of one spectator. Oneself situated in relation to others. With the invention of the camera came the idea that perspective can be in multiple places at the same time. Berger quotes filmmaker Dziga Vertov who had written the following about this “mechanical eye” which is the camera; “Freed from the boundaries of time and space, I coordinate any and all points of the universe, wherever I want them to be. My way leads towards the creation of a fresh perception of the world. Thus I explain in a new way the world unknown to you.”<sup>34</sup> which I think is a beautiful way of describing the change in perception the camera has set in motion, also because it talks as if from the perception of the machine which is the camera.

Men no longer believed in a single center from which everything was depicted and the visual was not timeless but rather fleeting.

Artworks could from then on be seen and understood in innumerable different contexts. In order to understand what this shift means exactly, we will have a look at what Berger has told us about this matter. First, someone very important to mention when talking about Berger and his *Ways of Seeing* is Walter Benjamin.

Benjamin (1892-1940) was a German philosopher and cultural critic. In his well-known essay *The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction*<sup>35</sup>, he talks about how human perception of works of art changes due to modern means of reproduction. Because of these advancements, we keep drifting further away from apprehending a work of art. We see it more and more out of its original context.

This essay has been a great source of inspiration for Berger, who took on this idea of art changing into a commodity instead of being something with its own authority within society. Walter Benjamin has been the main source of inspiration for his series and book *Ways of Seeing*. “For the first time ever, images of art have become ephemeral, ubiquitous, insubstantial, available, valueless, free. They surround us in the same way as a language surrounds us. They have entered the mainstream of life over which they no longer, in themselves, have power.”<sup>36</sup>

Art of the modern days has destroyed the authority it used to have in the Western world. The images become, like language, open for different interpretations. Earlier on in time, art used to have a clearer role and meaning within society (art was for the ruling class in society since they were the ones buying the art and so they decided upon what was art), but this has changed since the beginning of photography and the contemporary arts in general. Art was no longer only on display in a museum or in the houses of the rich, but it became possible for everyone to have a famous work of art hanging on their walls or to see one on a screen or in a magazine. All because of the possibility of reproduction of images.

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<sup>34</sup> Berger, 1973, p.17

<sup>35</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, 1935

<sup>36</sup> Berger, 1972, p.32

What does this mean for our perception? Do we see something different when we see the same work in a different environment, a different context?

### 2.1.3 Art for everyone

The artist has made a reproduction of his or her idea of reality and the viewer is looking at an image of this reproduction (in a magazine or on a computer screen for example) which exists in another kind of reality. It is a different version of the work. Different from the original one the artist has produced. When we see an original artwork one now often thinks of it as a famous painting of which one has seen a lot of reproductions already. The original work becomes the original of a reproduction. What it depicts is no longer unique, the only uniqueness lies in that it is the original.

The camera has multiplied meanings and, with that, destroyed a work's unique original meaning. Reproduction makes the meaning of works of art ambiguous. An image can now be used for countless different purposes. As a result, images of artworks can be used with words added to them or music surrounding it and/or with different physical surroundings. These factors all have the ability to change perspective. We have become able to see these images in contexts of our own, familiar to us, outside of the golden frame, outside of the museum. "I've said that as soon as the meaning of the painting becomes transmittable, this meaning is liable to be manipulated and transformed. It's no longer a constant."<sup>37</sup>

Like said before, Berger explains to us how our perspective is decided upon by what we know and/or what we believe. Knowledge and belief are often shared within one society/language-group (again, the *épisteme*). The way we have experienced art throughout the last century has largely been through reproductions and so this experience will ultimately define how we define and perceive an artwork. "What we make of that painted moment when it is before our eyes depends upon what we expect of art, and that in turn depends today upon how we have already experienced the meaning of paintings through reproductions."<sup>38</sup>

This new kind of images (reproduced) have created a new language through images. "The meaning of an image can be changed according to what you see beside it or what comes after it."<sup>39</sup> An example of this which Berger mentions in his TV series is how adults and children sometimes pin up images/reproductions next to their own drawings or photos or pages from magazines. "There, everything belongs to the same visual language. Used for describing or recreating experience. What so often inhibits such a spontaneous process is the false *mystification* which surrounds art."<sup>40</sup> Here, in episode 1 of his TV-series, Berger introduces a new aspect which influences our perception of art which is *mystification*. Berger describes this as a kind of "mask" which is put over the images as though it cannot be experienced to be too direct or accessible. This way we do not make sense of a work in front of us in our own terms but rather in the terms decided upon for us by art critics.

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<sup>37</sup> Berger, 1972, episode 1 (19:00)

<sup>38</sup> Berger, 1972, p.31

<sup>39</sup> Berger, 1972, episode 1 (19:33)

<sup>40</sup> Berger, 1972, episode 1 (21:57)

This way of describing mystification is one quite intense and actually not in consonance with what has been said by the theorists in the first chapter. I will explain Berger's way of describing mystification and I will show how there can also be another way of understanding this process of mystification and its effects.

### 2.1.4 Mystification

"Children", Berger says, "until they're educated out of it and are forced to accept mystifications, look at images and interpret them very directly. They connect any image, whether from a comic or from the National Gallery, directly with their own experience."<sup>41</sup> In the first episode of his TV-series he shows a group of children a reproduction of a Caravaggio (*Supper at Emmaus*, seen here on the right) and asks them what they see.

While one child thinks the depicted person in the middle is Jesus, another says; "it looks like a she to me". The children have a dispute over whether the person is either a man or a woman. "Because they were really looking and really relating what they saw to their own experience, they recognized something that most adults wouldn't."<sup>42</sup> The Children recognized the sexual ambivalence of the principal figure without knowing the name of the artist or the knowledge that he was a



*Supper at Emmaus*

homosexual and that he has dealt a lot with this ambivalence. With this example, Berger shows the viewer how mystification changes what we see. Most adults, having had a "normal" education in the Western world, would immediately see a depiction of Jesus and they would not have recognized anything else. Their perception is "narrowed" because of this knowledge.

Berger wanted to clarify that, because of this mystification, because art history has taught us "how things are", we can hardly see differently. That's why the children in Berger's programme perceived things that seem very surprising (maybe even incorrect) to people who are older and have acquired knowledge later in life which influences their perception now.

Berger says; "Mystification has little to do with the vocabulary used. Mystification is the process of explaining away what might otherwise be evident."<sup>43</sup> Berger's view on this is very extreme. Berger brings it as if we do not want to see the "real" reality. With that he is actually saying that what we are seeing is not real. He is also saying that reality does exist but that we are hiding it from ourselves.

Another way of looking at it is that there are many ways of seeing and that there is no question as to what is real or not. We are always living in a mystification which is our reality.

<sup>41</sup> Berger, 1972, episode 1 (26:08)

<sup>42</sup> Berger, 1972, episode 1 (27:40)

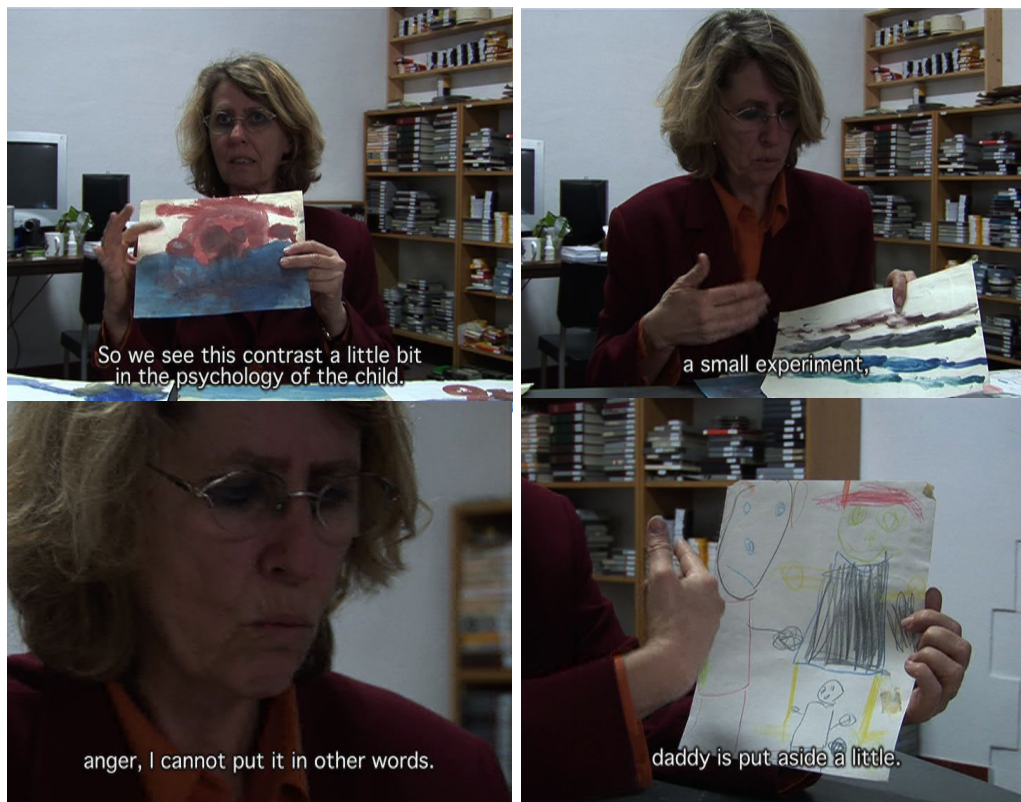
<sup>43</sup> Berger, 1972, p.15-16

Like Foucault explains it, for example; An unthinkable space is created within your cognition. Our épisteme limits you to comprehend other realities.

Foucault does not mean to say that we do not want to face reality, like Berger is more inclined to say. To Foucault, mystification is this unthinkable space created by an épisteme. Take for example the total strangeness of the ancient Chinese encyclopedia to someone from the Western part of the world. There is no right or wrong, only a lot of different ways of experiencing reality.

A more recent example I think fits with this idea of mystification fitting the last explanation of it is a work called *In Search of a Place on the Art Market, I decided to become a painter*,<sup>44</sup> by the Belgian artist Jasper Rigole (born in 1980).

In 2008, he took a series of drawings he made himself when he was a child to a psychologist to interpret them, without telling the psychologist he made the paintings himself, and filmed this analysis. This psychologist was specialised in childhood drawings and she analyzed the drawings extensively as she was thought to do, through the system of knowledge she knew. I think this is a good example of mystification being at play when making an image understandable this way, which does not per se have anything to do with how Rigole himself experienced his own being (as a child). This does not mean that either of the two versions are right or wrong, they are merely very different versions of understanding. Below are some screenshots of the psychologist examining the drawings.



<sup>44</sup> Jasper Rigole, *In search of a place on the Art Market, I decided to become a painter*, 2008, <https://www.jasperrigole.com/in-search-of-a-place-on-the-art-market-i-decided-to-become-a-painter/>

### 2.1.5 Changing perception

My interest lies in the link between language and perception. How is perception determined and altered, by what? And what control does language have over it? If images act like language does then the understanding of them is determined by social structures. Like language, images can be understood differently depending on the context. Think of Wittgenstein and his language games, for example.

This paragraph enlightens on that and how our perception (what we see and what meaning we give to it) can change depending on the information we have and/or obtain with it. This information includes language and written language but also music and images for example. There are many different factors which have the ability to form a kind of language as discussed before in paragraph 2.2.2.

I will use what Berger has said and written about this, showing examples, and I will explain about the cognitive mechanisms that decide upon our understanding and perception of things. For the latter I will refer to cognitive researcher, professor Floris de Lange.

At the conclusion of the first episode of *Ways of Seeing*, Berger turns directly to the viewer, saying; “Meanwhile, with this programme, as with all programmes, you receive images and meanings which are arranged. I hope you will consider what I arrange, but be sceptical of it.” Berger arranges everything with full autonomy, with the possible consequence of “misleading” (deliberately or unintentionally) the viewer into seeing what he wants you to see. He wants the viewer to be aware of this when watching his show and in general. Now that images circulate everywhere and with the ability of altering them at all times, I find this a very valid statement. This also becomes apparent through the works of Dullaart as well as Bridle’s radio show.

Berger says that “Reproduced paintings, like all information, have to hold their own against all the other information being continually transmitted.”<sup>45</sup> Information, in this sense, includes all sorts of surroundings, other images as well as sounds as text. This is where I would like to take you back to the subject of language, where this thesis started.

Images have become a language because they have become ever changeable and transmittable and with that, interpreted in countless different ways. Reproduction makes the meaning of a work of art, or an image in general, ambiguous. Because of reproduction, an image can be used by anybody for any purpose. Images can now be used like words, we can talk with them.

I will now give some examples Berger has used in order to show how to manipulate/change how an image is perceived.

The power music has over perception is something we hardly notice because it might seem and feel as if seeing and hearing are senses that can work alongside each other without interfering. Yet, music really does change the meaning of a picture.

To demonstrate this, the work by Caravaggio (on the next page, also shown to the group of children I mentioned before in chapter two) is used again.

First, the viewer is shown details of the painting cut to music from a rather lively, Italian opera and after that the work is cut to a more sombre, religious choral. This is how I experience this music when hearing it and that is also, consequently, how I experienced

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<sup>45</sup> Berger, 1972, p.28

the painting and the two different versions of it. The experience the music gives, passes through to the image.

Berger shows how the meaning of an image can change not only because of what we know about what we see, but also how a reproduction is cut as well as literally because of what is around, before, after, with, (etc.,) an artwork. This way, images can even be competing with other images and/or text which surrounds it (in a magazine or a newspaper for example, but also in an exhibition space or on Google).



This takes me to the second example which is one which was used both in the series<sup>46</sup> as well as the book<sup>47</sup> and it is about how written or verbally expressed information can change the meaning of an image and therefore our perception of it. A picture of a painting is shown, depicting what looks like a landscape of a cornfield with birds flying above it. After looking at the image by itself you receive the information that this is the last painting Van Gogh painted before he killed himself. The information that this painting is by Van Gogh (if you didn't already recognize that which is probable thanks to the possibility of reproduction) by itself changes significance, but this alongside with the information that it was his last painting before taking his own life changes perception as well. A story has now been created and the words have changed the image. "The image now illustrates the sentence," Berger says.



## 2.2 James Bridle, New ways of seeing

Artist, writer and publisher James Bridle reimagines John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* for the digital age in his Radio show called *New Ways of Seeing*<sup>48</sup>, broadcasted on BBC radio 4 in 2019. I have chosen to talk about him because Berger's ideas are based around a medium (the camera) which has been evolving very rapidly and therefore I find it interesting to look at the same ideas again in a more modern context.

Berger has said in the first episode of his television series; "It isn't so much the paintings themselves which I want to consider, as the way we now see them. Now in the second half of the 20th century. Because we see these paintings as nobody saw them before."<sup>49</sup>

Now that we have entered the 21st century, it might be interesting to have another look at how we perceive the world around us now.

<sup>46</sup> Berger, 1972, episode 1

<sup>47</sup> Berger, 1972, p.27-28

<sup>48</sup> James Bridle, *New Ways of Seeing*, London, BBC Radio 4, 2019

<sup>49</sup> Berger, 1972, episode 1



In the show, Bridle invites contemporary artists with whom he researches how the technology we use has transformed the ways in which we perceive. Bridle sees talking about technology as a way of talking about ourselves and how we see the world as this world (our perception of it) is shaped by and through the tools we use in our daily life. Bridle says that if we would become able to deliberately change the way we see, we can change the world.

### 2.2.1 The power of images in the 21st century

An example about the role an image can play in this era (21st century) is one given in episode two of the show and it's about a drone. James Bridle was collecting pictures of drones on the internet when one in particular struck him. It was one that kept popping up everywhere. It depicted a drone firing missiles above mountains in Afghanistan. It was the nr. 1 Google image result when you searched for the word "drone" and so it was extensively reproduced (you saw it in newspapers, on the television news, on protest posters). But after doing extensive research, Bridle realised that this image was fake. An amateur had put this image together and posted it online where it got picked up by a large part of the world.

The result was that this image had become our shared mental image of the drone as well as an image of a new kind of warfare. This image had now decided for us what we see when we see a drone.

Another good example consists of, again, a drone. Gatwick airport was shut down because there supposedly was a drone spotted on the airstrip. There was no camera footage of the drone on the strip nor did the police see the drone but nonetheless the newspapers and other news outlets used images of the airstrip with the alleged drone flying above it (photoshopped). This image lingered in the readers' mind and reinforced the idea that there truly was a drone on the airstrip while it might never have appeared there.

Bridle asks; "What does it mean when our most recognized image of the global situation is itself a fabrication, an electronic dream. untethered from reality?"<sup>50</sup>

Berger had already told us about the effect of the camera on the idea of reality, "The camera, by making the work of art transmittable, has multiplied its possible meanings and destroyed its unique, original, meaning."<sup>51</sup> This increase of possible meanings and interpretations of images has evolved into images functioning as a language on itself.

### 2.2.2 A language of images

The availability of images, divorced from their original context, has changed their nature. Since technology has evolved, this process has only been amplified. Images are now travelling further and further away from their original context, producing an infinite amount of meanings.

Images operate more and more like language does. They have the ability to create many versions of reality. And since images do not know a language in words they can approach (and appeal to) everyone in the world.

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<sup>50</sup> Bridle, 2019, episode 2 (5:50)

<sup>51</sup> Berger, 1972, episode 1

All these different, fragmented, versions of reality have created different communication bubbles, isolated from one another. Images are a main contributor to this process. In trying to see the world more clearly, we get further and further away from a general notion of it, causing fragmentation.

The more images (the more information) we see, the more our idea of reality is formed. This idea can easily differ between people within the same societal group. Because there is so much information to be found (in text as well as image), it becomes hard to filter what is truth and what is not. “the result is fear, confusion and often anger. The dominant tenor of our present politics.”<sup>52</sup>

### 2.2.3 An alternate reality

Images have become more powerful because with the possibility of reproduction on whatever platform anyone wishes, they have become a communication tool but also a tool to manipulate a large group of people. How do we know what images are real? And how could we make sure someone else sees an image in the same context as the person creating the image?

Thinking about what Lera Boroditsky has said about grammatical gender and the difference between a Russian speaker’s and a French speaker’s experience of a flower, imagine what this means when thinking about images with different depictions travelling all over the world. Being interpreted and experienced by thousands of different language-speakers.

On social media platforms people share images non stop. These images form a language within a virtual reality and these images become a weapon in a new kind of power structure. Constant Dullaart (1979) is a Dutch contemporary artist who makes works revolving around the theme of the social network(s) and its influence on social and political networks. With his works he tries to expose the technological systems which form the visual culture of the 21st century. Mega corporations have become able to influence our worldview through the internet (manipulative media) and Dullaart aims to find the boundaries of these big businesses like Google and Facebook in a quest to manipulate them, reclaiming what politics and corporations are doing (creating alternate realities as a tool for manipulation).

John Berger spoke about Western art conforming to the western male gaze, The objectification of the female nude. Within this, the female is a minority which he demonstrated through 17th century oil paintings<sup>53</sup>. In a way, not much has changed in the last two centuries.

With the invention of photoshop in 1990 came the ability to alter images, which was a great source of inspiration for Dullaart. Photoshop is a digital manipulation tool, used to edit most of the images we see now in daily life.

Dullaart talks about that when the two founders, Tom and John Knoll, were looking for an image to use when pitching the possibilities of the software. John used a very personal image of his wife, Jennifer, sitting on a beach at Bora Bora, Tahiti. You could not see her face since the photo was taken from behind but nonetheless one is able to see a half-naked lady.

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<sup>52</sup> Bridle, 2019, episode 2 (9:40)

<sup>53</sup> Berger, 1971, chapter 3, p.45

On the one hand it can be seen as a beautiful gesture for John to use a picture of his wife but at the same time it can be seen as typical that the first image used for photoshop is one which objectifies the female body. John gave this image to his clients, giving them full autonomy to use it for whatever purposes. Constant Dullaart talks about how this is a strange tool or power to give to people or to sell. Bridle says that; “It only consolidates the power of the viewer, at the expense of the viewed”<sup>54</sup>.

Dullaart has made a work about this picture called *Jennifer in Paradise*. He tracked down this picture of Jennifer and displayed it alongside photoshopped versions of the same image. He has done this at many different exhibitions for the past four years.

This picture was the first ever to be photoshopped and that makes Jennifer the first person to be in a picture existing in a world where the camera lies. Behind this image lie the ideals and promises of digital culture (embodied by the manipulation allowed by Photoshop). It is a symbol of free exchange and free cultural expression in a world which was still unaware of control of the images.

Photography used to be a way to record the world as realistically as possible. Now, we do no longer believe that a picture necessarily represents reality. Photoshop is the main reason for this shift. The manipulation of images has never been done on such a large scale as it is now. *Jennifer in paradise* is no longer the Knolls’ holiday picture, it now belongs to all of us. It is embedded in our culture and a symbol for the manipulation of images.

“We need more ways of seeing”<sup>55</sup>, Dullaart says to Bridle. “Maybe there is a way in which we can alter reality in more poetic ways”, conferring a new kind of power. “A form of art that actively shifts our ways of seeing in order to change the way power works in the world.”

In an interview<sup>56</sup> with The Guardian, Jennifer Knoll reacts to Dullaart’s work in which he extensively uses her picture, saying “The beauty of the internet is that people can take things, and do what they want with them, to protect what they want or feel.”

John Berger has mentioned that the art world no longer has its own set relevance in Western society. The rules which decide upon if something belongs to the artworld have changed, mainly because the art world has fused together with daily life.

In order for an artist to obtain a spot in the art world his or her work goes through the same system which capitalizes on social markets. Preferences and likes become value in terms of legitimacy and market presence and so obtaining a lot of followers on social media platforms has become important to artists, creating a brand online.

In his work *100,000 Followers for Everyone*, Dullaart brings this power which social media holds over the art world to light. He does so by buying instagram accounts in order to get the amounts of followers of different artists’ accounts at the exact same level. This way he gets rid of the existing power dynamic and raises confusion on what (account) is real or fake. He creates awareness to the idea that social media is a construct anyhow, whether an account is real or fake. This work is very relevant when we think about the manipulation of public opinion (the one who buys the most followers will be the one listened to), and fake news.

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<sup>54</sup> Bridle, 2019, episode 2

<sup>55</sup> Bridle, 2019, episode 2

<sup>56</sup> Gordon Comstock, *Jennifer in paradise: the story of the first Photoshopped image*, The Guardian, 2014

Maybe even more relevant than ever now that it has apparently become easier than ever in politics/for politicians to direct voters exactly to wherever they want them to be.

The role of the artist is not to make more images per se but to play with the idea of the image itself. And to use their power in different ways. This starting point is one Dullaart shares with Berger. With these fake accounts he bought in *100,000 Followers for Everyone*, Dullaart was able to create a kind of alternate reality inside the alternate reality the social media already is. He wants to create more ways of seeing than just what is valid for our political agenda, which is the main thing images are used and manipulated for these days.

### Chapter 3, The prediction machine

Someone who, I find, explains this manipulation through images and the inability of our cognition to see without influences in a very understandable way is Floris de Lange. De Lange is a Dutch researcher and professor. He researches in cognitive and behavioral sciences, investigating how different kinds of precognition can influence what we see and what decisions we (will) make in general. He explains to us how the brain interprets what comes in and this is why I find it important to mention him and what he has to say. The role of language here is that it joints together the human brain and the surrounding world. What comes into the brain is processed through understanding through language. De Lange takes us by the hand in exploring what happens in between something coming in through the eye and the brain's development of this into perception.

De Lange's explanation of how our brain defines reality is one I find beautifully explained, namely that our brain is a "prediction machine"<sup>57</sup>, nothing more and nothing less. Our brain creates its own idea of reality because it will always try to be ahead of the body and therefore it is possible for us to see things that are not per se there or happening, but rather that what your brain determines to be the most plausible.

Why is this so? Why do we need our brains to be a prediction machine? Because if what we expect coincides with what happens/is, then we will realize this quicker which gives us more headspace to focus on other, more important things that need our attention which is important for survival. These predictions are based on knowledge like knowing that stairs go up or down and a sidewalk has a curb, but also things like that everything inside a museum is art and that roses are red and violets are blue. What your brain will predict depends on this before-mentioned context (and *épisteme*). "What you see is only 5 percent of what your brain is processing and the rest of it is the brain in conversation with itself."<sup>58</sup>

In the Dutch television show *Grote Vragen*, Floris de Lange is invited to talk about cognition and especially his idea of the prediction machine. He provides the viewer with some great examples that show how your brain makes these predictions (expectations) and how this method makes the brain susceptible to manipulation.

Optical illusion is a great way of exposing this because it shows very clearly that the brain makes an interpretation of the (in this case optical) information it receives. The illusions are called illusions because they are made in a way that the brain will always choose the incorrect interpretation based on what it expects (what is most likely to be..).

One of these examples consists of an image of a brick wall, which de Lange displays for the presenter of the show *Grote Vragen*, with what seems to be a small stone or a piece of cement pushed in between the joint of two of the bricks. When lightening up the bricks what becomes apparent is that the stone is not a stone and the joint is not a joint, in fact they belong together, and together they turn out to be a cigar. This cigar was there the whole time but it was invisible to our brain as it didn't expect a cigar to be in front of a brick wall, and therefore the cigar was impossible to perceive.

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<sup>57</sup> Floris de Lange, *Grote Vragen*, NPO, 2020, episode 1 (translation), [https://www.npostart.nl/grote-vragen/10-09-2020/VPWON\\_1301004](https://www.npostart.nl/grote-vragen/10-09-2020/VPWON_1301004)

<sup>58</sup> Floris de Lange, 2020

Interesting is when the bricks are now changed back to their original brightness, all of a sudden the cigar remains to be visible. This is because the brain is now aware that, in this case, the cigar can be in front of the brick wall and so it can make you perceive it. Because our brain was used to seeing a brick wall and used to seeing a cigar as well as not seeing one in front of another, it couldn't envision the cigar to be there. Now you can understand how our cognition, working with this prediction-system, can quite easily be fooled into only seeing based on what it knows.

I think the idea of the prediction machine brings together language, thought and perception. I find that language can be seen as an embodiment of a common way of understanding within a language group and it keeps this understanding in place. Thought and, subsequently, perception are guided by the structures of the language which decides upon what your cognition will expect from its surroundings. So; when you are a French-speaker, you think of a flower as feminine and soft because that is the only way in which you know a flower and this is embedded in your language, and so that is how you perceive it as well. Like mentioned before, language has created a kind of unthinkable space in your mind.

## In conclusion

The first chapter focussed on linguistic studies. Different thinkers have enlightened us on how exactly language can shape thought. Various cultures construct the world in a different way and this is expressed and withstood through language. Languages do not only differ in (use of) words, but within languages different meanings are attached to the same things. This underlines the arbitrariness of meaning. It is not universal. It does not have anything to do with reality and everything with our construction of it. This is where language makes its way into cognition, into our minds. It is hard to understand why and how certain meanings are given in another language because the underlying structures can differ a lot from the ones known to you.

In the second chapter I have put my focus on the link between language and perception. Perception is decided upon by habits, beliefs and assumptions expressed through language. The invention of the camera, together with other modern-day technological developments have made us look at images in different ways. Where, before, images surrounded us in the context of art (which used to have a clear, respected, role within society), now they surround us like language does. Open for interpretation, floating between innumerable different contexts. In perceiving, what you see is only a small part, the rest is our cognition in conversation with itself. Language plays a big part in our perception because it is the basis with which we give meaning to what we see.

The language we speak shows how we experience our surroundings. Speakers from different languages conceptualize the physical as well as non-physical world in ways different from each other. We express and endure this “world view” through language. This experiencing through language also acts upon our literal ways of seeing. The brain interprets, based on prior information and turns it into perception.

The changing role of the image shows us how existing understandings are not irrevocable but ever changeable through time, like language. This gives a nice idea of how there is not one (way of understanding) reality, there are countless different versions and experiences of it.

I would like to fantasize about how we could make this unthinkable space, created through the concepts and meanings which exist inside of us, thinkable again.

We are conditioning each other on how to think and how to perceive and we do this through language. This, within a language-group and/or a society can assure safety because we know what to expect from each other and it makes it easier for people to cooperate because they share the same understanding of surroundings and with that the ability to communicate this clearly.

Images now have more power than ever. This is because of the possibility of reproduction and alteration. The image can be used in countless different ways and it is acting more and more like language does. One image has the power to portray many different versions of reality. I find this very interesting but it can also create chaos and misunderstanding. I think it would be good to try to be aware of the power of language (in the form of language as well as image)

We can try to become aware that there are an immense amount of ways of understanding. We could pursue to accept that there is not one right way of understanding. I don't know if this would ever be possible for us as human beings but I think it is nice to think about and it certainly doesn't hurt trying!

We might learn to think and look whilst being aware of the information we have and being aware that another person might see or understand the same thing completely differently.

As you've noticed here is not an ending to this story, no real conclusion. Hopefully scientists like Boroditsky, De Lange and artists like Dullaart and Bridle continue to do their work on this subject because I think it can help us become more receptive of the power of language and images. If we try to be aware that language changes what we see we can choose to either embrace, or to reject this and try to see in another way.

When asked the question what she would wish everyone to know about the relationship between language and thought, Boroditsky answered;

“What I hope that does for people is to make them curious about other ways of experiencing the world, other possibilities for how we can see things and conceptualize things, because the human mind is incredibly flexible and inventive. It's just this exquisite organism that can see the world in so many different ways, and we know that because for example there are so many different languages that construct the world in so many different ways. But we sometimes get stuck in whatever it is that we're used to. If you're used to the patterns in your language and in your culture, that's the way that you'll see things, and it's hard to look out of the trench and see how things could be different.”<sup>59</sup>

I would like to conclude by saying that when looking at this vegetable stand or in the mirror, when no understanding exists, this moment of not knowing is not a bad or frightening thing. It is just a moment in which no language is needed and in which we get a chance to remind ourselves of all the different ways of understanding.

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<sup>59</sup> Katherine Matthews, 2017



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