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## Christ Levitating and the Vanishing Square

### Diagrams in picture analysis

Most studies of pictures and pictural phenomena take place without any further determination of the concept of picture: the everyday meaning of the word are without further notice taken as sufficient. In many cases this causes no problems, to the extent that the study only involves the description and interpretation of selected properties in the picture in question. For a more systematic gaze, though, it is hardly satisfactory that the very category of picture remains vague. Very often, it is spontaneously assumed that a picture is an object somehow picturing another object. For specialists with some measure of knowledge of art history, such an idea must immediately cause problems: most of the abstract or non-figurative tradition of 20. C. art depicts - for a first glance – no other object. Other spontaneous ideas hold that the picture is a visual entity which some person has produced with the intention of communicating some content - maybe even an especially aesthetic content - or, maybe, a content about which something is claimed, so that the picture has the character of a proposition. The ideas of what is a picture thus flutter around concepts like visibility, intention, communication, similarity, abstraction, reference, proposition. There is, however, some of these concepts which for a closer gaze proves irrelevant for the basic determination of the picture concept. The idea that *visual* pictures should exhaust the picture category is already undermined by the fact that we talk, without further notice, about pictural meanings, iconic language and so forth (without any idea that these notions should in themselves be pictural!), just like synaesthetic phenomena of all kinds point to the fact that the category of pictures does not belong to vision alone. Nothing prevents a sound from picturing another, and even if visual pictures constitute a prominent and prototypical class of pictures, nothing indicates that they exhaust the

category. The idea, on the other hand, that pictures should be the expression of the *communicative intention* of somebody, does not seem plausible either on closer scrutiny. Naturally occurring images, mirrorings, echoes, mimicry phenomena and so on point to a broader concept of picture, just like the developments away from purely intentional meaning concepts in the aesthetic disciplines in general. Just like in the case of the work of art, it is not exhaustive or even decisive for our experience of an image that it corresponds to what the sender might intend it to mean. The possibility of discovering important properties in an image which the artist did not intend when he painted it, lies open to us; if this was not the case, the artist might just as well serve as an index of solutions for the aesthetic analysis, and he might ease his own work as well as that of the critic by simply publish a written account of his intention instead of painting. *Similarity*, then, seems to be definitely dealt with already in the art history of the 20. Century - for is it not the case that similarity in pictures is but the result of a restricted, mimetic, and outlived poetics which has long since been obliterated by the avant garde? Has it not long since - supported by deconstructivist and negativist theories - made it clear that behind every tempting similarity hides an abyss of differences? My hypothesis is, however, that it is, despite of all this, in similarity we shall seek the very definition of the concepts of image and picture as such.<sup>i</sup> If we take a series of the archangels of the so-called nonfigurative tradition, e.g. Malevich, Kandinsky, Klee, Mondrian, Newman, Rothko, Reinhardt - it is striking (even if their claims will, of course, not suffice to settle the case definitively) that they themselves by no means suggest that their pictures do not represent anything, quite on the contrary. It goes without saying that they do not represent interiors nor exteriors from the natural or cultural world, easy to recognize for an untrained gaze - but they are taken to refer to more subtle matters, for many of the painters mentioned even to mystical, religious spheres. Even an observer like myself - who has a hard time letting Rudolf Steiner figure as the key to Kandinsky - has the immediate and spontaneous experience that these pictures represent *something*, be it personal mental ideas or emotions, be it realms of ideal geometry, be it that-which-cannot-be-depicted ... it does not matter in this context. The decisive thing is that similarity cannot be given up as that which defines a picture in the first place. The iconoclastic tradition discussed in ch. 3, supposed that similarity was (almost) identity, that it was a dull copy of something given, that it maybe only mimed natural beauty and thus constituted a primitive set of tablets which must be crushed in order to push forward to a radically new and sublime language of art. I will suggest that we - from the vantage point of our time - can see this idea

as a special sort of avant garde kitsch. It is the avant garde version of the deer by the forest lake over the couch because it just like the deer - only with reversed value ascription - assumes similarity to be an easy an unproblematic issue<sup>ii</sup>. The history of the avant garde demonstrates - quite on the contrary - that the limits to the concept of similarity are very wide indeed. Just like the concept of *œuvre*, of artwork, has only been extended and become still more manyfaceted and enriched by the many attacks on it by the avant garde, the concept of similarity has been diversified and extrapolated to realms where we did not recognize it functioning earlier. Especially the concept of the artwork which - however this may take place - gives the single piece of art its definitivity, its closedness, a set of borders, results in the fact that what appears within these borders assume the character of a sight seen within a frame, a margin, or other boundaries in space and time, that what is seen within these limits appear as representing *something*. The fact that it may very often be quite difficult to determine *what* this something is, does not change the fact that as soon as we are within the realm of the artwork, we are perfectly aware that the work has, in some way, to be decoded. But as the artwork cannot - if it aims at being a good work, that is - rely on conventions alone (this would conflict with the second and in other respects problematic demand of the avant garde: originality<sup>iii</sup>), no other resource is left but similarity. The art history of the 20. century with its triumph of experiment has thus - quite to the contrary to what is often assumed - been a triumph of similarity.

What does this similarity entail for the definition of the picture? Many artworks which we spontaneously conceive of as pictures (and thus primarily iconical signs), however, also possess indexical aspects (maybe due to their title which may refer to existing phenomena - the portrait painting's title referring to the person portrayed; the landscape paitings to the locality; the indexical reference of the signature to the artist, etc.), as well as symbolical aspects (e.g. by virtue of their use of different conventions for indirect reference to phenomena - the iconographical convention like the lion referring to the apostle Marcus). We may concentrate upon, however, the primarily iconical signs - what Peirce terms hypoicons. They are the class of signs, then, which primarily functions iconically. Here, Peirce's non-circular description of what "iconical" means remains decisive – his requirement that icons are signs, *by the contemplation of which it is possible to learn more about their object than what lay in the mere construction recipe for the sign*. When possessing the key to an icon, it is possible to take out of it more information about its object than what is

explicitly stated in the sign itself. It is for this reason that similarity-based signs seem “deep”, and the definition by “more information” is, contrary to the intuitive similarity definition, operational to the extent that it may be used as a criterion to determine whether a sign is in fact an icon. The fact that many easily decodable icons exist might give rise to the idea that it should always be very easy to determine the object of an icon; this is, however, a very dangerous fallacy. Icons may, in some cases, be very difficult to decode. Perhaps the object may be determined vaguely or partially only; the decisive thing remains, according to the operational definition, whether more information may be retrieved about the object than what explicitly appears. To grasp more exactly what lies in this operational definition, we must again consider Peirce’s triadic subtypology of the category of hypoicons. They fall in images, diagrams, and metaphors, respectively. Images in this restricted, technical meaning of the word are similar to their object due to some simple quality (colour, shape, tonality, size, ...); diagrams are all similarity-based signs which refer to their object by means of some skeletal analysis of the object into mutually connected parts. The diagram consists of a sketch-like anatomy of its object - as the most ordinary examples one may point to function diagrams, cake diagrams, column diagrams, matrices - but also, cf. below, a much larger set of icon types. Metaphor, finally, is the picture type which refers to its object via the intermediary of a third object. When a metaphor does not in an evident way display which diagram it makes use of, it becomes ambiguous and opens up interesting possibilities for poetical use, but this will, from the Peircean point of view, be a marginal, atypical use, even if strongly interesting and fertile.<sup>iv</sup> In art, however, this use becomes central. The naked, easy-to-grasp diagram rarely occurs in art – and even in prototypical diagrams, surplus image similarities (in Peirce’s special use of the word “image”) often occur - as when a column diagram over the average income in different countries are tinted with the colours of the flags of those countries.

The decisive implication for the status of the picture category in these distinctions lies in the extension of the diagram category, cf. ch. 4. This category, at a first glance so easy to determine and seemingly bound to lines and arrows on paper, proves much more comprehensive, given the operational icon definition. Peirce gradually realizes this, as when he sees that e.g. algebraic formalisms also have diagrammatical character - to the extent that they may be manipulated in order to display new information not explicitly present. Here, Peirce’s non-circular definition of similarity demonstrates its full force: icons are all those signs by means of which more

knowledge about their object may be gained. Diagrams, consequently, are that subset thereof which functions by analyzing their object in parts, interconnected by means of rule-bound relations. This entails a series of further determinations of the diagram: it includes all signs by means of which something can be inferred with necessity (which then, in turn, holds for their object) - that is, diagrams include all signs allowing for deduction. As discussed in ch. 4, this implies that diagrams as a decisive feature possess the possibility of being *manipulated* with the aim of reaching deductive consequences. This manipulability and, correlative, deductibility, is what makes diagrams icons with the special feature that they may be used to think with. If we consider the less abstract side of diagrams, we see that this holds also for very "mimetic" diagrams. As mentioned, Peirce never undertook any further partition of the diagram category, and the establishment of a rational typology of diagrams remains one of the most important tasks for actual semiotics to pursue<sup>v</sup>, but it seems obvious that *maps* are involved as a crucial type of diagrams. Maps come, even if we restrict ourselves to geographical maps, in a continuum of widely varying degrees of abstraction, from aerial photos, preserving distances, angles (provided the area depicted is sufficiently small), colour and much more ... and to e.g. subway maps which are neither colour-, distance-, nor angle-preserving but only preserves the mutual topological relations between subway stations and lines as points on a network of topological connections. Common to all maps, however, seems to be the idea that a route in the diagram corresponds to a route in the object which facilitates the possibility of diagram experimentation on maps (what is, e.g. the highway distance between Paris and Berlin? - this is not stated explicitly in any way on your average map of Europe, neither in the printing process nor in the construction of the map based on triangulations in the landscape, but the information may be easily retrieved by a small diagram experiment using a ruler and the scale of the map).

Maybe my conclusion is evident: all pictures, also in the ordinary art-history-meaning of the word, are also diagrams – primarily *maps* in the general meaning of the term suggested.<sup>vi</sup> As I hinted to above, this idea must be seen in relation to Peirce's idea that signs are only signs *in actu*, that is, to the extent that they are used as signs. This implies that if I see a picture hanging remotely on the wall, peripherally in my field of vision where it appears almost as a vague impression, then it is only, of course, an image in Peirce's simple sense. But as soon as I - be it as a spontaneous viewer of the picture or as professional analyst - go closer into the picture, the use of it as a diagram automatically becomes relevant. I measure distances on the

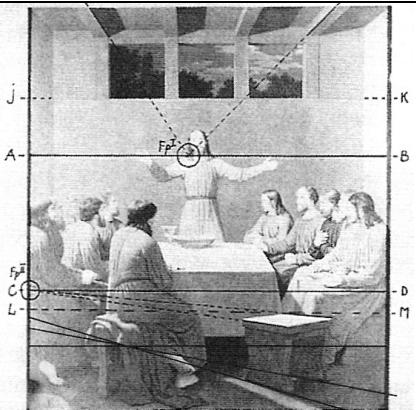
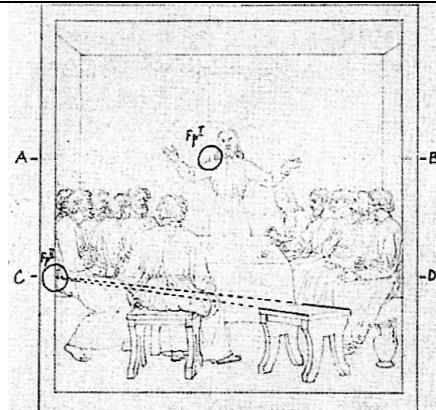
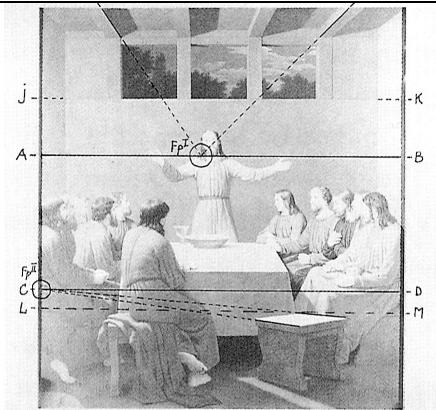
picture plane with the eyes and spontaneously infer information about distances between foreground figures, medium ground appearances and background features in the space depicted; I observe the striking effects of contrast between certain colours and may oppose them to other, non-contrasting colours. I may construct a space<sup>vii</sup>, in which I can imagine my body moving around; this very wandering route inside the landscape has the characteristics of a diagram manipulation. I may question, for instance, the artificial, the striking, the aesthetic, the failed or other qualities in the distribution of picture objects on the plane - doing so, I make a manipulation where I imaginatively move around objects on the plane and observe the changes in their mutual relations. It is, in short, impossible to reflect or speculate upon a picture - in spontaneous perception or with the distance of the analyst - without conceiving of the picture as a diagram, manipulating with its parts according to different rules and, so doing, retrieve new knowledge of the objects depicted, be they concrete or abstract.

Now pictures - in the art history use of the word - constitute a special subset of the diagram category. They are visual, they are delimited, they are two-dimensional (2 1/2-dimensional, if we include texture, bas-relief, frame, etc.). They are, moreover, characterized by the fact that they are only rarely accompanied by any explicit symbolic set of rules or conventions governing the possibility for their diagrammatical manipulation (this in opposition to mathematical diagrams). But this does not mean they do not function as diagrams; it rather means that we, by contemplating them, makes use of two things: 1) the spontaneous diagrammatical abilities characterizing natural perception, constituting an autonomous intelligence inherent in the visual system (giving rise to facts like that it is almost impossible not to see depth in a perspectively construed picture), 2) the experimental use of diagrammatical abilities taken from other fields of experience. Art is thus diagrammatically underdetermined in a way analogous to the metaphorical underdeterminacy of poetry - which is why it calls for interpretation: many different diagrams and metaphors may call for application in experimenting analytical picture observation. Thus analysis of art (but this goes for any analytical process) involves a crucial abductive component - abduction being the Peircean prerequisite for any gaining of new knowledge. Abduction makes a guess at an unexplained phenomenon by suggesting a general law or state of affairs which would have the phenomenon in question as necessary consequence (other possible laws, regularities, or prerequisites might have the same effect which is why abduction is not necessary but remains a qualified guess). But once an abduction is proposed, then it may

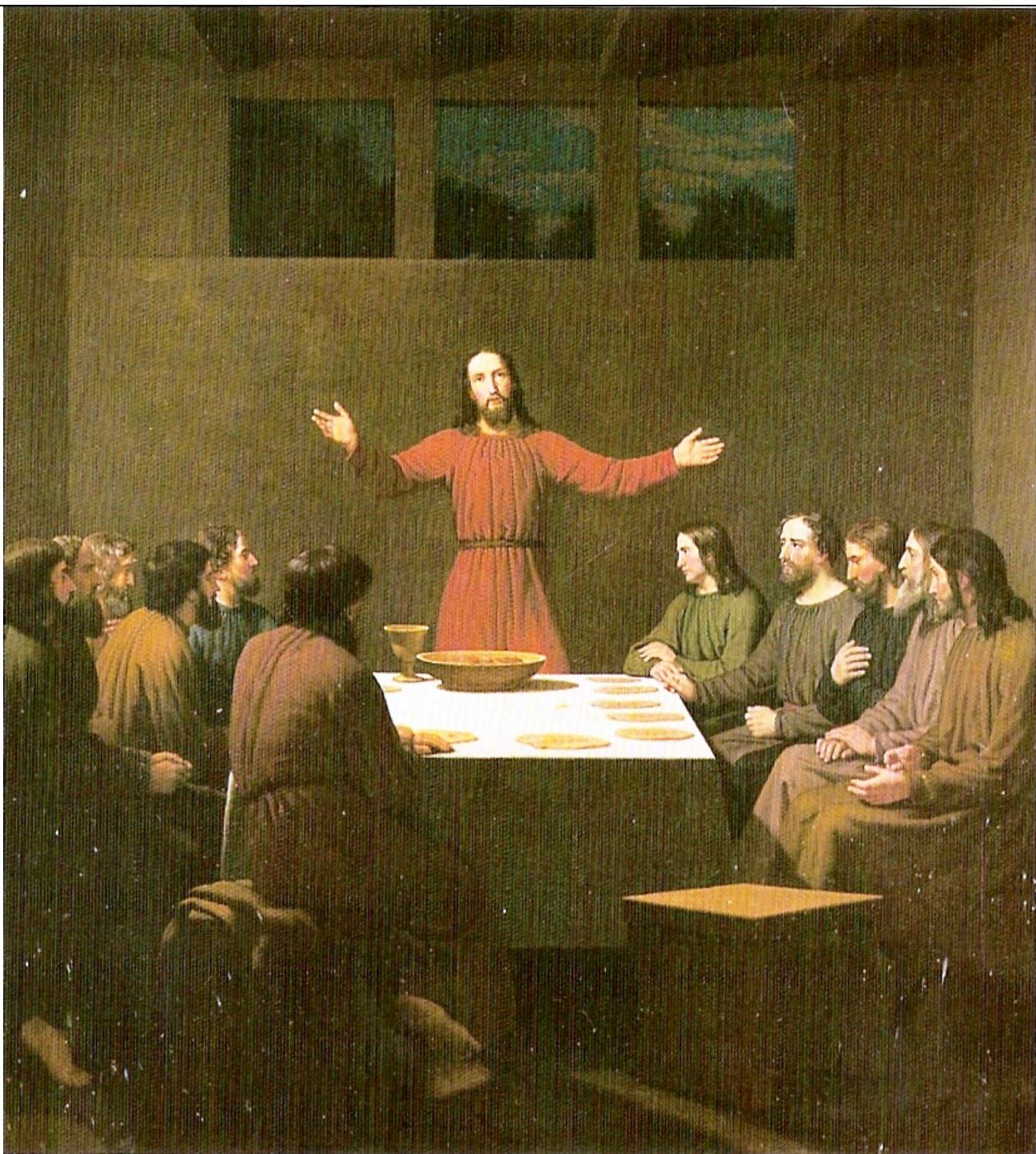
be tested by the manipulation of the diagram implied in the hypothesis proposed (we return to the role of ab- and deduction in interpretation in ch. 16). The outcome of the diagrammatic deduction may then, in turn, be inductively compared with other knowledge about the phenomenon in question, giving Peirce's three-beat motor of reasoning as a result: abduction-deduction-induction<sup>viii</sup>. It may thus be discovered de- and inductively whether the abduction in question is fertile; in the opposite case another abduction must be suggested.

### *Christ Levitating ...*

Let me illustrate this idea of the analysis of pictures by a couple of examples. Some years ago, the Danish art historian Erik Fischer published an exquisite little book on the Danish romantic painter Eckersberg<sup>ix</sup> - including a brilliant analysis of Eckersberg's famous altar piece from Frederiksberg Church in Copenhagen. Fischer recapitulates the iconographic background of the picture. Eckersberg was asked by the rector of the church to base his picture on John 17.6-19 which is the so-called "high priest's prayer" in the latter part of the last supper - a *topos* with, it must be admitted, a rather meagre pictural potential. Fischer now wonders what Eckersberg's seemingly uncomplicated last supper rendering may yield as an illustration of this ecstatic speech of farewell, in which Christ claims not to be of this world. In his search for further content in the picture, Fischer stumbles over the empty seat of Judas in the right foreground zone of the picture and sharply remarks: is it not the case that this stool is positioned in a strangely oblique way in the room? Fischer makes this observation and now adds the abduction that the stool is not only oblique but that this serves a deliberate artistic purpose which is why he now indulges in an experimental manipulation of central relations in the picture, that is, treats it as a diagram: "His empty stool is highlighted in the foreground. Not only is it highlighted, it also seems to play a compositional role of its own: its vanishing point, Fp II, at the extreme left of the painting, demonstrates that Eckersberg provided his composition with a second horizon, C-D, a unique phenomenon in the case, has a horizontal ceiling with parallel girders. The result is a horizon with the room's vanishing point (FpI) at Christ's right shoulder. He now repeats the same procedure with the seat of the stool and finds that Judas' seat has a completely different, much lower horizon from that of the dining room,



indicated by the vanishing point (FpII). This observation is now corroborated by an



earlier sketch of the picture, in which Eckersberg again has made this construction of the horizon corresponding to the seat, and Fischer consequently finds that the seat really, measured against the horizon line implied by the ceiling, is skew. This diagrammatical finding supports his abductive hypothesis and now allows Fischer - using another unspoken assumption, namely that the disciples did not know of ergonomically correct

seats but used stools with approximately horizontal seats (this unspoken premiss is, of course, supported by the general symmetry of the stool's design) - to conclude that the picture is a case of deliberate use of double perspective with the rhetorical effect of a structural derogation of Judas. His horizon is, literally, far below that of our Saviour: "The second horizon bears a subtle iconographic message. Judas is *the son of perdition*, so "his" horizon is placed low in the composition cosmology; his "vanishing point", at the extreme left, must be seen as an unmistakable indication that he has moved away from harmony toward betrayal.

The line L-M further stresses the expulsion of Judas: it touches the far corner of his empty stool, which is thus once again symbolically relegated to its own sphere at the very bottom of the composition."

If we now take further Fischer's idea and repeat the same operation, now with respect to the *sides* of the stool resting on the floor (again based on the helping hypothesis that they are parallel), then we obtain yet another horizon line, the X-Y line, this time for the floor of the room. This line, surprisingly, lies even lower than the one construed from the seat. This implies that the stool is almost impossible as a geometrical object - if measured on our ordinary ideas of how stools normally have parallel sides and orthogonal vertices. This implies that the stool stands out as disquieting object which due to its double perspective and its oblique form irritates our gaze and indirectly insists on Judas's betrayal and disappearance, and in so far this observation yields further support to Fischer's reading. But what if we suppose, now, that the stool is not skew in relation to the perspective of the floor but that it stands, in fact, in a normal way on the floor? If this is the case, then the very perspective of the floor deviates strongly from that of the ceiling, and then further perspective anomalies follow. Then the whole geometry of the room of the supper explodes; ceiling and floor yawn and moves away from each other in the direction into the picture towards the horizons. Whether it is the floor that goes downward or the ceiling that goes upward (or both) is of course impossible to decide within the picture's own system of reference, because it gives no hint which may decide which one of the now no less than three possible horizon lines should be privileged as being horizontal. But no matter this undecidability, a remarkable fact remains. Namely the fact that given the tilting floor, Christ is now simply unable to reach the floor behind the table, if we assume that he was created like a normal man with approximately the same distance from top to groin as from groin to feet. This diagram manipulation thus urges the question: What could be the possible reason for Christ to stand on an invisible platform behind the table, to wear extreme Sylvester Stallone boots to appear taller

than he actually is? Or what could be the reason for a radically long-legged Christ which I believe we have no further biblical evidence to support? - or, the other way around, a Christ secretly levitating over the floor behind the tablecloth? The left side of the table is mercifully hidden by the sitting disciples and thus does not allow for an additional, corrective horizon construal based on the (allegedly) rectangular, horizontal shape of the table top. Our experimental deduction on the picture read as a diagram thus leads us to infer these facts. Do they corroborate our abduction - that there might lie further information hidden in the multi-perspective structure of the picture? This is the case, indeed, because the scene of the last supper leads directly on to resurrection and ascension - decisive upward movements which are then prefigured in this picture's intricate application of a triple perspective. Christ is here already, during the last supper, characterized by an upward movement which very well points to the claim in the evangelical text base of the picture: He is not of this world. These two diagram deductions - Fischer's and mine - possess an objective validity which does not depend on what Eckersberg's intention (or the picture observer's, for that matter) might have been. On the contrary, our judgment of these diagram experiments depends on their fertility in relation to the given picture and its contextual background. Thus, it is at this point we cease to read the picture as a pure diagram and include the symbolical reference it carries (due to its conventional use as an altar piece and the correlative reference to a specific phase of the passion of Christ). And in both cases, Fischer's and mine, we find in this symbolical framing of the picture as an applied diagram, so to speak, facts corroborating our manipulating deductions. It is not only Eckersberg who failed on a bad day and crafted a malfunctioning diagram (as would be the case if the picture was to be read naturalistically only, and the different additional hypotheses as to horizontal ceilings, floors and seats were correct) which makes an ordinary room twist in surreal lines. Quite on the contrary he has made an ambiguous diagram, open for a triple reading, whose tension between the perspectives of ceiling, floor and seat enables the observer to judge Judas' low status and skew nature, as well as the beginning levitation of Christ pointing forward to resurrection and ascension. Fischer's analysis has, of course, a further support due to Eckersberg's preliminary sketch which is lacking in the case of my additional argument (the floor horizon in the sketch coincides with that of the stool top). But the sketch has only the role of inductively strengthening Fischer's argument; it proves deductively nothing (and presupposes an intentionalistic reading of the picture) but it merely serves the purpose of further support for the probability of his claim. The decisive test of both

analyses lies in their inductive continuity with the symbolic dimension of the picture - corresponding to Peirce's notion of the symbolical government of the pure diagram, deciding which conceptual reality it depicts in concrete usage. Here, the category of the artwork plays an important role as that which allows us to detect these hidden similarities in the picture: if the picture was not a work of art with the special definitivity this implies, then we would rather be tempted to dismiss it as a bad piece of student's work bearing witness to a vacillating understanding of the laws of perspective with the result that all parallel lines do not meet in the same horizontal point. Herein, the analysis of an artwork is different from a pictural analysis as we would make if this picture was an ordinary photograph: then we would be forced to other helping hypotheses, so as for instance that the stool of Judas is in fact deform, that Christ stands on a small, hidden platform on a tilting floor, that Christ has been ingested growth hormone by John the Baptist during adolescence, etc. The category of the artwork obliges us with its definitivity to search for the coherent reading rather than the probable reading, in the hope that it will, in the end, convince with its fertility in the final understanding of the work. But pictural phenomena which are not artworks and do not share their strongly teleological composition, do not demand such an integrated understanding; they may as phenomena require a decomposition in parts calling for each their diagram. They are none the less worthy phenomena for that, of course, whereas the work of art will suffer from such inconsistencies if not they may be deemed motivated at some level of analysis. Herein, the object of artistic analysis differs from other objects<sup>x</sup>.

This presentation demonstrates the characteristic shifting between abduction understood as qualified guesses faced with strange observations, deduction understood as diagram experimentation on the picture, abductive helping hypotheses, inductive probability arguments and a final conclusion measured on the symbolical governing of the diagram. This procedure is probably not unique for the analysis of pictures, not even for aesthetic analysis as such. Rather, it is a general heuristic for scientific analysis of object properties not yet fully determined (in that case its behaviour might be deducted directly from theory). It is the road of the power of judgment to abductively guess and afterwards to corroborate this guess by deductive experiment and inductive probability support. Still, this leaves the analysis of pictures with a special status, because unlike the case in many other disciplines its very object contains a direct diagrammatic aspect. In most other disciplines it is a task for the scientist to find, formalize and

corroborate which diagram may adequately map a given phenomenon. A (sufficiently complicated) picture, however, only *exists* to the extent it is already a diagram.

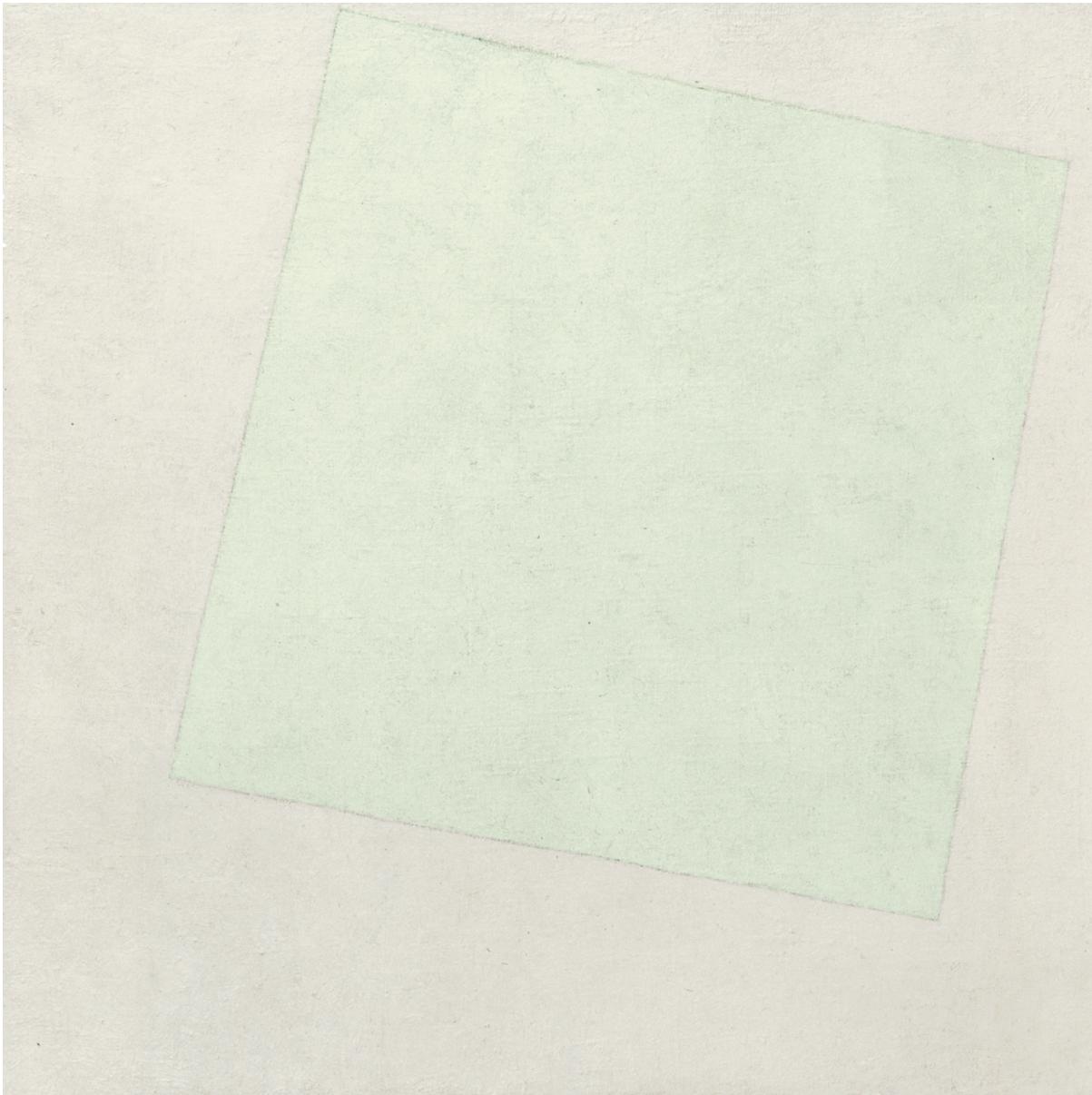
This implies that the analysis of pictures ought to be interested not only in its connection to visual objects in general or to aesthetic objects in general - but to diagrams in logic, mathematics, maps, algebra, and graphs. Diagrams comprise all things by means of which necessary conclusions may be drawn. Thus, the diagram category implies that all pictures with diagram qualities (which is: most pictures) involve the possibility for logical inferences regarding certain implications for their object. A traditional logical understanding of this fact would probably be that what is pictural about the picture should be seen as a mere heuristic surface over a depth of logical propositions whose content might be more adequately expressed in purely formal calculi. Such an idea would, with a certain displacement, repeat the linguistic imperialism in early picture semiotics where pictures' character of being signs with content was seen as so central that the very visual qualities of the picture tended to be reduced to a peripheral epiphenomenon.<sup>xi</sup> To avoid merely substituting a logical imperialism for linguistic imperialism, it is important that this logical aspect of pictures be correctly understood. The logical aspect of the picture is inherent in its very iconic construction, in its very diagrammatical structure, and contrary to the possibility of a logical imperialism of the sort mentioned, a Peircean view would see symbolical calculi as a mere subset of the general iconic realm of logic.

### *... the vanishing square*

This diagrammatic rendering of the analysis of pictures might give difficulties, however, when we face pictures where no evident diagrammatic systems are at stake (as in the Eckersberg case perspective and its analysis of perceived space into mutually connected positions), nor any symbolical content which may govern the diagrammatical experiments - phenomena which were abundantly present in Eckersberg's painting. Let us now, to support for our hypothesis, turn to a diagrammatic case study of a picture without any explicit diagrammatic structure and symbolical content. Malevich's *Suprematist Composition: White Square on White* (1918) may of course not, with its low-profile articulations, hide a complexity of the same kind as Eckersberg's altar piece; but still it would be a mistake to claim that

we view even a picture of this simplicity as a mere image in Peirce's sense of the word.

The meditative calm which may inhabit the viewer by the contemplation of such a work of art, was understood by Malevich himself as a direct access to being itself with the acquittal of ordinary reason connected to everyday perception<sup>xii</sup>, but even a quasi-mystical experience of this kind does not take place without diagrammatical means. Even the symbolical governing inherent in the painting title is here extremely vague and is delimited to a description of the picture surface in very general terms. Already in this fact, though, we find a hint: there is a delicate tension between the generic "white square on white" and the specific appearance of the canvas surface. A "white square on white" might with the same means be presented in infinitely many other ways: the small square might be differently located on the canvas and have any other size as long as it remained smaller than the picture. This immediately opens the picture for diagrammatical manipulation: we may imaginatively let the inner square reduce and grow, move around on the surface. The fact that this diagrammatic exercise would not change anything in relation to the generic title is a point which makes it possible to see the specific picture *itself* as generic, so that the



Malevich's *Suprematist Composition: White Square on White* (1918)

painting in a certain sense represents an infinite set of other pictures of white square on white - an effect which Malevich has no doubt sought in his idea that his painting should display nothing less than the absolute itself. But this does not exhaust the diagrammatical possibilities of experiment on this surface. Ground and figure are only distinguished by a difference in shades of white on the lower limit of being perceptible, making the small square an inkling bluer than the background, against which it luckily, gestaltistically stands forward (which is also referred to in the title's "white square *on* white") by means of a discrete comic strip contour. This makes possible a variation well-known from Gestalt theory: the *Kippfigur* shifting between

object and background, so that the small square changes from being an object in the foreground and to being a hole in the surrounding foreground - a change facilitated by the more blueish tone's more remote character in atmospheric air. This diagrammatical experiment is even basically made possible by the visual system and is not necessarily in need of any conscious effort. A further fact is that the title's repetition of the concept "white" is contradicted by the two main nuances on the surface, to the extent that we should understand exactly the same color by the word "white". Neither fore- nor background are, in fact, perfectly white, and the "white" of the title must thus also be generic and refers to white as a class of different whitish shadings.<sup>xiii</sup> The diagrammatical exercise called for by this fact is naturally to imagine the difference between the two whites disappear and the contour to vanish completely so that the small square simply implodes in the background - which would be the case if both whites were in fact identical. This procedure introduces a subtle play, for the very contour between the two parts of the surface is what introduces a minimum of depth in it - whether it turns one way or the other. If the square in the foreground ceases to exist, the depth of the background remains as a vacuum into which the viewer is sucked. Even if the two surfaces are only minimally distinct, the picture surface thus holds a possibility for a Rothko-like hoovering into the picture which lets the - diagrammatically imagined - completely emptied surface have a depth, a void, a nothing with spatial qualities; probably for Malevich an adequate representation of his Absolute. A further diagrammatical experiment is possible with reference to a diagram already present in the visual system before any ascription of content. If the vertically suspended picture is supposed to refer to a zone equipped with gravitation, the inner square immediately assumes weight, and its oblique position related to the frame indicates an instability which at any time may be released, letting the square fall away with the pure, unspotted depth remaining.

Even if the title of the picture also in this case allowed for the construction of a symbolical frame which might, to some extent, orient the picture's interpretation as a diagram, then the overall result is here - as in large parts of 20. Century art - a radical underdetermination as compared to the Eckersberg case. This implies that, in viewing such a picture, you are forced, as an observer, to an abductive trial-and-error process, attempting the use of diagrams and consecutive manipulations with no other guaranty than perception's for one diagram being better than another. An analogy is, again, the use of sophisticated metaphor in much modern poetry which does not

allow one unambiguous diagrammatical interpretation: such underdetermination only *augments* the possibilities for diagrammatical manipulation. This diagrammatical diffusity does not, however, contradict the fundamental similarity character of the picture. Even if the surface is only made to refer to a universe of pure geometry<sup>xiv</sup> - cf. the title - then it is an undoubtable relation of similarity, just like the secondary relation which, in turn, with a Platonic gesture lets this idealized universe of geometry refer to the Absolute as such (if we agree to ascribe the Absolute traditional properties like ideality, purity, simplicity, etc.).

What is gained by realizing the diagrammatical character of picture viewing is not least the close relation between picture and thought. It is a corollary to Peirce's generalized conception of logic that thought, even if general, can never leave an intuitive, iconic basis, and the diagram as a category is, as mentioned, Peirce's heir to Kant's famous *schemata* as a meetingplace between intuition and thought. This implies that we automatically, spontaneously see pictures as bundles of diagrammatical variation possibilities (some of which are already present in the hardware of our visual system), and we think - when we do so, that is - in and with them by attempting to make explicit these diagrams, to add other and less spontaneously appealing diagrams - and to examine some or all of their manipulative possibilities. This gives the strong insight - for the analysis of pictures - that the contemplation of pictures is ripe with connections to general epistemology.<sup>xv</sup> This implies the necessity for the picture analyst to go deeper into the field between arts and diagrams (in a more narrow use of the word), and it further implies the maybe more difficult requirement that he must give up his spontaneous idea that the picture displays what it displays and nothing more. Frank Stella's famous "What you see is what you see" only remains correct in a diagrammatical light, if "see" is taken in a broad sense including more than vision proper - namely logical and conceptual insights. Seen as a diagram, the picture is a *machine à penser*, allowing for a spectrum of different manipulations. It is these manipulations the analysis of pictures must reveal, and they are not immediately visible in one glance on the canvas.<sup>xvi</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Mikkel Bogh (2002) argues that the introduction of poststructuralist theories in art history has had double consequences. On the one hand, it heightened the level of reflection compared to the strongly biographical traditional art history – on the other hand, it tended to leave the interest in the formal and phenomenological properties of the artwork to oblivion in favor of mere context.

<sup>ii</sup> For a further discussion of negativism as avant garde kitsch, see Stjernfelt “The Vulgar Metaphysics of Transgression”, in *Text und Kontext* 2001 or Thomsen and Stjernfelt 2005.

<sup>iii</sup> For a closer gaze, a certain tension thus prevails between two of the basic ideas of the historical avant garde: anti-figuration and anti-convention. Both of them are dubious as ontological constraints on art (why must an artwork not portray something; why could a conventional work not possess artistic value?), but it is interesting in this context that anti-conventionalism naturally implies that the anti-conventional artwork can not rely on purely anti-figurative mechanisms of meaning only (meaning must be either motivated or conventional, or both). Anti-convention must thus base itself on a similarity (but maybe one not seen before!). This lies already in the notion of “abstract” art: if a picture is abstract, it does not imply it is not figurative, only that its similarity is so general that many different objects fall under it. The famous white square on white (to which we return below) refers to many possible concrete squares, herein lies its abstraction, and the game of providing the abstraction with the concrete objects it subsumes is left over to the viewer. The fact that things are hardly thus conceived by the main line of the art history of our time has its reason elsewhere, in another reason for the scepticism towards similarity, namely that similarity exists as a possibility before the finished artwork and thus offends the idea of the artist as an inspired deity, creating objects never before seen nor possible. The artwork’s basis in similarity makes, from this point of view, the artist into a copist; even if the status of a sharp-sighted observer, seeing what nobody before him has been able to see, should not be so poor as a substitute for radical “creativity”.

<sup>iv</sup> In this, the metaphor definition is in agreement with the actual tradition of cognitive semantics where general metaphors and blendings are widespread in ordinary language, even if in an unspectacular way because understanding them is so easy - here the spectacular metaphors and blendings of poetry owe their effects to a sophisticated but derivative use of ordinary linguistic and conceptual material. This forms the cognitive equivalent to the core idea of “deviation” poetics highlighted by the Russian formalists such as Shklovski.

<sup>v</sup> At the conference “Thinking With Diagrams 98”, Alan Blackwell and Yuri Engelhardt gave an overview over the many existing attempts at diagram taxonomies which all seem insufficient in some way or another (Blackwell and Engelhardt “A Taxonomy of Diagram Taxonomies”, paper given at “Thinking With Diagrams 98”, University of Wales, Aberystwyth). As mentioned Peirce has one sketchy attempt at a tripartition of diagrams into maps, algebra, and graphs (May and Stjernfelt 1996).

<sup>vi</sup> That is, they can be used as diagrams and are regularly so used in ordinary picture observation. It must immediately be admitted that even if visual pictures are thus icons and diagrams among others, their visual specificity may be pointed out referring to the special features of the visual system, cf. e.g. the already classical *Traité du signe visuel*

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(Groupe  $\mu$ , 1992) where the visual sign is characterized by its possible utilization of a long series of different optical transformations. These transformations are relevant here, because they are visually specific versions of the general rule-governed manipulability of diagrams. Visual diagrams are thus characterized by certain classes of manipulability, and it may be expected that a rational taxonomy of visual pictures may be constructed from the classification of such transformations.

vii It is possible to argue for a distinction between two types of pictures, those which make possible the construction of a space for the perceiving body, and those without this possibility, cf. next chapter.

viii A further investigation of this device follows in ch. 16.

ix Erik Fischer C.W. Eckersberg, Copenhagen 1993. I reviewed the book in the Copenhagen daily *Information* (Oct. 6th 1993) where some of the reflections in this paper were originally born.

x It is a well-known fact, dating at least from Kant's *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (1790), that artworks and biological organisms share this property, making both adequate objects for "teleological judgment". For both kinds of objects, however, we should not expect every single detail or feature to serve the whole teleologically; this would be a misplaced and dogmatic use of the concept of artwork or organism, respectively. Rather, artworks make use of completely ordinary structures of perception, thought, objects, which they take over for their own purposes (as argued in Bundgaard 2004) – much like biological organisms are built from ordinary physical structures.

xi Cf. Groupe  $\mu$ 's criticism of this tendency, op.cit.

xii See Esmann 1995.

xiii The colour white naturally plays a special role in relation to the "absolute" character of the painting because of the neutral and "all-encompassing" character of this colour (consisting of all visual wavelengths) which gives it a more absolute character than the individual spectral colours. Another experiment might thus substitute for the two white nuances two red nuances, e.g., with a larger degree of concretion as a contrastive result.

xiv An imperfect similarity relation, of course, because the infinitely thin lines of ideal geometry by their very nature cannot be drawn.

xv Something like this naturally also occurred to Rudolf Arnheim, cf. his *Visual Thinking* (Berkeley 1967). Sensitive phenomenologists might feel an intellectualist offense by this emphasis on diagrams, but on a closer look it is by no means strange to the phenomenological tradition. As discussed in ch. 6-8, the experimental manipulation on a diagram is directly related to the "eidetic variations" leading to phenomenological "Wesenserschauung", cf. Husserl's *Erfahrung und Urteil*, and the emphasis on the body in phenomenology from the later Husserl, Merleau-Ponty and onwards (cf. "la chair" in *Le visible et l'invisible*, Paris 1964) may easily be reconciliated with diagrammatical reasoning. The diagrammatical experiment forms a central part of Peirce's pragmatism, the experiment involves the imagination of something *one could do*, and this imaginable doing has a natural corporal basis: "It is not a historical fact that the best thinking has been done by words, or aural images. It has been performed by means of visual images and muscular imaginations." (Peirce: "Sketch of a new philosophy", undated, NEM IV,

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375). In many pictures, there is a large class of diagram experiments which are immediately bodily; in landscape pictures, the viewer involuntarily imagines himself wandering into it, cf. Anne Fastrup's research into Diderot's "Salons" (Fastrup, in press).

A remarkable consequence of pictures' diagram character is the refusal of the widespread semiotic idea that a picture is a sign to the extent that it implies a code which must be decoded directly, in an analogy to a denotative proposition. Diagrams leave, thanks to their more or less open manipulability a considerable initiative to the observer, and different schools of picture viewing may probably be described by their favorite diagram manipulation types. The systematic and rule-bound character of diagrams prevents, on the other hand, the complete handing over of initiative to the observer, as known from the different forms of scepticist aesthetics, from reception analysis and to (de)constructionism.

<sup>xvi</sup> It could be said that the analysis of pictures must give up its dogma of the concreteness of the picture and thus make an epistemological self-criticism analogous to historiography. Here, the Rankean idea of the description of concrete events "wie es eigentlich gewesen" implied the rejection of all speculations of the type "what if ...". But a semiotic analysis of these ideas demonstrates that it is impossible to describe even the most concrete event without the use of universals, types, generalities, and as soon as reference is made to general objects, a "what if?" is implied, cf. the pragmatic maxim's "would-bes". If you say, for instance, that the rearmament of the enemy released the war, then you claim by the same token, that if the enemy had not rearmed, all other things being equal, then the war would not have come - a claim which would normally be rejected out of hand as counterfactual speculation. If you should refrain from indulging in such things, you should positivistically limit yourself to registrate events without reflecting on their type, nor on relations of cause and effect between them. I do not think any historiography has been written which conforms to such ideas. Younger historians (such as Niall Ferguson (ed.) *Virtual History*, London 1997) are now realizing that counterfactual speculations are inevitable - and if you think you can do without them, then you are fooling yourself. The equivalent in analysis of picture, I would claim, is that if you think you can see and analyse pictures without the counterfactual variations of diagrams, then you fool yourself.