

CULTURES OF SENSE:
SCIENCE, AESTHETICS, AND THE ART OF ATTENTION IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

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This dissertation excavates the formative influence of a transdisciplinary discourse on *Aufmerksamkeit* (attention) on the emergence of modern poetics and aesthetics in eighteenth-century Germany. Tracing the problem of attention across eighteenth-century scientific methodology, epistemology, and poetics, the chapters of this study recover how poets and critics like Barthold Heinrich Brockes, Johann Jakob Breitinger, and Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten reimagined literature as an institution for the education of attention. Brockes is foundational for my analysis because of how he appropriates techniques of attentive observation developed in the experimental natural sciences for poetic experiments in perception, thus popularizing a new model of poetry as an exercise of the senses. Similarly, Breitinger re-conceptualizes poetry in terms of a practice that disrupts and reconfigures habits of perception, assigning to poetry the task of educating readers' attentiveness. Across the disciplines, sense perception is thus no longer understood as passive imprint or blind mechanism, but as a process that can be cultivated through exercise and that actively shapes the material of perception. This "poietic" understanding of perception is then the basis of Alexander Baumgarten's momentous conjunction of *aísthēsis* (sense perception) and artistic production in a unified theory of aesthetics.

Bringing the work of historians of science like Lorraine Daston in conversation with recent re-readings of eighteenth-century aesthetics in literary studies, this dissertation revises standard narratives that explain the formation of aesthetics as a development within philosophical rationalism or as a German counterpart of British discussions of taste, and instead recovers a transdisciplinary discourse on attention as the basis on which an aesthetic regime of literature took shape. In doing so, it also sheds new light on a chapter of the cultural history of attention, identifying the education of attention as a centerpiece of subject formation in the Enlightenment period.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Johannes Wankhammer studied German Language and Literature at the University of Graz, Austria, and the Free University of Berlin, Germany, receiving his B.A. from the University of Graz in 2006. In 2009, he received an M.A. in Comparative Literature from Binghamton University, NY, following a two-year joint-study program co-organized by the University of Graz. From 2009 to 2016, he studied at the Department of German Studies at Cornell University, receiving his M.A. in 2013 and his Ph.D. in 2016. During the academic year 2014-2015, he served as Graduate Fellow at Cornell's Society for the Humanities in the context of a collaborative research project on the annual focal theme "Sensation." Johannes joined the Department of German Studies at Reed College as a Visiting Assistant Professor in August 2016.

To the memory of my father.

“In dieser Welt aber rollen die Tage dahin;
die einen gehen, die anderen kommen, aber keiner bleibt”
– said the page where the bookmark was left.

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Finally, I would like to give thanks *to* and *for* my brother Alexander and my parents Susanne and Rudolf Wankhammer. It seemed wrong to unilaterally dedicate this to my father now that he can no longer receive the dedication. But even more wrong not to do so.

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PREFACE

It was the first session of a first-year writing seminar on the Enlightenment, and my students were eager to show their enthusiasm for the subject. One student was particularly vocal. As a yoga teacher, he announced, he had been on the path to enlightenment for years. Another student chimed in, reporting details of her daily meditation practice.

Sparing me the task, other students who remembered enough of their history classes in high school (and had read the course description) cleared up the misunderstanding. Relieved but somewhat irritated, I wrote off the confusion as an example of how language can, à la Sapir and Whorf, shape our perception of the world. Surely, the same misunderstanding would not have occurred in a German language seminar on *Aufklärung* – although different double entendres might have come up in that course. And, trying to see things in a positive light, did the need to explain the term “Enlightenment” not perhaps also signal a welcome shift from a monolithically Western-centric perspective in secondary education – rather than only its deplorable decline?

A few sessions later, class discussion turned to Descartes’s *Meditations on First Philosophy* – and my yoga instructor was triumphant. So meditation was after all the path to enlightenment “in that other sense” as well?

Another example, I thought, of the malignant genius of language. But the series of coincidences was indeed striking. The imagery of illumination and the concern with “meditation” were, after all, not the only overlaps between the semantic fields of Eastern spirituality and Enlightenment rationality. “Attention” and “mental clarity” were invoked in

both areas; and the “eye of the mind” belonged equally to the metaphorical repertoire of Descartes and Locke and to that of seasoned yogis. What if one took the resonances seriously and considered Enlightenment “in that other sense” to be based on a form of psychophysical practice as well?

That I did not immediately dismiss this thought was in part due the currency of the concept of “cultural techniques” in recent German theory, which has shifted the spotlight of theoretical discussion to the practices that precede and consolidate formal systems of communication and action. Certainly, whatever practice my student had integrated into her daily routine had little in common with what Descartes described in terms of meditation. The Cartesian meditations and the paradigm shift they exemplified were part of a radically *different* “culture of attention,”¹ as Jan Assmann has suggested describing the way a culture organizes collective attention – but a culture that could perhaps be described *in terms of* practices and techniques for cultivating attention as well. And perhaps, the specific difference between the cultures of attention that clashed in my seminar was the secret reason why my students, like so many post-Enlightenment subjects, yearned for the different kinds of focus, attentiveness, and discipline promised by the practices of yoga.

My teaching that day was not the most focused, but I left class with an idea that injected a fresh dose of thinking into my dissertation project. The result is the study that follows.

¹ Assmann coins the term in analogy with the term “memory culture” in “Die Aufmerksamkeit Gottes,” 69.

INTRODUCTION

For two millennia, it seemed as if Aristotle's *De Anima* had provided a complete inventory of what souls can do. Treatises on the mind in the seventeenth century continued to divide up their subject according to the Aristotelian capacities of sensing, remembering, imagining, reasoning, and willing; even if they sided with the moderns against the authorities of ancient philosophy. Discussions of the five external senses were typically followed by chapters on the internal senses (memory and imagination), and culminated in a treatment of judgement, reason, and will, the so-called higher powers of cognition.¹ By the middle of the eighteenth century, however, the nature of the soul seems to have undergone a small but significant shift. Beginning the 1730ies and 1740ies, treatises began to appear that included chapters on a mental faculty with no equivalent in the Aristotelian architecture of the soul: the faculty of attention.

This study contributes a chapter to the history of how the soul acquired this new faculty. In the first decades of the eighteenth century, attention became not only a watchword in the philosophy of mind and the psychology of inquiry of the rising natural sciences but also the key term in a momentous reorganization of the poetic field in mid-eighteenth-century Germany. As social and technological ruptures shook fundamental certainties and demanded a new capacity for critical watchfulness, poets like Barthold Heinrich Brockes and critics like Johann Jakob Breitinger reimagined poetry in terms of an education of attention. Tracing cross-pollinations

¹ An overview of standard topics in seventeenth-century treatises on the soul is offered in Hatfield, "Attention in Early Scientific Psychology," 6–7. The two most basic capacities Aristotle had ascribed to all living beings including plants, nourishment and reproduction, had dropped out of the picture with modern mind-body dualisms.

between the different disciplines of attention, the chapters of my study will excavate the emergence of this eighteenth-century poetics of *Aufmerksamkeit*, whose most prominent and consequential result was Alexander Baumgarten's establishment of the new philosophical discipline of aesthetics.

Christian Wolff, the eminent philosopher in Germany before Kant, laid the foundation for eighteenth-century discussions of attention in his widely read *Deutsche Metaphysik* (1719), which defined "Aufmerksamkeit" and in fact helped to establish the German word as the loan translation for *attentio* in the first place:²

Wir finden in der Seele ein Vermögen sowohl bey ihren Empfindungen, als Einbildungen und allen übrigen Gedanken [...], sich auf eines unter ihnen dergestalt zu richten, daß wir uns dessen mehr als des übrigen bewusst sind, das ist, zu machen, daß ein Gedancke mehr Klarheit bekommet als die übrigen haben: welches wir die Aufmercksamkeit zu nennen pflegen.³

For Wolff, attention is characterized by narrowing awareness to one thought or sensation among others in order to increase the degree of consciousness with which the focused item is perceived.⁴ What *motivates* the idea that narrowing the focus increases the clarity of perception in Wolff's broader system is the assumption that the mind cannot, like the infinite

² While claims that Wolff "introduced" the term *Aufmerksamkeit* into the German language are exaggerated – the term occasionally appears in the seventeenth century – it is certainly true that Wolff offered the first philosophical definition of the term and, through the immense influence of his works on scholarly discourse in eighteenth-century Germany, ensured that *Aufmerksamkeit* prevailed over competing loan translations of *attentio* such as *Achtsamkeit*, *Aufmerkung*, and *Achtung*. For the (erroneous) claim that Wolff introduced the term into the German language, see for instance the editor's preface to *Wie gebannt: ästhetische Verfahren der affektiven Bindung von Aufmerksamkeit*, 9.

³ Wolff, *Vernünfftige Gedancken von Gott, der Welt und der Seele des Menschen, auch allen Dingen überhaupt*, from now on by convention cited as *Deutsche Metaphysik*, 149 (§268).

⁴ Wolff's Latin *Psychologia Empirica* puts this even more succinctly, emphasizing the necessary *partiality* of attention: "Facultas efficiendi, ut in perceptione composita *partialis una majorem claritatem* habeat, dicitur *Attentio*"; my emphasis. Attention focuses on *one part* of a composite perception in order to increase its clarity; *Psychologia empirica*, 168–169 (§237).

mind of God, consciously perceive everything all at once. Selectivity of focus, and therefore the need to pay attention, is the mark of a mind that is, like the human mind, finite, so that investing *one* thing with attention withdraws it from all others. Wolff elaborates that the absolute amount of attention at one's disposal varies between different people. Disciplined training can even increase one's overall attentional budget, so that more attention can be distributed among a greater number of things for a longer period of time.⁵ But however well people train their attention, they will of course never approach the all-seeing-ness of the divine mind.

The idea that attention is a limited resource subject to an internal economy is so prevalent that it has come to organize the linguistic imaginary of English, which requires people to “pay” attention to things – reminding us that attention is a resource better not wasted, lest we find ourselves insolvent when it comes to things to which we owe our attention.⁶ The idea is, in fact, shared so widely that it often serves as the self-evident opening premise for theories of attention that otherwise have little in common with each other. “Capacity-limitation theories” in cognitive psychology that explain attentional phenomena through a “bottleneck in information processing”⁷ assume it with the same air of obviousness with which

⁵ Wolff, *Deutsche Metaphysik*, 150 (§270). This is elaborated in more detail in the *Psychologia empirica*, 178–183 (§249–251), where Wolff recommends various strategies for training one's attention.

⁶ The pertinent sense of economy as a closed “household” with limited resources has to be distinguished from recent diagnoses – based on an increasing competition for consumer's attention in the economic sphere of modern societies – that we live in an “economy of attention.” This thesis was influentially developed in Franck, *Ökonomie der Aufmerksamkeit*. For a media-theoretical version of a similar argument, see Schmidt, “Aufmerksamkeit: die Währung der Medien.”

⁷ For an overview of different theories of attention in twentieth-century and contemporary psychology, see Mole, “Attention.” In this context, it is perhaps necessary to note that this study does not share the ambition of recent cognitive approaches to supplement the scientific theories of psychology and neurology with phenomenologically rich “first-person” accounts provided by poetry; nor does it hope to find in scientific accounts of perception the key to eighteenth-century poetics. The question that guides this study is thus not what attention *is* but how attention

phenomenological accounts presuppose attention's need to selectively structure the chaos of experience,⁸ and with which sociological approaches construe attention as a form of social action necessitated by an oversupply of possibilities that cannot all be realized at the same time.⁹ In his posthumously published sketches on a phenomenological anthropology, Hans Blumenberg pithily summarizes the premise behind these various concepts of attention as the assumption "daß ein Subjekt es mit einer Welt zu tun hat, die seinen Informationsbedarf überfordert und überflutet."¹⁰

The interesting question is why – given that the perceptual economy at the heart of attention is such an obvious fact of the human condition – the selectivity of attention only became a focal topic of discussion when Wolff and others turned their attention to attention in the early eighteenth century.¹¹ While the explanatory value of data provided by the quantitative analysis of historical corpora is certainly limited, the graph charted when mining

has been historically *practiced* and *understood*. For an example and a summary of cognitive approaches to attention and eighteenth-century (English) poems, see the introduction to Koehler, *Poetry of Attention in the Eighteenth Century*.

⁸ Bernhard Waldenfels begins his phenomenological reflections on attention in this way. His opening idea "wer alles sieht, sieht und hört nichts" is the flipside of the economy of finitude assumed by Wolff; Waldenfels, *Phänomenologie der Aufmerksamkeit*, 13.

⁹ See, for instance, Schroer, "Soziologie der Aufmerksamkeit," 200; Hahn, "Aufmerksamkeit," 25–26, 30. Both offer instructive overviews of the sociological dimension of attention. For a critique of the Darwinist connotations of conceiving attention in terms of selectivity, see Seitter, "Aufmerksamkeitskorrelate," 172. On selectivity as the basic operation of attention, see also Neumann's overview of "Aufmerksamkeit" in Ritter's *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*.

¹⁰ Blumenberg, *Zu den Sachen und zurück*, 188.

¹¹ On the pioneering role of Wolff in this context, see Hatfield, "Attention in Early Scientific Psychology," 5–6.

the vast archive of Google Books for German “Aufmerksamkeit” and English “attention” nevertheless illustrates the rise of interest in the eighteenth century quite strikingly:¹²

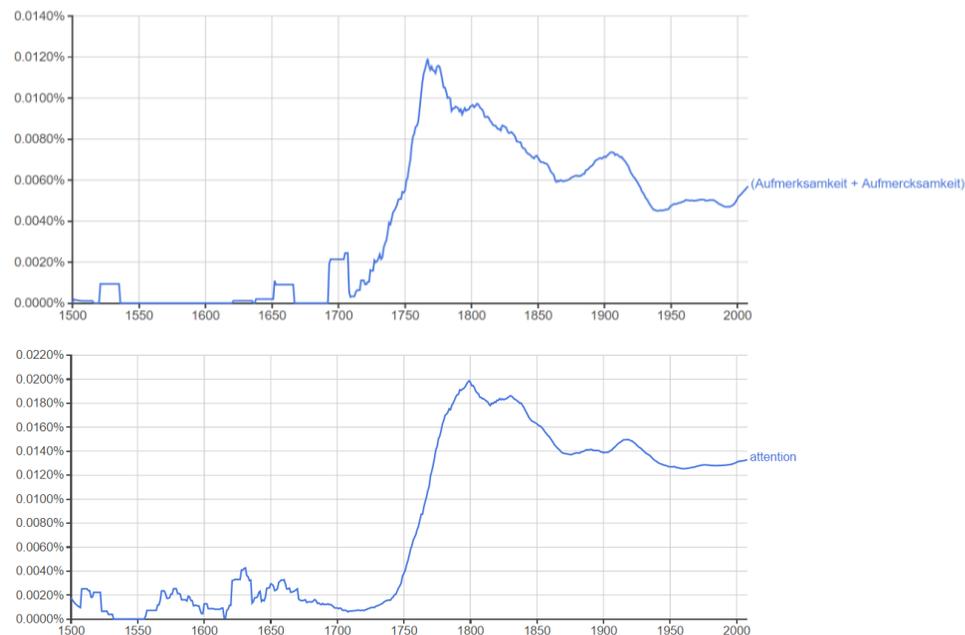


Figure 1: Results for German “Aufmerksamkeit” and English “attention” in Google N-gram

The sudden rise of interest in attention in the eighteenth century was not simply a matter of the progress of knowledge – as if philosophical psychology suddenly discovered and began to progressively chart a hitherto unknown district of the mind.¹³ Attentional phenomena of directing awareness had been discussed since Greek and Roman antiquity and throughout the

¹² The English graph is more meaningful than the German as Google’s German corpus for the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is severely limited and unreliable. Both graphs – as, in fact, the graph for French “attention” – show a sudden rise and peak frequency in the eighteenth century and then two more bumps signaling an increase in word usage in the late nineteenth century and the present. The graph for French “attention” already begins to rise in the second half of the seventeenth century, perhaps reflecting the growing treatment of attention in the wake of Cartesian philosophy. English “attention” lags in comparison with both the French and German. (Problems which limit the significance of the findings include potentially faulty OCR, especially in the case of German *Fraktur* – although text recognition has made significant progress in this regard – as well as regular historical misattributions of texts in the Google archive.) Source: “Google Ngram Viewer.”

¹³ This is the general assumption behind much literature on (the history of) attention in psychology and analytical philosophy; see, for instance, Mole’s otherwise highly instructive overview in the *Stanford Encyclopedia* on “Attention”; or Murphy’s *Historical Introduction to Modern Psychology*, 3–22.

Middle Ages – without, however, becoming a topic of the first order.¹⁴ The reason might well be that in a world where the microcosm reflects the macrocosm – as in the classical *kosmos*, the medieval *ordo creationis*, or the order of resemblances that guided the Renaissance¹⁵ – the narrowing of focus characteristic of attention constitutes no particularly urgent matter. Where every particular reflects the order of being alongside with it, and the whole is therefore seamlessly present in the part, focusing on one thing does not come at the *cost* or the *expense* of others, as it does in the “economic” view of attention.

I will suggest in the analyses that follow that the exacerbated sense of selectivity and partiality that defines modern attention only surfaces once the ramifications that connect one thing to all others no longer hold. Substantial conflicts can then arise between focusing on this *or* that thing; foregrounding this *or* that aspect; seeing something one way *or* another. The result is not only a new urgency of the problem of attention but, in the same stroke, the possibility of distraction. Coined in the modern sense in seventeenth-century France and soon imported into German as *Zerstreuung*, distraction is discussed, in the eighteenth-century, as the malady of *misusing* selective attention – or, as Lessing argued, as this misuse interpreted as a moral failing, as we ought to be able to control where to place the focus of our attention:

“Haben wir es nicht in unserer Gewalt, [die Aufmerksamkeit] anzustrengen, sie abzuziehen, wie

¹⁴ For overviews, see Neumann, “Aufmerksamkeit”; Hatfield, “Attention in Early Scientific Psychology”; Waldenfels, *Phänomenologie der Aufmerksamkeit*, 15–20.

¹⁵ On the order of similitude in the Renaissance, see the pertinent sections in Foucault’s Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 17–45.

wir wollen? Und was ist die Zerstreuung anders, als ein unrechter Gebrauch unserer Aufmerksamkeit? Der Zerstreute denkt, und denkt nur das nicht, was er ... denken sollte.”¹⁶

At the same time that attention became threatened by distraction, an attitude of attentiveness was, however, more necessary than ever. As long-established frameworks of understanding were submitted to systematic doubt – paradigmatically in Descartes – the need for attention as a perceptual “state of exception” in which experience is scrutinized with a heightened level of awareness became imperative.¹⁷ This imperative also can be – and famously was – interpreted optimistically, as the opening of new horizons of understanding. Once traditional frameworks of understanding are cast aside as a mere contrivance of prejudices, empty words, and arbitrary tradition (Bacon’s “idols”), an unprejudiced attention would finally be free to register what a gaze clouded by false preconceptions had been unable to see, and take note of the details and parts of which things are truly composed. No one portrayed this experience more vividly than the poet of attention Barthold Heinrich Brockes, who begins one of his volumes of poetry with an emblematic rise from a dim cave into a spring day, simply to register things as they show themselves in the bright light of the sun: for Brockes, emergence from the Platonic cave simply means perceiving the world anew with fresh and attentive eyes.¹⁸ The tension between partiality and discovery – between the risk of missing the

¹⁶ Lessing, *Werke und Briefe*, 6:322. Lessing reflects on the (for him, recent) history of the word *Zerstreuung* in a 1767 review of Regnard’s *Le Disträit*, emphasizing that the play was initially met with an unfavorable reception but became a success during his time.

¹⁷ Michael Hagner has characterized attention as a “state of exception,” see Hagner, “Aufmerksamkeit als Ausnahmezustand”; “Toward a History of Attention in Culture and Science.”

¹⁸ “Wenn jemand irgendwo in einer Höhle,/Allwo desselben Sinn und Seele/Von aller Creatur und allem Vorwurf leer,/In steter Dämmerung erzogen wär;/Und trät' auf einmahl in die Welt,/Zumahl zur holden Frühlings-Zeit...” In Brockes, the exit from the Platonic cave does not lead into a beyond of immaterial ideas but into the midday sun of

mark and the exuberance of marking things for the first time – defines attention in the eighteenth century.

Both poles testify to the demise of an unfractured framework of understanding in which everything has its preordained place.¹⁹ The rise of attention can thus be understood as the correlate, in individual and collective consciousness, of the becoming-questionable of order that theories of modernity (especially in the German tradition) have described through the analytical category of “contingency” – the awareness that things *could also be otherwise*.²⁰ Parallel to attention, contingency was first defined as a concept in classical philosophy but remained marginal until the eighteenth-century. Specific events could be contingent, could either happen or not happen and were therefore possible in another way as well – not, however, the horizon of possibility as a whole. As Michael Makropoulos and others have noted, *modern* contingency-consciousness marks the moment when contingency affects the horizon of possibility itself, so that whole frameworks of understanding forfeited their semblance of

the physical world – as the title of his poetry-collection *Irdisches Vergnügen in Gott* suggests. Brockes, *Irdisches Vergnügen in Gott*, 1753, 4:3–5.

¹⁹ The diagnosis that the rise of modern social forms went hand in hand with the destruction of traditional forms and conceptions of order is central to all classics of sociology. Synthesizing sociological and intellectual-historical approaches, Niklas Luhmann has characterized the prevalent conception of order in feudally stratified premodern societies (as opposed to functionally differentiated modern ones) as that of a “cosmos of essences” (“Essenzkosmos”); see Luhmann, *Beobachtungen der Moderne*, 130–31; on this topic in the context of a sociology of attention, see Schroer, “Soziologie der Aufmerksamkeit,” 207–8; also Hahn, “Aufmerksamkeit,” 74–51.

²⁰ Logically defined through the double negation of being “neither necessary nor impossible,” the concept of contingency is discussed as a shorthand for the awareness that things are *not inevitable* and could therefore *also be possible in another way*. The most prominent theorists of contingency in the German tradition are Hans Blumenberg and Niklas Luhmann. For a highly instructive synopsis of their concepts of contingency, see Campe, “Contingencies in Blumenberg and Luhmann.” Classics on contingency in the German tradition include Waldenfels, “Ordnung im Potentialis. Zur Krisis der europäischen Moderne”; and the final volume of the *Forschungsgruppe Poetik und Hermeneutik* on *Kontingenz*.

inevitability.²¹ The risk and the exuberance of attention, I will argue, arose in close entanglement with such a rising awareness for the contingency of things.

Attention between Innovation and Routine

Sociological approaches to the problem of attention and modernity have described modernization in terms of a “profound disruption of the established order of attention”²² caused by the fraying of traditional social units (such as guilds or medieval towns) that granted everyone a fixed place in the social order. In response, members of modernizing societies had to cultivate an individual faculty of attention, necessary for orienting themselves in an oversupply of different and ever-evolving possibilities of behavior.

A remark from Christian Thomasius’s *Ausübung der Sittenlehre* (1696) strikingly documents the problem: “Man [kann] auch das *decorum* durch unbetrüglche Grund=Regeln nicht erlernen, sondern es gehöret eine *continuirliche* und genaue Auffmerckung und zwar auff die geringsten Kleinigkeiten dazu, weil das *decorum* alle Tage sich ändert, und an allen Orten anders ist.”²³ The uncertainty of what is socially acceptable in the context of what Thomasius already calls “bürgerlich[e] Gesellschaft”²⁴ demands an attitude of persistent watchfulness that must pick up on the minutest details in order to properly read a social situation. The concept of *decorum* – which for a long epitomized what was natural and proper in sociality as well as in the

²¹ Makropoulos, “Modernität als Kontingenzkultur,” 65.

²² “Modernisierung lässt sich auch als umfassende Störung der etablierten Aufmerksamkeitsordnung verstehen”; Schroer, “Soziologie der Aufmerksamkeit,” 207–8.

²³ Thomasius, *Ausübung der Sittenlehre*, 238 (§28). *Aufmerkung* was an alternative loan translation of Latin *attentio* before the eighteenth-century terminologization of *Aufmerksamkeit*. Italics reproduce Latin print in original. Complaints about the fickleness of *decorum* became common in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century; see Disselkamp, *Barockheroismus*, 404–5.

²⁴ Thomasius, *Ausübung der Sittenlehre*, 13 (§21).

arts – has become a matter of sheer contingency for Thomasius (“keinen gewissen Grund”).²⁵ Bookish knowledge, he emphasizes, is of no use in understanding the fashions (“*mode*”) of the day; the only remedy is a constant exercise and refinement (“*exerciren und schärfen*”) of attention and judgement.²⁶ Thomasius’s cautionary note comes in the context of a typology of the ambitious individual (*der Ehrgeizige*) who must develop the skill of a quickly adaptable attention in order to get ahead in an increasingly fluid society. *Aufmerksamkeit* thus emerged, as Barbara Thums has suggested, as a principal “Kulturtechnik der Moderne”;²⁷ a necessary technique for orientation in an age characterized, as Thomasius’s prescient reference to fashion implies, by constant innovation and change.²⁸

In eighteenth-century poetics, the sensibility articulated by Thomasius first surfaced with Johann Jakob Breitinger’s *Critische Dichtkunst* (1740), which raised *the new* into the central category of poetic theory. Breitinger’s focus on novelty is thrown into sharp relief by comparison with his rival Johann Christoph Gottsched’s *Versuch einer Critischen Dichtkunst vor die Deutschen* (1730). Gottsched’s rationalist interpretation of the principle of nature imitation attempted to circumscribe poetics one last time within the boundaries of a given order of nature and a concomitant anamnestic temporality in which nothing is ever truly new under the sun. For Gottsched, *decorum* once more represented a set of eternal laws that pervade the natural as well as the social world. Not so for Breitinger, for whom the essential condition of

²⁵ Ibid., 239 (§28).

²⁶ Ibid., 238–239 (§28).

²⁷ Thums, “Die schwierige Kunst der Selbsterkenntnis,” 131. Thums uses *Kulturtechnik* in the broad sense of a cultural skill.

²⁸ Focusing on the nineteenth century, Walter Benjamin famously saw fashion’s turning novelty into a constant (“the new and the ever same”) as paradigmatic for a characteristically modern temporality of unending innovation that bars substantive change. See the convolute “B” of the *Das Passagen-Werk*, 1:110–32.

novelty – the source of poetic beauty – consisted in *deviation* from the customs, laws, and habits familiar to an audience. Breitinger reoriented poetry toward the new, the unknown, the undefined, thereby beginning to raise the indeterminate – as the “not-yet-determined” – into the century’s new ideal of artistic production. I propose that, condensed to one issue, the difference between Gottsched’s and Breitinger’s poetics – which I contrast in the first two chapters of this study – boils down to *attention to attention*. Absent as a poetological category in Gottsched, Breitinger saw poetry as catering above all to the attentive capacities of an audience, turning the cognitive absorption of new material into the main source of poetic pleasure.

The same tension between routine and innovation also defines the juxtaposition of *attention and habit*, perhaps the most frequently invoked contrast in the eighteenth-century discourse on attention I investigate. Breitinger saw the force of habit as the reason why people let the beautiful complexity of the world pass by unnoticed most of the time, and prescribed poetry’s attention-inducing novelty as a cure for the malady. What Breitinger prescribed in theory, Barthold Heinrich Brockes’s poems performed in practice, using detailed description as a tool to alert readers to the overlooked wonders of even the most everyday objects as they reveal themselves to the attentive gaze. Brockes’s massive poetic oeuvre is, I will argue in the third chapter, best understood as the attempt to continuously jolt readers out of their inattentive stupor, culminating in Brockes’s *cri de coeur* “Laß ja Gewohnheit mir die Augen nicht verkleistern!”²⁹

²⁹ Brockes, *Irdisches Vergnügen in Gott*, 1724, 2:465.

For both Breitinger and Brockes, the relationship between habit and attention will, however, turn out to be more complicated than this clear-cut opposition suggests. At the heart of the opposition is the idea that the *default* mode of perception is not natural, not fixed or given, but learned – a *habit*, therefore, of noticing and (more often) not noticing things. This means that habit is itself a form a habituated or automated *attention* – a specific pattern of taking note and disregarding, only one reduced to customary modes of coping with everyday challenges, and therefore blind to the slumbering complexity of the world. The same reversal takes place in the case of the exceptional attention evoked by poetry, whose goal turns out to be the education of a new *habit* of perception. The relationship between attention and habit is thus a dialectical one – a tension between what Michael Hagner has described as attention’s “state of exception”³⁰ and the solidification of moments of heightened awareness into new routines. In the words of Walter Benjamin, “alle Aufmerksamkeit muß in Gewohnheit münden, wenn sie den Menschen nicht sprengen, alle Gewohnheit von Aufmerksamkeit verstört werden, wenn sie den Menschen nicht lähmen soll.”³¹ Benjamin goes on to evoke a form of habitual attention that would arrest the dialectic by cultivating a form of attentive receptivity not limited to exceptional moments of conscious awareness.³² Echoed today in projects as diverse as Peter Handke’s decidedly high-brow celebration of literary attentiveness and the popular-psychological “mindfulness” movement, efforts of habituating attentiveness also have their

³⁰ Hagner, “Aufmerksamkeit als Ausnahmezustand.”

³¹ Benjamin, “Gewohnheit und Aufmerksamkeit,” 407.

³² Ibid., 407–8; for a contextualizing reading of Benjamin’s brief text on attention and habit, see Liska, “Walter Benjamins Dialektik der Aufmerksamkeit.”

seeds in the eighteenth-century poetics of attention developed by the likes of Breitinger and Brockes.

The deeply ambivalent nature of the project of an education of attention is most conspicuous in Alexander Baumgarten's pioneering *Aesthetica* (1750), the subject of my fourth chapter, which drew the philosophical conclusion from the early eighteenth-century poetics of attention. Baumgarten takes the malleability of embodied attention as the point of departure for his project of aesthetics, understood as a general theory of sense perception and art. Conceiving of attention in terms of a *habitus* or acquired skill, Baumgarten conceives artworks in the newly generalized aesthetic sense as *practice cases* for cultivating an attentive habitus. Depending on whether this practice of attention is understood along the model of military-style drill or as an exercise in creative perception – and I will argue that Baumgarten's text gives occasion for both interpretations – his aesthetics heralds a project of resistant individualization or of repressive normalization. Aesthetic practice either prepares transformative moment of unpredictably *different* forms of perception that break open fossilized structures – or molds subjects according to the forms of specialized attention required by the social institutions that begin to take over the structuring function of social estates. The specifically modern dialectic of attention and habit thus recurs at the heart of Baumgarten's aesthetic project.

Lens Technology

Beyond its broadly sociological dimensions, the concept of attention operative in the body of work I discuss is critically shaped by an epochal innovation in media technology. Breitinger's, Baumgarten's, and especially Brockes's recurrent analogies between the

marvelous representations of poetry with observations through telescopes, microscopes, and magnifying glasses point to the lens technology we still invoke when speaking of “focusing” attention as a further source of the eighteenth-century discourse on attention. Writing about the uses of microscopes for scientific experimentation, Christian Wolff reports an experience that encapsulates the effect of lens technology as concisely as Thomasius did for attention’s sociological aspect: “daß, wenn man einmahl eine Sache durch das Vergrößerungs=Glas genau betrachtet, man nach diesem auch mit blossem Auge vielen Unterschied wahrnimmt, den man vorher nicht erwogen.”³³ Having observed things through magnifying glasses, we look at them with different eyes – but not, Wolff notes, because our eyes now work differently than before. The reason can only be “weil wir mehr darauf acht haben, was wir sehen.”³⁴

Wolff interprets the feedback effect of microscopic observation on the natural gaze as the increasing subtlety of an attention that can now discriminate more details than before. The deeper experience that announces itself in Wolff’s comments is, however, the insight that something mediates between things and the way they are perceived *even when no refracting lens is present*. In microscopic observation, a physical element was literally placed “in between” things and their perception, with the effect that things appear in a different granularity than before. In the after-image of microscopic observation, the thought imposes itself that even in the absence of an actual lens, something like an “internal lens” mediates between objects and how we see them; something that, in analogy with the lens, decides how finely we discriminate,

³³ Wolff, *Allerhand nützliche Versuche*, 3:312 (§82); parts of this passage also quoted in Thums, “Selbstbildungen: Wahrnehmung, Aufmerksamkeit und Diätetik,” 2008, 44.

³⁴ Wolff, *Allerhand nützliche Versuche*, 3:312 (§82). The phrase “acht haben” is often used by Wolff and others as the verbal form of *Aufmerksamkeit*.

what we see and cannot see – what comes into focus and recedes into the background. This mediator is attention; and it is because of this structural affinity of attention with optical media that, in the works I read, reflections on attention tend to morph seamlessly into reflections on prosthetic technologies of perception, and vice versa.

The overall effect of lens technology and the post-Copernican world it helped to inaugurate has been described by Hans Blumenberg as the breakdown of the “postulate of visibility.”³⁵ Once telescopes discovered previously unknown stars and microscopes disclosed worlds of visibility inaccessible to the naked eye, the postulate of an essential fit between the structure of the world and the human perceptual apparatus – central to a classical metaphysics for which seeing and knowing were closely intertwined – had to be abandoned. Just as the disintegration of traditional *social* structure was interpreted in the eighteenth-century as an opportunity to finally make things right – to impose, as the French revolutionaries intended, a reasonable order on the social – the initially dominant interpretation of the emerging incongruence between reality and natural visibility was, however, an optimistic one: the confidence that the new instruments of prosthetic vision and an unprejudiced, disciplined attention would finally reveal things as they really are. This general optimism is the default interpretation in Gottsched and Wolff. In the other works I read, however, the latent contingency of perception begins to surface simultaneously as a threat to a harmonious order of creation (a threat felt poignantly by Brockes) or an opportunity for poetic representation (a dimension emphasized in Breitingen) – before it finally becomes, with Baumgarten’s appraisal

³⁵ Blumenberg, *Die Genesis der kopernikanischen Welt*, 717–747, here: 746.

of the loss of abstraction, a key motivating factor behind the emergence of philosophical aesthetics.

Leibniz: Attention and the Definition of Things

The metaphysical reverberations of the developments sketched above were first conceptually articulated – but ultimately also defused – in the philosophical project of Leibniz. Against Descartes, Leibniz objected that even in clear and distinct cognitions, we do not perceive things as they are in themselves, or as God would know them, but only clarify them to ourselves as far as our differentiating capacities go – even though any little section of the world enfolds (as Leibniz could witness through Antonie van Leeuwenhoek’s microscope³⁶) infinitely many more nuances than a finite mind can perceive. This idea informs Leibniz’s entire philosophical outlook. Monads, the basic entities of Leibniz’s metaphysics, are such essential cognitive limitations incarnate. Their unique “point of view” grants to each perceiving unit only a limited “zone of clarity,” raised from a perceptual background noise that indistinctly echoes the vast expanse of the world.

The clearest exposition of the problem is, however, provided in Leibniz’s early “Meditations on Knowledge, Truth, and Ideas” (1684). In this brief but extremely influential essay, Leibniz differentiates between two types of definitions: “nominal definitions,” which include such a number of characteristics as suffices to distinguish the thing defined from similar things; and “real definitions,” which define a thing all the way down to its most minute

³⁶ On Leibniz’s relationship with the famous microscopist Leeuwnhoek and its influence on the *Monadology*, see Schmidt, “Leeuwenhoek. Medienlogik und Wissen im 17. und frühen 18. Jahrhundert,” 17–18.

differentiating features.³⁷ Leibniz argues that because the world is too complex for finite minds to acquire exhaustive “real” definitions of things, finite perceivers like humans must make do with nominal definitions, or notions that rely on a limited number of features to identify a thing as a certain kind of thing. Human knowers must, in other words, *give definition to* things by imposing their own measure on a world that infinitely exceeds their perceptual capacity.

Leibniz’s essay spells out the logic that motivates the emerging conceptualization, by Wolff and others, of attention as a capacity for selective perception: attention *must* select because the world is too complex for a finite mind; attention *can* select because the lack of fit between mind and world opens up a space for the independent structuring activity of perception; and attention can select *between different possibilities* because, in the absence of a single mode of perception prescribed by and inscribed into things, more than one way of structuring perception is always possible.

Leibniz’s project of a philosophy that departs from classical metaphysics by construing the world as an assemblage of limited, partial, and individual viewpoints is famously ambivalent. In the bigger picture, the monadic points of view converge in the oversight of the divine monad; an all-seeing gaze that accommodates the viewpoints to each other and guarantees that that all take part in a cosmic harmony that constitutes, according to Leibniz’s most famous and infamous doctrine, the best of possible worlds. This tension between partiality and its redemption in a harmonizing providential order looms – as Leibniz’s vision

³⁷ Leibniz, “Meditations on Knowledge, Truth, and Ideas,” 1989, 24. The role of the attention is not discussed in terms of a separate faculty in this essay but is elaborated on the basis of this essay’s typology in Leibniz’s later epistemological writings and in the writings of his successors.

generally does over German eighteenth-century thought – over all the texts I discuss. Nowhere is it entirely resolved; but there are distinctive shifts of emphasis when Breiting, for instance, discovers the possible worlds kept latent in Leibniz’s metaphysical picture as an opportunity for poets to conceive and represent things *differently* than they are according to our normal conceptions; or when Baumgarten, in a foundational move of his new discipline of aesthetics, takes the essential incompleteness of cognition as an occasion to challenge the exclusivity of clear and distinct notions altogether.

In its identification of selective attention as the agent that *gives definition to things* – “definition” both in the sense of a “formal statement of meaning” and the “de-fining of contours” to make things tractable to a finite mind – Leibniz’s proposal also carries methodological significance for this study. We will make Leibniz’s suggestion our own, and examine attention as a fundamental patterning of perception that *gives to things* their definition and therefore occurs *before* definition; in a yet-undefined space that, however, always needs to be delimited, closed, defined. Paying attention to historical forms attention thus makes it possible to study how in different contexts and at different times, specific features were noted as salient and others passed unnoticed; some things were invested with special significance and others ignored or disregarded; and, finally, how the lines were drawn between aspects that belonged to one (type of) thing and those that already belong to another.³⁸ The chapters of this dissertation excavate how this indefinite space of attention was

³⁸ The idea of attention as a *meta-historical* device is briefly entertained in the introduction to Lorraine Daston’s *Kurze Geschichte der wissenschaftlichen Aufmerksamkeit*. Studying scientific attention, Daston observes, makes it possible to study the changing ontology of scientific objects – how objects are *established* by investing certain things and certain differentiating criteria with significance. Daston uses the term *besetzen* in this context, suggesting the interaction of libidinal cathexis with different ways of “occupying” the perceptual field with

shaped by attentional *techniques* and *technologies* while also tracing different *conceptualizations of attention* that indicate how this process of defining was itself historically understood in the eighteenth century.

My focus will necessarily be selective – not only in narrowing attention to a limited historical period but also by foregrounding certain traits of the eighteenth-century regime of attention over others. Specifically, I will focus on how techniques and theories of attention that emerged in the methodology of the observational natural sciences and in the context of a post-Cartesian, representationalist philosophy of mind informed the reconceptualization of poetry, poetics, and aesthetics in German letters at around the middle of the eighteenth century. What largely falls out of the picture is the rich tradition of religious attentiveness – except where it merges, as in the poetry of Barthold Heinrich Brockes, with the new scientific and philosophical regime of attention,³⁹ as well as eighteenth-century discussions of attention in the context of pedagogy and moral philosophy,⁴⁰ which we will similarly touch on only to the degree that they intersect with the moral and pedagogical dimensions of the poetics of attentiveness.

Nevertheless, the specific constellation of attention at the intersection of early natural science, representationalist philosophy, and the rise of aesthetics I will trace negotiates and condenses

significance: “Warum, wann und wie geschieht es, daß die Wissenschaft ihre Aufmerksamkeit eher auf diese statt auf jene Objekte richtet, oder daß sie zuvor als disparat wahrgenommene Objekte zu einer gemeinsamen Kategorie zusammenfaßt? ... Ein besetztes Objekt (um den Freudschen Terminus zu benutzen) zieht die Aufmerksamkeit wie ein Magnet an; ein nicht besetztes Objekt hingegen kann zwar von den Sinnen registriert, aber dennoch vom Verstand übersehen werden, weil es an der nötigen Aufmerksamkeit fehlt”; *ibid.*, 11.

³⁹ Dorothea von Mücke has recently described eighteenth-century practices of religious attentiveness as an important factor in the emergence of aesthetics; *The Practices of the Enlightenment*, 1–76.

⁴⁰ For an overview of conceptions of *Aufmerksamkeit* in eighteenth-century pedagogy, see Ehrenspeck-Kolasa, “Das Thema Aufmerksamkeit in der Pädagogik des 18. Jahrhunderts.” The pedagogical discourse drew largely from the same Wolffian conceptual resources as the poetics of attention.

many of the broader stakes of the specifically modern problem of attention – including the question how attention, as a both voluntary and involuntary, active and passive faculty, articulates and disarticulates body and mind; how techniques of attention cope with a surplus of information and competing possibilities of perception and action; and how they serve, in this way, to stabilize and destabilize a “subject” – a term whose modern philosophical meaning was coined in the context of Alexander Baumgarten’s reflections on the agent of attentive perception.

Observation and Attention

Some of the best cultural histories of attention – above all Jonathan Crary’s *Suspensions of Perception* – have focused on the late nineteenth century as the moment when the question of attention became a focal point of modern cultural practice. I will turn instead to Lorraine Daston’s recent work on attention in early modern science as a point of departure for excavating the pre-history of the modern regime of attention in the eighteenth century.⁴¹ According to Crary, the selectivity and partiality of perception implied in ascribing a central role to attention in perception is a byproduct of the fragmentation of experience through the shocks of industrial modernity. Daston, by contrast, has shown that this fragmentation was preceded by another, less noisy but no less incisive type of perceptual disintegration: with an eye to the co-implication of disciplined habitus and the consolidation of scientific fields, she characterizes eighteenth-century natural sciences as “disciplines of attention” which “worked in multiple

⁴¹ See Daston, *Kurze Geschichte der wissenschaftlichen Aufmerksamkeit*; “The Disciplines of Attention”; “Attention and the Values of Nature in the Enlightenment”; as well as pertinent sections on attention in Daston, “The Empire of Observation, 1600-1800”; Daston and Galison, *Objectivity*.

ways to single out objects as worthy of sustained investigation, isolate them from the continuous flow of experience, subject them to an exacting mental, often literal, dissection into a mosaic of details.”⁴² For scientific observers, learning to pay attention, in other words, meant learning to use their perceptual faculties like a scalpel.

Lorraine Daston attributes to these practices of attention a central place within the massive retraining of perception that accompanied and enabled the rise of the observational natural sciences in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. As Daston and others have shown, this habitus of a sharply-focused attention produced a new *psychology of inquiry* (which revalued the “epistemic passions” of wonder and curiosity as prerequisites for sustained attention);⁴³ gave rise to a distinct cultural *type* of the scientist (prone to paying intense attention to narrow details, thus becoming in the eyes of others an “absent-minded professor” or even a “mad scientist”);⁴⁴ and provided the model for a new type of observer *subjectivity* (constituted by attention as a technique for sorting through perceptions in order to keep the chaos of phenomena at bay).⁴⁵

My excavation of the problem of attention in eighteenth-century philosophy and science will further proceed in conversation with a tradition of scholarship – dating back as far as Hegel’s recapitulation of early modern science under the heading “Beobachtende Vernunft”⁴⁶ – that identifies *observation* as the paradigmatic epistemic practice of classical

⁴² Daston, “The Disciplines of Attention,” 436.

⁴³ Daston, *Kurze Geschichte der wissenschaftlichen Aufmerksamkeit*, 9–35, esp. 24–25; “The Disciplines of Attention,” 436–37; Daston and Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150–1750*, 303–28.

⁴⁴ Daston, *Kurze Geschichte der wissenschaftlichen Aufmerksamkeit*, 45–48.

⁴⁵ Thums, “Selbstbildungen: Wahrnehmung, Aufmerksamkeit und Diätetik,” 2008, esp. 37–40; See also Thums, “Aufmerksamkeit: zur Ästhetisierung eines anthropologischen Paradigmas im 18. Jahrhundert,” esp. 55.

⁴⁶ Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, 164–232.

modernity. In the context of a poetics of knowledge that studies, in the wake of Foucault, epistemic constellations beyond or below disciplinary divisions, important work has been done in recent years to reconstruct a paradigm of observation formative for the sciences and literature in the classical age of European modernity from around 1600 to 1800.⁴⁷ As this work has shown, a paradigm of observation formed the common ground on which modern concepts of literature and science took shape; but also, eventually, the basis of their divergence into the “two cultures” we inhabit today.⁴⁸

Emphasizing *attention* over observation does not dispute the importance of observation but shifts the emphasis to the infrastructure of psychophysical techniques that underlie the paradigm of observation. This reorientation follows clues in eighteenth-century treatises on observation in the sciences, which characterize disposal over attention as the principal tool of skilled observers.⁴⁹ Diderot’s and d’Alembert’s *Encyclopédie* thus only articulates common knowledge when it defines the headword “OBSERVATION” succinctly as “l’attention de l’ame [sic] tournée vers les objets qu’offre la nature.”⁵⁰ Observation and attention thus designated different aspects of the same epistemic activity, with observation generally referring to this activity’s completed *objective*, and attention to the *means of carrying out* the objective –

⁴⁷ For recent examples, see Campe, Holland, and Strowick, “Observation in Science and Literature”; Hoffmann, *Unter Beobachtung*; Stadler, *Der technisierte Blick*; Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*, 1992; Singy, “Huber’s Eyes”; Daston and Lunbeck, *Histories of Scientific Observation*; Zelle, “Experiment, Observation, Self-Observation.”

⁴⁸ This point is made by Campe, Holland, and Strowick, “Observation in Science and Literature,” 372.

⁴⁹ Summarizing the eighteenth-century discourse on observation in a 1775 treatise on “The Art of Observation,” Jean Senebier declares: “die Aufmerksamkeit allein kann [den Beobachter] in den Stand setzen, die Natur mit Nutzen in ihrem erhabenen Buche zu lesen, und einige Theile dieses prächtigen Werkes zu verstehen; sie allein wird ihm zum Herrn über die Sache machen, die er betrachtet”; *Die Kunst zu Beobachten*, 148–49. In his 1759 *Essai analytique sur les facultés de l’ame*, the Swiss naturalist Charles Bonnet similarly identified the careful or regular [*avec regle*] application of attention as the “universal spirit of observation” in the arts and sciences; *Essai analytique*, 134.

⁵⁰ de Chambaud, “Observation”

understood as various techniques for attentively sifting through the wealth of phenomena in order to identify their characteristic features.

Methodologically, the shift from observation to attention takes into consideration the growing scholarly awareness, systematically articulated in the concept of “cultural technique” (*Kulturtechnik*), that discourse networks and media systems (the historical a priori presumed by media theory in the vein of Kittler) have their own condition of possibility in the *practices* and *techniques* that generate them.⁵¹ In considering how specific techniques of exercising the senses, applying the mind, and handling prosthetic devices consolidated and implemented the cultural program of observation, privileging the analytical category of attention over observation recovers the praxeological groundwork that makes observations possible. In this way, the approach employed in this study contextualizes the history of knowledge within a history of the senses and of sensory techniques that inscribe themselves into historical bodies and minds.

⁵¹ Introducing the concept of *Kulturtechnik* to an English language audience, Bernard Geoghegan succinctly summarizes the idea (quoting Bernhard Siegert): “The concept of cultural techniques highlights the operations or sequences of operations that historically and logically precede the media concepts generated by them ... For example, counting historically and logically precedes numbers, singing precedes formalized scales, and casual farming precedes the invention of rationalized agriculture”; Geoghegan, “After Kittler,” 69. For an introduction to different dimensions of the concept, see also the other articles by Bernhard Siegert, Geoffrey Winthrop-Young, Cornelia Vismann, Sybille Krämer (co-authored with Horst Bredekamp) in *Theory, Culture & Society* 30.6. The concept is currently discussed in two different varieties; one that “identifies cultural techniques with rigorous and formalized symbolic systems,” and second, more ecumenical definition that “recognizes a broader range of formalizable cultural practices, including tacit knowledge”; *ibid.*, 67. The second sense of *Kulturtechniken* is more productive for considering practices of attentiveness.

Attention and Distinct Cognition

The *formalization* of these practices of attention can be traced to a primal scene of modern philosophy – Descartes’s declaration, in the Second Meditation, that perception is really an *activity* of the *mind*. The mind’s inspection of impressions received by the senses, Descartes notes, can be either “imperfect and confused ... or clear and distinct ... depending on how closely I pay attention to the things in which [an object] consists [*prout minus vel magis ad illa ex quibus constat attendo*].”⁵² As the capacity to focus successively on the constituent parts of representations until each of them and their relations are evident to the perceiving mind, the conscious direction of attention became, in Descartes and his successors, the principal mental technique for attaining “clear and distinct” perceptions.

By the early eighteenth-century, Christian Wolff had developed the Cartesian suggestion into an elaborate concept of attention as a faculty (*Vermögen*) with a fundamental role in philosophical epistemology.⁵³ For Wolff, the perceptual labor of attention in cognition involved two levels or stages.⁵⁴ The first stage, attention proper (*Aufmercksamkeit, attentio*), focuses – as discussed above – on one feature of a compound representation at the expense of all others

⁵² Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, 22; *Meditations on First Philosophy (Latin-English)*, 42. In the replies to objections, Descartes reiterates that the distinction between the universal doubt of the First Meditation and the epistemic certainty of the Third Meditation is effected by *attention*; Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings*, 1984, 2:306; on this point see also Mole, “Attention.”

⁵³ On Wolff’s pioneering concept of attention, see Adler, “Bändigung des (Un)Möglichen: Die ambivalente Beziehung zwischen Aufmerksamkeit und Aufklärung,” 41–47; Hatfield, “Attention in Early Scientific Psychology,” 4–7.

⁵⁴ Wolff develops parallel accounts of attention in *Vernünfftige Gedancken von Gott, der Welt und der Seele des Menschen, auch allen Dingen überhaupt*, from now on cited as *Deutsche Metaphysik*, 149–152 (§268–273); *Psychologia empirica*, 167–193 (§234–264); and *Psychologia rationalis*, 286–305 (§357–386). While there are differences between these accounts I focus on the synoptic aspects. For a summary account of attention in Wolff that addresses some of these differences and emphasizes how selectivity and narrowing of attention is linked to the Enlightenment prohibition against precipitation, see Adler, “Bändigung des (Un)Möglichen: Die ambivalente Beziehung zwischen Aufmerksamkeit und Aufklärung,” 45–48.

in order to increase the clarity of the selected part. The second stage, a protracted form of attention Wolff identifies with reflection (*Überdencken, reflexio*), strings these attentive acts together into a sequence: it consists in focusing attention to one feature of a representation after another, until all relevant features, as well their interconnection, can be surveyed by the mind. Once a complete inventory of the relevant component features of represented objects – their “marks” or “notes” (*Merkmale, notae*) – has been established, a representation becomes “clear and distinct” – or, as Wolff defines distinctness, clearly recognized in its parts: “Wenn wir eine Sache uns vorstellen ... und richten unsere Gedancken auf einen Theil nach dem andern, daraus sie bestehet ... so überdencken wir dieselbe Sache, und sie wird und durch diese fortgesetzte Aufmercksamkeit auf einen Theil nach dem andern ... in ihren Theilen ... klar, vor sich aber deutlich.”⁵⁵

How foundational the methodical attention outlined by Descartes and Wolff became for seventeenth and eighteenth-century philosophical discourse can be gleaned from the widely ramified terminological network in this discourse centered around Latin *notare*: the mental activity of “taking note” (*notare*) identifies the features or “notes” (*notas*) that distinguish one thing from another, and which can then be gathered in “notions” (*notiones*) – collections of notes that (at least ideally) capture the essential characteristics of the thing represented. Similar underground connections are suggested in the German terminology, where *Aufmerksamkeit* (the faculty of attention), (*Auf-*)*Merken* (the activity of taking note of features),

⁵⁵ Wolff, *Deutsche Metaphysik*, 151 (§272). In the *Psychologia empirica*, the final synopsis of parts is distinguished as a third stage of *collatio* or *comparatio*; *Psychologia empirica*, 189–190 (§259–260). This three-step would become canonical for the Wolffian school up to Kant.

and *Merkmale* (the distinctive marks that typify a phenomenon) form a nexus that ties objective properties to a specific technique of perception. The structure of objects as conceived by the philosophy of the time is, first of all, the structure of a particular form of attention.

Echoing a further meaning of both Latin *notare* (“to write”), the mental notation of representations is also the basis of an arbitrary signification that is understood, at the time, as the conventional naming of features or “notes.” In converting the imagistic impressions received by the senses into sets of communicable characters that can be marked and represented through signs, methodical attention is foundational to a notion of transparent signification that Michel Foucault has described as a centerpiece of the classical regime of representation.⁵⁶ Applying the Foucauldian approach to the philosophy and literary theory of the German Enlightenment, David Wellbery has argued that Enlightenment semiotics saw conventional signification as a double-edged sword that made higher-order thought possible but also lead away from the ideal transparency of intuitive meaning. Poetry, Wellbery argues, was ascribed the role of recovering the original plenitude of meaning before and beyond conventional signification.⁵⁷ We might add to this that according to the same paradigm, signification is itself contingent on a prior selection of nominable features that is accomplished by *attention* – a qualification with important consequences for understanding the function of literary works in Enlightenment culture. I propose that the stratum *before* conventional signification targeted in poetic works is not simply the locus of an ideal plenitude of meaning

⁵⁶ On the importance of the sign in classical representation, see Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 58–63.

⁵⁷ Wellbery, *Lessing's Laocoon*, 1984, 30–42, 83–84.

beyond signification as Wellbery suggests.⁵⁸ It is rather attention's primary patterning of perception, which, as Breitinger and Brockes will find out, can lead to the experience of a constitutive partiality rather than an original wholeness at the bottom of signification.

Disciplines of Attention – Scientific, Poetic, Aesthetic

The epistemology of Descartes and his successors presupposed attention as an autonomous *act* of the *mind*. Such autonomy was, in fact, the key to the epistemic certainty ascribed to clear and distinct representations. The mind has complete insight into such representations precisely because they are, in the clarity of their composition, *as good as self-constructed*; internally “assembled” from parts that an attentive inspection had isolated from compound representations. Attention thus had a gatekeeper function which ensured that nothing undigested, nothing that has not been resolved into distinctness enters into the mind's meditations, and all steps of the methodological procedure are performed under the close inspection of a watchful mind.

The capacity to control attention is thus the bedrock of the Cartesian method, yet it also its Achilles heel. Attention has, as Descartes had to acknowledge, a less compliant side. One cannot only *make* oneself concentrate on things; things also *draw* attention to them, or *tug* at the attention when one is trying to focus on something else. This involuntary attention poses both a systematic and a pragmatic problem for the Cartesian method. At the level of Descartes's systematic philosophy, automatic responses to external stimuli threaten to extend

⁵⁸ Ibid., 84.

the mechanical pushing and pulling that governs the corporeal world into the immaterial mind, and thus to corrode the ontological separation Descartes posits between *res cogitans* and *res extensa*. At the pragmatic level, a method based on attention as the key to distinct perceptions runs the risk of becoming anthropologically unviable if the human mind proves incapable of sufficiently extracting itself from involuntary distractions of attention.

To ward off these threats, Descartes partially redeems involuntary attention as a natural disposition for voluntary attention in the passion of wonder (*admiration*), which he defines as a “sudden surprise of the soul which brings it to consider with attention the objects that seem to it unusual or extraordinary.”⁵⁹ Wonder occupies a special place among the passions because it facilitates a transition from passive affectedness to active mental scrutiny. This transition from passion to self-controlled mental activity also has an ontogenetic component: although it is “good to be born with some inclination to wonder,” eventually we “must attempt to free ourselves from this inclination as much as possible,” and replace it with “the special state of reflection and attention which our will can always impose ... when we judge the matter before us to be worth serious consideration.”⁶⁰ To become a mature adult, and especially to become a Cartesian philosopher-scientist, one must thus acquire control over one’s attention by converting what begins as an involuntary response into a deliberate activity.

Descartes’s comments on wonder suggest that the essential separation of mind and physical world presupposed by his philosophical approach – but also, as we have seen, by modern attention discourses in general – first has to be *enacted* through a form of disciplined

⁵⁹ Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings*, 1984, 1:353 (§70).

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 1:355 (§76).

behavior. Learning to pay attention the Cartesian way helps to *constitute* the mind as a separate entity by extracting thought from involuntary responses to external stimuli that draw it into the vagaries of the physical world. Failing to establish the necessary distance undermines the very separation of mind and matter on which the epoch-making Cartesian standpoint is based. The device for controlling attention outlined in Descartes's remarks on wonder is therefore no less than a blueprint for the education of the post-Cartesian subject.

The forms of embodied behavior negotiated and enforced by these seemingly abstract philosophical reflections can be glimpsed in illustrations to Charles le Brun's *The Expression of the Passions*, a treatise on painting emotions based on the Cartesian typology of the passions,⁶¹ which strikingly visualizes the contrast between wonder and active attention:

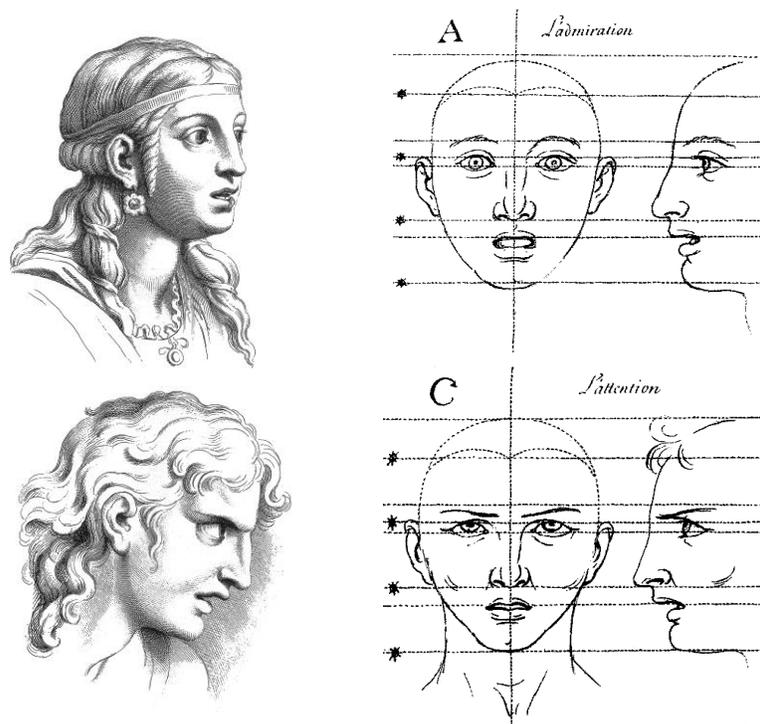


Figure 2: Illustrations of wonder (above) and attention (below) from Le Brun's *Expression of the Passions*

⁶¹ On the genesis and historical influence of Le Brun's illustrated lecture course on the passions (including reproductions of Le Brun's original drawings), see Montagu, *The Expression of the Passions*.

With wide open eyes and a mouth gaping in astonishment, the face of wonder is visibly struck by its object, as if overwhelmed by a yet unmanageable influx of perceptions. The face of attention, by contrast, confronts its target head-on. Titled toward the object of attention, its pupils are ready to pierce the object with their gaze, supported by contracted eyebrows and raised lower eye-lids that help to limit peripheral vision. Wonder, in short, is *transfixed by*, willful attention *fixates* its object. The hidden irony of Le Brun's appropriation of the Cartesian treatise on the soul – and perhaps the rejoinder of the artist Le Brun to the philosopher Descartes – is that he depicts wonder *as well as* attention among the *passions*, suggesting that even the successful conversion of wonder into active attention leads to the disembodied space of meditation only by ways of a strained – and conspicuously gendered – face.

The stakes and the basic mechanism of the Cartesian disciplining program become especially clear in Nicolas Malebranche's reflections on attention in *The Search after Truth* (1674–75). To remedy the mind's distractions by alluring sensory stimuli, he recommends a ruse formulated below in terms of Cartesian psychophysiology:

Nothing is more difficult than applying oneself for any length of time to something that fails to excite our wonder, since then the animal spirits are not so easily led into those parts of the brain necessary to represent it. It is easily said that we should be attentive; our attention is not forthcoming, or at least not for any length of time, however we may be convinced in the abstract (which in no way agitates the spirits) that the thing deserves our attention. We must trick our imagination in order to stir our spirits, and we must represent the subject we wish to think about in a novel way so that an impulse of wonder might be excited in us.⁶²

⁶² Malebranche, *The Search after Truth*, 385–86. Translation of the beginning of the second sentence altered to convey the moment of futile self-command suggested in Malebranche's "On a beau dire que nous soyons attentifs, nous ne pouvons pas l'être"; Malebranche, *Recherche de la vérité*, 2:494. On wonder in Malebranche see also Daston, *Kurze Geschichte der wissenschaftlichen Aufmerksamkeit*, 22.

Malebranche understands that attention cannot be brought under control by a simple word of command, and instead elaborates the outlines of a technology of the self that exploits the predilection of the involuntary attention for marvelous things as a lure that makes it do the work required in the pursuit of scientific knowledge. Self-affectation with wonder is the carrot to the stick of the Cartesian disciplining of attention: tricking oneself into imagining things as marvelous makes the animal spirits flow in sync with the demands of Cartesian method.

Elaborating the broader psychology of scientific inquiry exemplified by Malebranche's recommendation, Lorraine Daston has suggested that around the turn of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a shift took place in the discourse on wonder and attention that helps to illuminate how this discourse would inform the reconceptualization of poetics. While the wonder produced by extraordinary objects was initially seen – in line with Malebranche's suggestion – as a psychological crutch to assist the mind in observing particulars with the sustained attention required by the new scientific method, the order was reversed once observational attention had solidified into a professional habitus: proper attention was now seen as capable of *revealing* the marvelousness of seemingly ordinary things. The preferred scientific object choice correspondingly switched from the strange and preternatural objects characteristic of early modern curiosity cabinets to the likes of aphids and worms, which an extraordinarily acute attention could reveal *as* complex and extraordinary *despite* their ordinariness to the uninitiated eye. Wonder – both as “subjective” amazement and as

“objective” marvelousness of nature – was thus reconceived as the *effect* of a special technique of perception.⁶³

This relocation of wonder in the eye of the beholder is critical to the adaptation of the wonder/attention matrix for poetics because it suggested a new purpose for the artistry that distinguishes poetry from other forms of language use. In implicit and often explicit analogy of poetic representation with the attentive observations of scientists, poetic technique was reimagined as a tool for revealing the complexity and beauty slumbering in even the most innocuous things; for taping for an audience, as Breitingger would put it, the “mines of marvelous novelty” discovered by the scientific disciplines of attention.⁶⁴ The strangeness and extravagance of scientific findings – such as Charles Bonnet’s insight that aphids were capable of a virgin birth previously reserved for biblical miracle, gained through twenty-one waking days of undivided attention to a single specimen⁶⁵ – facilitated repurposing the strangeness and extravagance associated with rhetorically enhanced speech in the service of quasi-scientific discovery rather than rhetorical persuasion. Breaking with a long tradition, Breitingger and others thus reconceived *inventio* as a way of discovering new truths about nature for an audience, rather than as a technique for finding arguments that sweeten and embellish speech.⁶⁶ Poetic technique effectively achieved the same result as the disciplined and technologically enhanced attention of scientists: it *made things appear strange*; with the new

⁶³ Daston, *Kurze Geschichte der wissenschaftlichen Aufmerksamkeit*, 15–35; see also Daston and Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150-1750*, 215–328.

⁶⁴ “Minen des verwundersamen Neuen”; Breitingger, *Critische Dichtkunst*, 1:116.

⁶⁵ Daston, “Attention and the Values of Nature in the Enlightenment,” 106.

⁶⁶ The metamorphosis of the *inventio* tradition has recently been traced from Wolff and Leibniz to Baumgarten and Meier by Stefanie Buchenau, who argues that it is critical to the emergence of aesthetics; see Buchenau, *The Founding of Aesthetics in the German Enlightenment*.

twist that strangeness of appearance could be interpreted as testifying to the truth rather than the falsehood of poetic representations.

The device that lent itself to this understanding of poetry was *evidentia*, the classical rhetorical technique for “making-appear,” which emerged as the master-trope of poetics in the early eighteenth century. As Rüdiger Campe has suggested, *evidentia* provided the joint at which rhetorical poetics was eventually transformed into a discourse on aesthetics.⁶⁷ What has not been sufficiently noted is that the prominence of *evidentia* in eighteenth-century poetics and aesthetics is itself a consequence of the poetic adaptation of the attention discourse. The two aspects of *evidentia* conceptualized in the rhetorical tradition – *enargeia* or detailed description; and *energeia*, the affective force of poetic visualization⁶⁸ – conveniently mapped onto the two sides of attention as an active and passive, voluntary and involuntary faculty. According to the poetic interpretation of the wonder/attention matrix, the affective force of *evidentia* could captivate readers by eliciting involuntary attention, while detailed description mimicked the successive attention to parts that brings clarity into representations. Through its charms, poetry was thus seen as capable of imposing states of attentiveness that taught audiences to see things with the precision the new type of knowledge demanded. Poetry was,

⁶⁷ Campe, “Bella Evidentia”; see also “Effekt der Form,” 2014.

⁶⁸ The *enargeia/energeia* dichotomy has become established as a scholarly shorthand for two aspects conceptualized in the context of the rhetorical *evidentia* tradition – *detailed description*, and the vivid and forceful *presencing effect* achieved through such description. The two-sidedness of the multi-faceted *evidentia* tradition (and related tropes and figures such as *ekphrasis*, *perspexitas*, *raepresentatio*, *phantasia*) is not necessarily negotiated in these terms in the tradition but both elements are already present in Quintilian’s and Aristotle’s descriptions of language’s capacity to “place things before the (inner) eye” in *Institutio Oratoria* 8.61-8.71 and Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* 3.11.1. For an overview of the *enargeia/Energeia* distinction in this context, see Müller, “Evidentia Und Medialität,” 61–62.

Breitinger, Brockes, and the young Baumgarten agreed, above all an institution for the *education of attention*.

In the narrative I submit, the poetics of Johann Christoph Gottsched, the subject of my first chapter, serves as a foil that brings into relief the *novelty* of the poetics of attention that would replace his approach – a novelty we might understand both as a focus on the new and strange, and as the historical innovation marked by reorienting poetics toward the new. Although Gottsched draws on the same philosophical resources as Breitinger, he appropriates primarily the restorative aspects of Wolff’s philosophical project, formulating a vision of poetry that is, in a precise sense, *neoclassical*: a poetics that continues to see poetry as the prolongation and imitation of the unchanging order of nature presupposed by classical metaphysics.

Chapter two is devoted to excavating Johann Jakob Breitinger’s amalgamation of *evidentia* with the wonder/attention discourse. Already in Breitinger, a tension arises between the two sides of *evidentia* that together form the basis of the poetics of attention: the forcefulness of poetry is effected by unusual and extraordinary patterns of attention, which – in contrast to the function of wonder in the sciences – begin to be valued in their own right by Breitinger, for their *difference* to habitual modes of perception alone (rather than their effect of clarifying notions). Although, according to Breitinger’s official program, the poetics of attention teaches people how to “see things *reasonably*,”⁶⁹ he outlines a poetic process ultimately more

⁶⁹ “Die Gemähle der Poesie ... geben Anweisung, wie man die Sachen von Stücke zu Stücke mit Vernunft und Ueberlegung anschauen soll”; Breitinger, *Critische Dichtkunst*, 1:28.

prone to teaching how to see things *differently*. I thus read Breitinger's poetics as an early reflection on an irremediable selectivity of attention.

Barthold Heinrich Brockes, whose poetic technique is the subject of my third chapter, understood poetry much like Breitinger as "die Kunst vernünftig sehen zu lernen"⁷⁰ – an art Brockes put to practice in nine of volumes of predominantly descriptive poetry. Close-reading one of Brockes's meta-poetological reflections on attention, I suggest that Brockes understands the education of attention as the training of an embodied skill that I characterize, through Marcel Mauss's concept of "techniques of the body," in terms of a "sensory technique." Reading a further poem's staging a scene of anatomical observation, I probe the idea of a parallelism of structures of objects and structures of attention, suggesting that in scrutinizing objects, the heightened attentiveness of Brockes's poetic gaze hits upon the congealed attention stored up in historical habits of seeing. The final poem I read in this chapter then traces an experiment in poetic perception that results in Brockes's discovery of the contingency of a form of perception mediated by prosthetic technologies and techniques.

My fourth chapter offers a new perspective on Alexander Baumgarten's aesthetics by reading Baumgarten's work through an early project sketch that reveals how his new discipline of aesthetics was conceived in response to the practices of attention I trace throughout my readings. Taking philosophical stock of an eighteenth-century poetics of attention by revisiting Leibniz's account of apperception, Baumgarten conceives works of art in terms of a practice for cultivating embodied attention, joining artistic production and sense perception in a unified

⁷⁰ Brockes, *Irdisches Vergnügen in Gott*, 1740, 6:300–304.

theory of aesthetics. Through Baumgarten's project, the eighteenth-century discourse on attention and wonder is thus transformed into aesthetics as a new discourse on art; a discourse that continues to be critically defined by the intersection of discipline and discovery at the heart of attention.

CHAPTER ONE

THE ONE AND THE MANY:

PERFECTION AND PERCEPTION IN THE POETICS OF JOHANN CHRISTOPH GOTTSCHED

At the beginning of the eighteenth-century, there was widespread agreement in an emerging German literary public that the demand of the day was a systematization of poetics along the lines of the philosophical system of Christian Wolff.⁷¹ Wolff had set out to give philosophical foundations to fields spanning from economics and education to geography and psychology, but had, with the exception of a treatise on architecture, deigned to make only scattered remarks on poetry, art and rhetoric.⁷² Complementing Wolff's doctrinal system with a treatise on poetics would lift German poetry out of what was by general consensus its dismal state, silence the mocking voices from abroad about the poetic ineptitude of the Germans, and give to German lands their own Boileau or Milton.

The first to stake a claim to writing a Wolffian poetics were the Swiss scholars Johann Jakob Bodmer and Johann Jakob Breitinger, who, in the preface to a 1727 treatise on the imagination dedicated to Wolff, announced their intent to treat matters of poetry and rhetoric "in mathematischer Gewißheit,"⁷³ thus extending the project of the Leibnizian (and Wolffian) *mathesis universalis* to the field of poetics. They were, however, beat to the punch by the Leipzig professor Johann Christoph Gottsched, who published his *Versuch einer kritischen*

⁷¹ For a recent account of the literary-political context of early eighteenth-century poetics, see Martus, *Werkpolitik*, 113–60 (here esp. 145).

⁷² See Beiser, *Diotima's Children*, 45–50; and Guyer, "18th Century German Aesthetics."

⁷³ Bodmer, *Von dem Einfluß und Gebrauche der Einbildungs-Krafft*, ix.

Dichtkunst vor die Deutschen, the first systematic treatise on poetics in Wolffian fashion, in 1730. It took Bodmer and Breitinger another ten years to offer a similarly systematic exposition of their poetological endeavors in Breitinger's *Critische Dichtkunst* (1740).

The challenge facing both Gottsched and Bodmer/Breitinger was to square the rich and heterogeneous tradition of Renaissance poetics – represented in German lands by *Schulmeisterpoetiken*,⁷⁴ which by and large reproduced the rhetorical poetics of Renaissance humanism introduced into the German language by Opitz – with the Rationalist philosophy propagated by Wolff. With different emphases, both also tried to integrate developments in contemporary poetics from neighboring traditions, with Gottsched famously favoring the French neo-classicism of Boileau, and Bodmer/Breitinger borrowing from Addison, Dubos, and Muratori.⁷⁵

What gave Gottsched the edge was perhaps not least his discovery that the principle of nature imitation could provide the joint at which to combine traditional poetics with Wolff's philosophical rationalism. In an autobiographical retrospective published late in life,⁷⁶ Gottsched describes his discovery of the principle of nature imitation as a personal revelation. He recalls how, having judged contemporary German poetics as well as Horace's *Ars Poetica* insufficiently methodical, he hit upon Aristotle's mimesis doctrine, and – “nun [...] gieng mit das

⁷⁴ This is the name given to treatises on poetry compiled by teachers in Catholic and Protestant Latin schools (*Lateinschulen*) in German lands. For an overview of this tradition, see Herrmann, *Naturnachahmung und Einbildungskraft*, 13–92; also Birke, “Gottscheds Neuorientierung der deutschen Poetik an der Philosophie Wolffs.”

⁷⁵ See Herrmann, *Naturnachahmung und Einbildungskraft*, 12, 135, 243–47; Möller, *Rhetorische Überlieferung und Dichtungstheorie im frühen 18. Jahrhundert*, 137–39 gives an overview of passages Breitinger borrowed from Muratori .

⁷⁶ This retrospective, which was published as a preface to a revised edition of the second volume of Gottsched's textbook of philosophy, is referenced in Möller, *Rhetorische Überlieferung und Dichtungstheorie im frühen 18. Jahrhundert*, 16.

erwünschte Licht auf”⁷⁷ – things begin to fall into place. With the injunction to imitate nature, Gottsched had found a principle that was equally well established in poetics and metaphysics and could thus provide a link between the two traditions.

This chapter excavates the philosophical foundation of the concept of nature imitation at the heart of Johann Christoph Gottsched’s poetics and situates it in the context of an early eighteenth-century “metaphysics of the artifice.” As I demonstrate in analyses of frontispiece engravings to works by Gottsched and Wolff, this metaphysics assumed an ontological indifference between the spheres of art and nature, understanding art and technology in terms of the reconstruction of a divine architectonic realized in nature. Identifying this notion as the source of Gottsched’s understanding of nature imitation, I then take a closer look at how the principle of nature imitation informs specific poetic techniques and principles, such as description, verisimilitude, decorum, and invention, arguing that the rationalist concept of “perfection” provides the organizing principle behind these various techniques. As a reading of Wolff’s *Deutsche Metaphysik* – the source of Gottsched’s understanding of nature imitation – reveals, the concept of perfection rests on a specific form of attention – but a form of attention that never fails to discover the order of things, and therefore does not surface as a topic of interest in its own right for Gottsched. Gottsched’s poetics rather presupposes a fixed order

⁷⁷ The entire passage bespeaks Gottsched’s desire to systematize poetics on the basis of the nature imitation principle: “Aus diesen kleinen Büchern [two translations of Aristotle’s *Poetics*] nun, gieng mit das erwünschte Licht auf. Ich begriff den großen Grundsatz von der Nachahmung der Natur, welcher der Poesie mit so vielen Künsten gemein ist; und nunmehr fieng ich erst an, auch Horazens *Artem Poeticam* recht zu verstehen, darinn ich vorhin nur Wahrheiten ohne Zusammenhang gesehen hatte. ... Ich brachte also meine Gedanken in Ordnung. ... Je weiter ich darinn kam, destomehr wickelten sich meine Begriffe aus; und alles bestätigte mich in dem wahren aristotelischen Grundsatz, von der Nachahmung der Natur: weil sich alle übrigen Regeln der Dichtkunst daraus herleiten ließen; andere willkührliche Grillen aber, dadurch vom Parnasse verbannet wurde” (Gottsched, *Erste Gründe der gesamten Weltweisheit*, 2: Preface, n. pag).

that pervades the natural as well as the social world, resulting in a poetics that saw the task of the poet as an office with the social function of maintaining and promoting rational order. The chapter will then conclude by suggesting that Gottsched can serve as foil that illuminates why the question of attention would become a central concern for poetics and aesthetics: the reason will be the breakdown of the very sense of order that Gottsched's poetics is at pains to maintain, which will turn the successful mediation between thought and things into an urgent problem.

The Artifice of Nature in the Early Eighteenth Century

In 1733, three years after his essay on critical poetics, Gottsched published a textbook of philosophy entitled *Erste Gründe der gesammten Weltweisheit*. The two-volume textbook is a condensed summary for use in university instruction of the extensive philosophical system of Christian Wolff. Gottsched's compendium seems to have been quite successful; it went through seven editions until 1762 and was, according to Paul Guyer, the most widely adopted textbook of Wolffian philosophy in the eighteenth century.⁷⁸

The book introduces itself to readers with an annotated frontispiece engraving opposite its title page,⁷⁹ which shows the universe as it will be explained by the textbook of philosophy that follows:

⁷⁸ Guyer, "18th Century German Aesthetics."

⁷⁹ The practice had become common in the sixteenth and seventeenth century and drew heavily on the emblematic tradition, which used allegorical elements to illustrate moral or spiritual truths, supported by a brief motto above and an epigram or *subscriptio* below the image. In the first half of the eighteenth century, before frontispiece engravings gradually disappeared from books, the conventional allegorical ciphers characteristic of the emblematic tradition receded in favor of "symbolic" or representational images, which, however, continued to illustrate or reinforce the book's central message in the form of an extended visual metaphor.

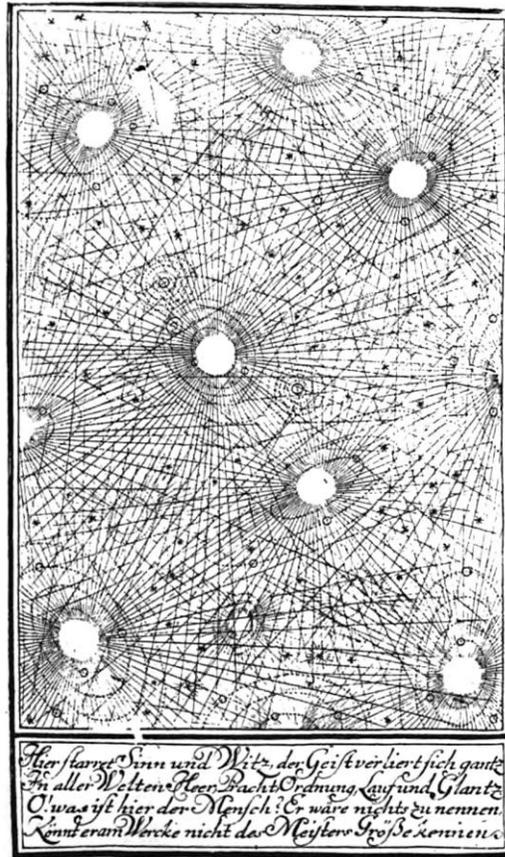


Figure 3: Frontispiece to the first edition of Gottsched's *Erste Gründe der gesamten Weltweisheit*

As if drawn with the help of a compass and ruler, Gottsched's cosmos is composed exclusively of perfectly straight lines and circular or elliptical shapes. The lines traversing the image converge in multiple centers, which are identified by their satellites as central *stars*. The engraving thus shows star systems with planets on orbital planes placed in different angular orientations across a three-dimensional space. The faint contours of a few far away systems are still recognizable in the distance before everything blends into the background of a star-speckled void.

The first remarkable feature of Gottsched's universe is that it lacks, in stark contrast to a long-standing circular or spherical cosmological imaginary, a single center or periphery. Concentric symmetry has given way to a multiplicity of centers in a universe that visibly exceeds

the frame in all directions. The stars of the background, whose difference from the foreground lies only in their greater distance from the observer's position, remind the viewer that this universe goes on into infinity, and that what we get a glimpse of is only a tiny section. The choice of the section is not entirely random: the order of planets in the fourth system from the top and the satellites of these planets identify it as the solar system as it was then known (with six planets; three of them – earth, Jupiter and Saturn – having satellites of their own). As in Fontenelle's speculations about the plurality of worlds, Gottsched's earth has lost its exclusivity; it revolves around one of infinitely many stars, the third satellite out from the center.

For all its incorporation of modern astronomical knowledge, the engraving is, of course, not a "realistic" depiction. Not so much because the proportions of stars and orbits are off, but because things are visible in this universe that not even an astronomical eye floating across space or observers directing their super-telescopes at this corner of the universe from far-away planets could see. Like the zodiac signs and savior figures of earlier cosmographies, some things belong so intimately to the nature of this cosmos that they are depicted as really-existing entities despite their invisibility to a human-like eye: These are, of course, the circular lines tracing the orbits of planets, and the lines of force converging in the gravitational centers of the star systems. What holds this universe together is no longer an encompassing outer circle or sphere but a dense fabric of forces generated by the constituent elements themselves.

It would seem that we have here all the ingredients for a familiar "decentering" narrative of modernity. With the Copernican displacement of the earth from the center of the universe (as a shorthand for the scientific revolution), the cosmological order is thrown off its hinges, resulting simultaneously in an alienation of humans from the cosmic harmony and in an

insult to human self-esteem that in turn provokes self-assertive counter-reactions. As German philosopher and intellectual historian Hans Blumenberg has shown in his analysis of the metaphorization of the astronomical findings of Copernicus – which were understood by Copernicus and his contemporaries as scientific findings perfectly compatible with a divine harmony of the universe, and only retroactively turned into a metaphor of cosmic dislocation – this narrative is simplistic, and misses the various transformations and layers of the cosmological imaginary in the early modern period.⁸⁰ Gottsched’s epigram more than proves this point:

Hier starret Sinn und Witz, der Geist verliert sich gantz
In aller Welten Heer, Pracht, Ordnung, Lauf und Glantz.
O! was ist hier der Mensch? Er wäre nichts zu nennen,
Könnt er am Wercke nicht des Meisters Größe kennen.⁸¹

“Der Geist verliert sich gantz”: at the brink of the first line break, the gazing intellect loses itself – yet not by getting lost, by losing its way, for instance, in the disorienting lines of force crisscrossing the void. The loss of self is rather contained or absorbed by the harmony invoked by the second line. This is not a loss *of*, but a loss *into* the order of the cosmos, a losing oneself in a cosmic spectacle to which the intellect can safely entrust itself. *Geist* is at home in this universe; no traces of “transcendental homelessness” are yet detectable. Splendor, order, and luster are liberally extended to all worlds without detriment to the third satellite of one star in the endless multiplicity of celestial bodies. In its overdetermined evocation of sublime order and regularity, the second line in fact seems to translate a single word – the Greek *kósmos*,

⁸⁰ Blumenberg, *Die Genesis der kopernikanischen Welt*, 272–99.

⁸¹ Frontispiece to Gottsched, *Erste Gründe der gesamten Weltweisheit*, 1983. Translations of quotes in brackets are mine unless otherwise indicated.

which, before becoming a descriptive term for the universe, meant precisely the world-whole as adorned order.

If the first two lines evoke a classical cosmos, the third and fourth pick up unmistakably theological motifs. The pre-ordained purpose of humans in the face of the harmonious creation is to recognize in it the greater glory of God. Humanity “almost” comes to nothing here not because it has been humiliated by the dislocation of its cosmic homestead but because the order of creation is unfathomably larger and more magnificent in comparison.

We can now identify the *historical* lines of forces that intersect in this engraving and animate Gottsched’s understanding of the order of nature suggested in the epigram. The discoveries of post-Copernican astronomy and the telescope technology that made them possible; Newton’s *Principia* with its mathematical formulation of the laws of motion and the universal law of gravitation that displaced earlier vortex theories as an explanation of planetary movement;⁸² the multiplicity of world systems as negotiated in Fontenelle’s *Conversations on the Plurality of Worlds* – all these converge and peacefully co-exist with the classical cosmos and scholastic *ordo*, the divinely instituted order of things. The plurality of worlds and the fact that they can be constructed as a geometrical force field are not only *reconcilable with* – they *constitute* a cosmic harmony that provokes professions of reverence worthy of any concentric harmony of spheres. This universe may be constructed by compass and ruler, but the constructive activity produces nothing of its own; the drawing of the lines of force is a re-tracing, a re-construction that amounts to the re-cognition of the divine architectonic. The eye

⁸² The engraving, in fact, visually references a famous engraving illustrating the Cartesian vortex theory, and updates the older image in terms of Newton’s theory.

that, through the telescope, recognizes the planets and their satellites; the pen that notes and calculates their regularities; the hand that, with ruler and compass, constructs the designs later edged into the copper plate from which the engraving is printed – they all contribute to one great work of reconstructing the master’s work. This is the implicit set of beliefs, the basic preunderstanding of the nature of the world and the place of humans in it that the textbook introduced by the frontispiece will elaborate in the sober language of philosophical reason.

The engraving to the second volume of Christian Wolff’s *Gesammelte kleine philosophische Schriften* seems to have little to do with that of Gottsched, but in fact, I propose, reveals the technical-epistemological apparatus that tacitly supports Gottsched’s harmonious cosmos:

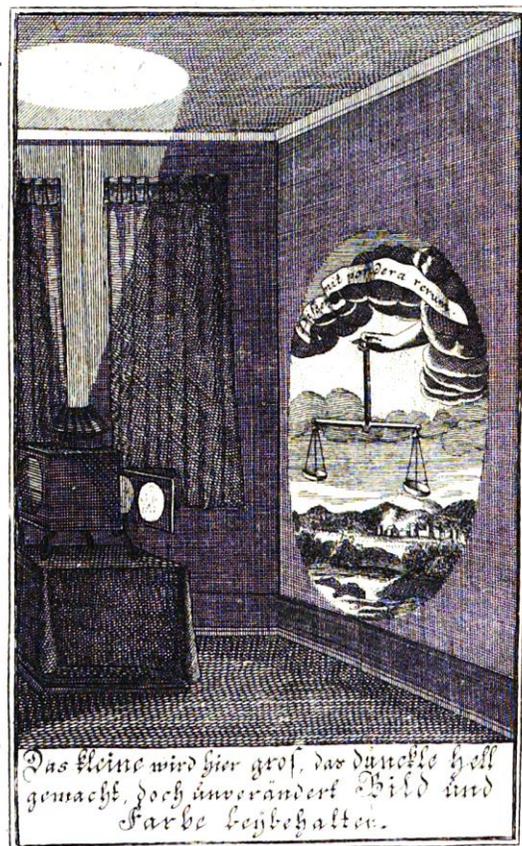


Figure 4: Frontispiece to Christian Wolff’s *Gesammelte kleine philosophische Schriften* (vol. 2, first edition)

From the infinite expanse of outer space, we are transported into an enclosed interior space, with curtains shut to keep the stray light out. The device depicted here is a *laterna magica* or magic lantern, an early type of image projector that used a concave mirror in the back of a light source to project images through a lens in the front.

That a collection of philosophical writings would introduce itself in a dark chamber – or perhaps two dark chambers, if we count the black box of the magic lantern – is perhaps not so surprising if we consider the model of cognition that supports Wolff’s philosophical rationalism. Like much of seventeenth and early eighteenth-century philosophy, Wolff was a strict representationalist, that is, he held that a true understanding of the world was possible only by means of clear and distinct internal representations of things. Jonathan Crary has argued in his study *Techniques of the Observer* that the early modern interiority of clear and distinct perceptions is modeled on the *camera obscura* (an encasement into which light falls through a pinhole so that an inverted image is projected inside).⁸³ In analogy to the *camera obscura*, philosophical interiority is established by walling off the inside from an outside – paradigmatically in Descartes’s shutting out of the external world⁸⁴ – and then admitting the outside back in under controlled conditions, in the form of regulated and calculable representations that pass before the eye of an internal observer. The gesture of the Cartesian withdrawal, the mind’s turning back onto itself and its internal representations, is repeated in the first chapter of Wolff’s *German Metaphysics* as the very foundation of his philosophical

⁸³ Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*, 1990, 25–66.

⁸⁴ The act is audible, as it were, in Descartes’s announcement at the beginning of the Third Meditation that “I will now shut my eyes, stop up my ears, and withdraw all my senses”; Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, 24; different translation quoted in Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*, 1992, 43.

project.⁸⁵ From within the dark chamber of pure or purified thought, Wolff sets out to construct his philosophical edifice as a re-construction of the world outside in clear and distinct internal notions.

The privileged epistemological status of the *camera obscura* might then explain why we find a device commonly used by charlatans and occultists to create illusions so effective that it was known in eighteenth-century Germany as a *Schreckenslaterne* on the frontispiece to (of all things) a collection of philosophical writings on logic. The magic lantern functions like an inverted *camera obscura*. Instead of a projection of the outside into an inside, an image is projected outward onto an external surface.

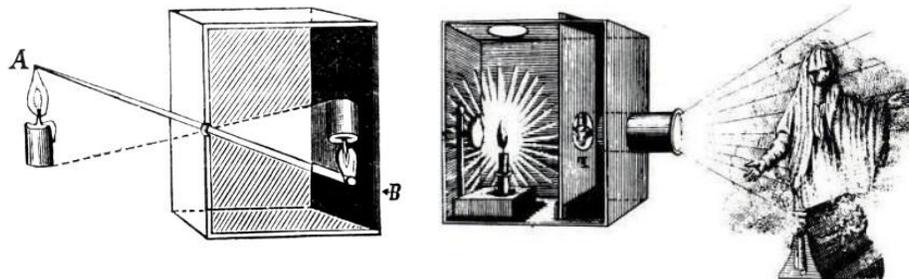


Figure 5: The magic lantern as “inverted” *camera obscura*

Wolff’s frontispiece performs a consistent inversion of the *camera obscura* model. The frontispiece does not simply suggest the process of cognition as modeled on the *camera obscura*, but the process of re-externalizing such cognition into the receptive minds of readers

⁸⁵ Wolff indirectly addresses the *camera obscura* model in his *Deutsche Metaphysik*, 461–462 (§740). Because the physical device lacks an internal observer, he objects to taking the analogy of the mind with a *camera obscura* too far – while making clear that the absence of such an observer is the *only* difference between the soul and a *camera-obscura*-like “representing machine” (“eine Maschine ... darinnen durch die Würckunge des Lichtes ... eine subtile Materie in solche Ordnung gesetzet werde, daß sie den äusserlichen Körper, von dem das Licht herkäme, vorstellte”). On Wolff’s critical engagement with the *camera obscura* model and debates surrounding the *camera obscura* in German early eighteenth-century philosophy, see Olson, “The Camera Obscura and the Nature of the Soul.”

of philosophy books. Reality as admitted through the pinhole and reconstructed within the dark chamber of thought is projected back outside again in similarly controlled, orderly, and calculable fashion. The unrhymed epigram leaves little doubt that what is illustrated here is indeed the *modus operandi* of philosophical discourse:

Das kleine wird hier gros, das dunckle hell gemacht,
doch unverändert Bild und
Farbe beybehalten⁸⁶

As in Gottsched's frontispiece, the deictic marker "here" points both up upward to the engraving and sideways to the text that follows. Its message is clear: Philosophy's magic lantern may scale things up for improved visibility; it may add some light to positive truth in order to elucidate its outlines. But truth's essential image, the colors of the real, are *unverändert beibehalten*, faithfully retained. By all assurances, truth's passage through the lens of the apparatus does not distort, it only brings out the natural face of truth more clearly and distinctly, delineated sharply in its contours as the bright oval of the projection against the darkened wall.

This is a remarkable claim not least because magic lanterns project images through a convex lens, which means that they have to be inserted upside down like slides in a slide projector. Sure enough, however, Wolff's magic lantern seems to constitute an exception to the laws of optical refraction: the slide frame protruding from the projector shows the silhouette of a human figure right side up rather than upside down.⁸⁷ The upright figure underscores the

⁸⁶ Frontispiece to Wolff, *Gesammelte kleine philosophische Schriften* (1737 Halle edition).

⁸⁷ It is unclear whether this is a deliberate or an accidental inaccuracy, or whether the engraving is perhaps supposed to depict a device with an added-on prism that rectifies the image – although I could not find evidence for such a design before the nineteenth century.

larger point that *technical* changes are not supposed to matter, and that the essence of the original is faithfully retained in the projection operation.

If the *camera obscura* with its seemingly passive reception of light is the age's best bet for a neutral medium – a technology that reveals the truth of nature without adding anything of its own to the picture – that claim is here extended to philosophy's magic lantern. It, too, is pronounced a perfect conduit for the transmission of truth that conveys images with the same calculable regularity and veracity with which the *camera obscura* receives them. Even the all-too-obvious waste product of the medium seems visually redeemed in the engraving. The upward projection of light through the opening on top of the encasement necessary for the ventilation of the candle or oil lamp burning inside evokes a light that seems to shine as much from above as from below; as if through an oculus, an opening in domes such as the Pantheon in Rome and, in church architecture, a manifestation of the divine eye. Even the excess of the technical medium thus converges, at least suggestively, with the bright ray of an all-seeing gaze.

And what is the image of truth that philosophy's magic lantern projects onto the chamber walls? From the bottom up there are rocks, trees, a river; a city, token of human civilization, blends into the natural landscape. A mountain range and clouds in the sky form the horizon. But truth does not end with this terrestrial horizon. Above the sky, a realm of bright light shines through what now appear to be celestial rather than terrestrial clouds. The topology of a celestial sphere above a terrestrial landscape is operative in several of the frontispieces to Wolff's various philosophical writings. In fact, the projected image is already the recursion of a frontispiece into a frontispiece: An almost identical engraving of celestial scales discerning the proper measure of things appears at the front of several of Wolff's

editions of his *German Logic*.⁸⁸ If the image projected by the magic lanterns is *already* a commentary on the task of philosophy then the engraving as a whole is a piece of meta-philosophy incarnate in an image. The thesis it projects about philosophy is this: that the light of pure understanding which shines forth from behind the celestial clouds, and the light shining from within the dark chamber of philosophical reflection are, in essence, the same; that philosophy's constructive activity leaves things essentially unchanged, and merely purifies and clears up their inner nature for everyone to see. Just as the artificial light from within the apparatus and the noetic light from the heavens converge in this image as different spectra of the same natural light, so do the two apparatuses. Like the self-correcting scales of logic that register the weight of things without adding any of their own, philosophy's magic lantern is introduced as a neutral device that leaves the essential shape of truth untouched.

Wolff's frontispiece thus advances a precarious claim. It patently displays the artificiality of the philosophical setup in the dark chamber – but only to then deny that this artificial setup does anything more than faithfully reflect the essence of things. The same premise informed Gottsched's frontispiece, where a cosmos constructed with compass and ruler stood for a natural order to which human sense and wit must necessarily defer. As in two still images, the engravings arrest a moment in the history of reflection on knowledge in which the constructedness of knowledge is fully embraced but not perceived as incompatible with understanding things in their inherent natures.

⁸⁸ See the frontispiece to Wolff's *Vernünfftige Gedancken von den Kräfte[n] des menschlichen Verstandes und ihrem richtigen Gebrauche in Erkän[n]t[n]iß der Wahrheit* (Halle 1736 edition).

The motto on the banner above the hand emerging from the clouds in the image projected on the wall underscores this message; and it simultaneously reveals the theological tradition in which Wolff and Gottsched find themselves: The formula “discernit pondera rerum [he discerns the weights of things]”⁸⁹ echoes a verse from the biblical *Book of Wisdom* with a long career in illustrating the scholastic *ordo*-concept, according to which God ordered or arranged all things in measure, number, and weight (“omnia in mensura et numero et pondere disposuisti”).⁹⁰ And this is where the circle closes itself to Gottsched’s earlier frontispiece and to Gottsched’s poetological project. In his *Critische Dichtkunst* Gottsched used a version of the same biblical verse to legitimate nature imitation as the first principle of poetry:

Die Schönheit eines künstlichen Werkes, beruht nicht auf einem leeren Dünkel; sondern sie hat ihren festen und nothwendigen Grund in der Natur der Dinge. Gott hat alles nach Zahl, Maaß und Gewicht geschaffen. Die natürlichen Dinge sind an sich selber schön: und wenn also die Kunst auch was schönes hervorbringen will, so muß sie dem Muster der Natur nachahmen.⁹¹

The same strands of cosmological thinking we discerned in Gottsched’s frontispiece inform his metaphysics of nature imitation. On the ground level, there is the classical belief in the essential completeness, exemplarity, and unchangeability of the cosmos.⁹² The quote from the Book of Wisdom then superimposes the scholastic of *ordo*-concept (the divinely ordained as opposed to humanly posited order of things) on the classical basis. But the passage continues; and it is this

⁸⁹ Frontispiece to Wolff, *Gesammelte kleine philosophische Schriften* (1737 Halle edition).

⁹⁰ Curtius, *Europäische Literatur und lateinisches Mittelalter*, 495–96.

⁹¹ Gottsched, *Versuch einer critischen Dichtkunst*, 183.

⁹² Hans Blumenberg has elaborated the way classical metaphysics – especially of the Aristotelian kind – is defined by the ontological priority and exemplarity of the unchanging order of the cosmos over human production, and the concomitant relegation of *ars* or *technē* to the derivative order of imitation, reflection, and prolongation of the given order of things. See the pertinent works of Hans Blumenberg; esp. the early essays “Nachahmung der Natur” (which ascribes an important role to Breitingen in the demise of nature imitation, 42–45); and “Das Verhältnis von Natur und Technik als philosophisches Problem.”

continuation which reveals how Gottsched updates these long-standing traditions of cosmological thinking:

Das genaue Verhältniß, die Ordnung und richtige Abmessung aller Theile, daraus ein Ding besteht, ist die Quelle aller Schönheit. Die Nachahmung der vollkommenen Natur, kann also einem künstlichen Werke die Vollkommenheit geben, dadurch es dem Verstande gefällig und angenehm wird: und die Abweichung von ihrem Muster, wird allemal etwas ungestaltetes und abgeschmacktes zuwege bringen.⁹³

The language of regularity and proportionality signals that Gottsched now interprets the cosmic order in terms of Wolff's (and his own) philosophical rationalism. The inner measure ("Maß") of the biblical passage have transformed into a measurement ("Abmessung") of its parts, the perception of order among the elements composing a thing. Such perception of order in things understood as composites of parts defines the rationalist master concept of perfection ("Vollkommenheit"), which Gottsched evokes in the following sentence. Perfection is, according to Gottsched's philosophy textbook, defined as "agreement in the manifold" ("Uebereinstimmung des Mannichfaltigen"), or order in the various parts out of which a thing is composed; and beauty is defined as such perfection perceived by the senses.⁹⁴ The point at which Gottsched conjoins the tradition of cosmological thought at the heart of the imitation topos with the philosophy of his time is thus the rationalist master concept of perfection, which understood truth, beauty, and goodness as one – namely in terms of orderly and therefore

⁹³ Gottsched, *Versuch einer critischen Dichtkunst*, 183–84.

⁹⁴ Gottsched, *Erste Gründe der gesamten Weltweisheit*, 1983, 1:220 (§256). The context makes clear that Gottsched understands the manifold in terms of constituent elements or parts. A parallel passage on nature imitation in the *Critische Dichtkunst* cites the definition of perception verbatim: "Die Regeln nämlich, die auch in freyen Künsten eingeführet worden, kommen nicht auf den bloßen Eigensinn der Menschen an; sondern sie haben ihren Grund in der unveränderlichen Natur der Dinge selbst; in der Uebereinstimmung des Mannigfaltigen, in der Ordnung und Harmonie"; *Versuch einer critischen Dichtkunst*, 174.

rationally comprehensible part-whole relationships. Technically speaking, “imitation of nature” for Gottsched thus implies the *reflection* of such orderly part-whole relationships in works of art.

Nature Imitation as Poetic Technique: Matters of Form and Content

After this metaphysical prelude, it remains to be seen how the imitation principle operates in Gottsched’s account of poetic craft.⁹⁵ In the fourth chapter of his *Dichtkunst*, Gottsched distinguishes three types of poetic nature imitation. The first type consists in description or vivid portrayal of absent things.⁹⁶ It is the least important (“nur die geringste”) of the three types of imitation for Gottsched; a basic propaedeutic that is necessary but not sufficient for producing good poetry. The second – the dramatic portrayal of human nature (human speech, action and passion) – already constitutes a more significant and challenging part of the poetic craft.⁹⁷ A poet must combine the rules of decorum – the principle that the diction of the literary personnel has to be appropriate to their social status and established literary conventions⁹⁸ – with personal observation and faithfully depict “sowohl die Natur der Affekten als die Pflichten aller Menschen in allen Ständen.”⁹⁹

⁹⁵ In Gottsched’s usage as in the general usage of the time, “poetic” and “poetry” is, of course, not limited to poetry in the modern sense, but refers to all epic, dramatic and lyric genres of literature.

⁹⁶ Gottsched, *Versuch einer critischen Dichtkunst*, 195–96.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 196–98.

⁹⁸ The rules of *decorum* are invoked in the language of propriety (“sich schicken”) and natural modes of speaking (“natürlichen Redensarten”). The call to imitate “nature” when depicting human action here entails not least an injunction against the affected mannerisms (“gekünstelt”) of the Baroque poetry of Lohenstein, the favorite target of early eighteenth century poeticians, and an orientation toward the natural as the “ungezwungen” (not forcibly contrived).

⁹⁹ Gottsched, *Versuch einer critischen Dichtkunst*, 198–201. Gottsched seems firmly convinced that the nature of affects and civic duties do not conflict with each other, but converge precisely in human nature.

A poet who thus combines observation and *decorum* will also be a successful imitator of nature in respecting “Wahrscheinlichkeit.”¹⁰⁰ The requirement of verisimilitude – another topos with roots in Aristotle’s poetics with special significance for the French neo-classical tradition Gottsched admired – prescribes depicting things as they *typically* and thus *plausibly* occur. The basis of verisimilitude is not yet the probabilistic likelihood of an occurrence,¹⁰¹ but the general course of nature, including the rules of decorum thought to exemplify “social” nature. While verisimilitude does not count as its own kind of nature imitation in Gottsched’s imitation chapter, it is easy to see why Gottsched can approximate and even assimilate it to nature imitation in other places of the *Dichtkunst*.

The most important type of nature imitation for Gottsched is the third: the invention of a good plot or story (“Fabel”).¹⁰² Such identification of “nature imitation” with “invention” might irritate in the light of the familiar modern meanings of the words. In the poetic discourse of the time, it is in fact a common conception. Where “invention” (*erfinden*) entails finding (*finden*) as much as fabrication, and “nature” indicates less the totality of facts than the principle of order and coherence of things, the terms do not necessarily imply a contradiction. “Nature”-adequate invention in this sense is, however, already implied by the requirement of verisimilitude. More difficult are cases in which the plot clearly runs counter to the general course of nature; as, for instance, in the moral fables of Aesop, which are among Gottsched’s preferred literary genres. The dominant strategy for incorporating non-verisimilar plots within

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 201.

¹⁰¹ Rüdiger Campe has traced the differentiation between between probabilistic *Wahrscheinlichkeit* and aesthetic *Schein des Wahren* beginning in the eighteenth century in a comprehensive study titled *Spiel der Wahrscheinlichkeit*.

¹⁰² Gottsched, *Versuch einer kritischen Dichtkunst*, 202–23.

an understanding of nature imitation is to disregard the depicted events and focus instead on the moral truth encapsulated in the plot. What is required of depicted events is then only a certain credibility or self-consistency, as long as they manage to convey a moral truth readily discernible underneath the strange narrative: “eine Fabel [ist] die Erzählung einer unter gewissen Umständen möglichen, aber nicht wirklich vorgefallenen Begebenheit, darunter eine nützliche moralische Wahrheit verborgen liegt.”¹⁰³ Good plots, in short, fulfill the *docere* or *prodesse* function ascribed to poetry by conveying a useful moral truth to the audience.

The crucial question is how all of these various poetic strategies Gottsched calls “nature imitation” – vivid description, representation of human passions according to the laws of decorum, the observance of verisimilitude, the invention of a plot that contains a true moral precept – participate in nature imitation as the supposed essence of poetry. Is there a substantial connection that holds them together, or is Gottsched simply assembling heterogeneous aspects of the craft of poetry under a nominal umbrella term?

With remarkable regularity, scholarship on Gottsched’s *Dichtkunst* diagnoses a problematic discrepancy between a “substantial” (*inhaltlich*) and a “formal” meaning of nature imitation. Hans-Peter Herrmann, for instance, claims that Gottsched’s nature imitation constitutes predominantly a formal principle for regulating poetic invention. Although he acknowledges that the first two kinds of nature imitation also include “substantial” (*inhaltlich*) moments concerned with empirical nature, nature imitation is, in Herrmann’s view, mostly concerned with formal conventions of literary representation (“konventionelle[r] Regelkanon

¹⁰³ Ibid., 204.

und nicht ... eine außerhalb des Menschen für sich existierende 'Natur'").¹⁰⁴ Karl-Heinz Finken sees the imitation principle as eclectically amalgamating opposing conceptions of truth as correspondence (to empirical reality) and internal formal coherence (of propositions), puzzled "welche enge Verknüpfung zwei völlig unterschiedliche Wahrheitskonzeptionen eingehen können."¹⁰⁵ In a recent article on "The Shifting Forms of Mimesis in Johann Christoph Gottsched's *Dichtkunst*," Sarah Ruth Lorenz finds Gottsched concerned with nature in its "empirical particularities" as well as with the "harmonious balance of its manifold elements," again emphasizing the heterogeneity and flexibility of Gottsched's conception.¹⁰⁶

More interesting than the question which account gets Gottsched more or less right is the question what prompts commentators to come up with similar diagnoses of a split at the heart of Gottsched's nature imitation. We will venture that the answer lies in an irritation resulting from a clash between Gottsched's understanding of nature in terms of "perfections" and the expectations modern commentators bring to the text. In his evocations of the "nature" upon which to model the productions of poetry, Gottsched repeatedly appeals to principles (such as the rules of literary and social decorum, the rational order and proportionality of

¹⁰⁴ Herrmann, *Naturnachahmung und Einbildungskraft*, 134.

¹⁰⁵ Finken, *Die Wahrheit der Literatur*, 59.

¹⁰⁶ Lorenz, "Shifting Forms of Mimesis in Johann Christoph Gottsched's *Dichtkunst*," 95. This typology disregards approaches which make no serious effort to historicize the principle of nature imitation in the first place. In his book-length study on *Mimesis, Imitation, Nachahmung*, Jürgen Petersen, for instance, Petersen reads the history of the topos in the period in question and beyond as the history of a misunderstanding. He is puzzled that, at the same time and often in the same breath as calling for *Nachahmung der Natur*, seventeenth and early eighteenth century poetics grant liberties to poetics invention that seem incommensurable with the precept of imitation, which he understands in terms of a strict copy of a nature he takes to mean something like totality of existing things. Taking this narrow sense to be the only legitimate meaning of *Nachahmung*, he sets out to prove that the term is a dead relic without actual poetological significance that was misintroduced in the German tradition; see for instance *Mimesis, Imitatio, Nachahmung*, 137–139, 259–267. For much of his study, Petersen wonders how a whole tradition could have possibly misused the term, apparently never asking whether this might not indicate a problem with his own point of departure.

things) that seem to have little to do with nature in any recognizable sense. They appear precisely as arbitrary “forms” imposed on the “content” of reality. When Gottsched, however, at other times appeals to the concrete observation of things in nature, this surely looks like a duplicity in his conception.

It is important to realize how and why this is not the case for Gottsched. As foundational as the distinction between “form” and “content” would become for later eighteenth-century aesthetics, and as self-evident as it appears to meta-aesthetic sensibilities formed in an engagement with that tradition, it is absent from Gottsched’s *Dichtkunst* as a poetic and an epistemological or ontological category. The difference between the “form” under which nature is represented and the “content” that is being represented – the difference that structures the entire conceptual apparatus with which commentators try to capture the functioning of the imitation topos – simply does not get made. This does not mean that Gottsched is incapable of distinguishing the “real” from the “ideal,” “is” from “ought,” or natural things from the nature of things. The point is that this distinction is made differently, or rather, that a different distinction is made. If Gottsched explicitly reflects on this difference, he distinguishes between nature *in its perfections* and nature in its less than perfect realizations. To better understand this distinction and the view of nature that informs it, it will be necessary to dig deeper into the philosophical concept of perfection.

Wolff’s Metaphysics of “Perfection” and the Default of Attention

Christian Wolff’s *Vernünfftige Gedancken von Gott, der Welt und der Seele des Menschen, auch allen Dingen überhaupt* (better known under its abbreviated title as *Deutsche*

Metaphysik or *German Metaphysics*) can lay claim to the title of the most influential work of philosophy in eighteenth-century Germany before the publication of Kant's *Critiques*.¹⁰⁷ As the groundwork of Wolff's comprehensive system of philosophy, it became foundational for decades of scholarly discourse in Germany far beyond the discipline of philosophy in the narrow sense. Wolff's philosophy is generally understood as a systematization of Leibniz's philosophical endeavors.¹⁰⁸ While it remains open to dispute whether it is best understood as a flattening systematization or an original continuation of Leibniz's thought, it is uncontroversial that Leibniz is the main source of inspiration for Wolff's philosophical project, and that most of Wolff's ideas have direct precursors in Leibniz's writings. Wolff's influence is not least in evidence in Gottsched's own textbook of philosophy, which reads in large parts like an abbreviated summary and (sometimes verbatim) adoption of Wolffian ideas. While Gottsched's and Wolff's philosophical outlooks are thus largely identical, the inner coherence of the metaphysical picture can be gathered much more clearly from Wolff's writings.

The second chapter of Wolff's *German Metaphysics* begins to paint what we might call a cosmos of essences. Wolff's own marginal paragraph summaries mark the way stations of his demonstration: "Das Wesen ist der Dinge ist nothwendig;" "Das nothwendige ist ewig;" "Das Wesen ist ewig;" "Das nothwendige ist unveränderlich;" "Das Wesen ist unveränderlich."¹⁰⁹ As necessary, eternal and unchangeable – Wolff demonstrates that these attributes imply each

¹⁰⁷ Beiser, *Diotima's Children*, 65; Guyer, "18th Century German Aesthetics." That Gottsched's *Dichtkunst* must be understood through the philosophical system of Wolff has been recognized above all by American historians of philosophy interested in the tradition of aesthetic rationalism such as Fred Beiser and Paul Guyer.

¹⁰⁸ For more on Wolff's complex relationship with Leibniz, see Hettche, "Christian Wolff." While the traditional (post-Romantic) view of Wolff is that of an unoriginal, pedantic, and professorial philistine who pressed Leibniz's philosophy into a narrow system, recent assessments of Wolff have been more favorable.

¹⁰⁹ Wolff, *Deutsche Metaphysik*, 21–22 (§38–43).

other – Wolff’s essences thus possess all the properties of the essences of classical philosophy. And yet they have a markedly different consistency: they are neither the ideal prototypes of the Platonic tradition nor the substantial forms of Aristotelianism. For Wolff, the essence of a thing is its specific *possibility* (“Das Wesen eines Dinges [ist] seine Möglichkeit”), or *how it is possible* (“wie es möglich ist”).¹¹⁰

Wolff’s concept of possibility as it defines essences combines two senses of *Möglichkeit*. It implies *logical possibility* (*possibilitas*), the freedom from contradiction of the (essential) properties of a thing.¹¹¹ But possibility also refers to *how a thing can be actual* in the sense of *how it can be made*.¹¹² This duplicity at the heart of Wolff’s essence concept between formal logic and maker’s knowledge is crucial; not least because the foregrounding of one or the other aspect is critical to the difference between Gottsched’s poetics and that of his rival Breitinger.

How the two aspects are *combined* in Wolff becomes clear on the basis of Wolff’s favorite example, a triangle. Line by line, Wolff demonstrates, we can construct a polygon with three angles in our minds without running into a contradiction. The essence of a triangle (“polygon with three angles”) thus consists in its possibility, i.e. its *constructability without contradiction*. Other, non-essential properties of the triangle (such as an angle sum of 180°) are

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 19 (§35); see also §16, §34-44.

¹¹¹ Wolff derives the concept of possibility out of the principle of non-contradiction. Everything that does not contain contradictory determinations is thus possible in a wide sense; Ibid., 7–8 (§12).

¹¹² Ibid., 19 (§35). In his transcription of Wolff’s definition, Gottsched makes this second sense even more explicit than Wolff. He explains the “innere Möglichkeit” that defines essence as “wie ein Ding entsteht, oder wie es gemacht wird,” and illustrates this with the making of gun powder from basic compounds; Gottsched, *Erste Gründe der gesamten Weltweisheit*, 1983, 1:212–213 (§232). Wolff later defines the essences of a window as the fact that it is possible to make an opening into a wall to let the light in – “weil .. sich eine Eröffnung ... in die Mauren *machen lässt*”; Wolff, *Deutsche Metaphysik*, 96 (§177) (my emphasis). The essence of a window is thus the fact that it can be made. On the tension in Wolff’s possibility-concept as a definition of essence, see Aichele, “Allzuständigkeit oder Beschränkung?,” 70–71.

demonstrably derived from the instruction to draw a polygon with three angles.¹¹³ In contrast, we would find ourselves unable to construct a polygon with only two angles without running into a contradiction: it is impossible (in Euclidean geometry) to draw a figure with two angles that also encloses a plain. A two-sided polygon would thus be without essence; it is not a constructible thing. Constructing a polygon with three (or more) angles, of course, again constitutes a specific possibility. A rectangle is therefore a thing with an essence, though with a different essence than a triangle. The essence of a thing is thus equivalent to the principle of how a thing can be assembled without contradiction in the space of pure thought – a things' specific logical-geometrical construction design.

Sub specie metaphysicae, all things have the shape of such logical-geometrical construction designs for Wolff. "Wooden iron" is contradictory (inconceivable) and thus impossible *in the same way* as two circles that intersect and have the same center.¹¹⁴ This example is telling not least because it shows that things we might consider as prototypically "material" as iron and wood are matters of formal logic for Wolff (Greek "hýlē" or wood is, after all, the grandfather of the word "matter"). The order of logic and the order of being are thus coextensive in Wolff's metaphysics; the universe is logic incarnate.¹¹⁵ Of course, not every possible thing is also actually incarnated. As in Leibniz, the transition from possibility to actuality is managed by God *qua* divine reason. Because God is perfectly wise and perfectly

¹¹³ Wolff, in fact, distinguishes between "accidents," or non-essential properties that follow necessarily from the essence (such as the triangle's angle sum); and "modes," non-essential properties that do not follow from the essence (such as a triangle's size). Wolff, *Deutsche Metaphysik*, 20–21 (§37); Hettche, "Christian Wolff."

¹¹⁴ Wolff, *Deutsche Metaphysik*, 7–8 (§12).

¹¹⁵ Schmidt describes this principle by the shorthand of "logical-ontological equivalence." See Schmidt, *Sinnlichkeit und Verstand*, 21.

good, the actual world must constitute the most perfect combination of compossible or co-constructible things (of possibilities that do not contradict each other). While the actual world can thus no longer claim ontological exclusivity or metaphysical necessity, it retains the claim to a maximum amount of perfection.¹¹⁶

What, then, is perfection? Wolff defines perfection as a special kind of order. Order consists in the regularity of a manifold¹¹⁷ – when many things together form a pattern, an arrangement of elements that is recognizable as governed by an underlying ordering principle. Wolff's example is an ordered procession of people (as opposed to a chaotic crowd): if people walk in pairs, this is an element that repeats itself throughout the parade; if the more noble person always walks on the right, there is an additional structural principle that makes the procession even more ordered (i.e. the distribution of parts even more determined); if the nobles go first and the less noble ones follow in accordance with their rank, the degree of order increases, and so on.¹¹⁸ Order prevails when there is a reason (*Grund*) why every part in a manifold inhabits the position it does; and because every element in an order occupies its place for a reason, order is always intelligible.¹¹⁹ Since, according to the principle of sufficient reason, everything in actuality has its reason, everything in actuality has an intelligible order. Order characterizes actuality in contrast to dreams, and is therefore also the criterion for truth.¹²⁰

¹¹⁶ Wolff, *Deutsche Metaphysik*, 579–644 (§939–1047).

¹¹⁷ "Aehnlichkeit des mannigfaltigen in dessen Folge auf und nach einander," (ibid., 68 (§132)). "Regularity" should be understood literally here, as the quality of being *rule-governed*.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 68–73 (§133–138). More about this strange example later. It already indicates that metaphysical and social order are never far apart in Wolff's (or in Gottsched's) universe.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 73 (§139).

¹²⁰ In truth or actuality, everything has a sufficient reason why it is thus and not otherwise, while in dreams, change occurs without regularity or reason, things can metamorphose one into the other "ohne daß man sagen kann, wie es zugegangen"; ibid., 74–76 (§142–143); here, 75 (§143). Dreams are difference without identity; order is identity

Wolff's concept of order thus approaches the identity of conceivability and actuality from the opposite direction, beginning with existing things rather than the laws of logic and geometry, but arrives at the same result. Everything in the world has a *ratio* (*Grund*, reason) by virtue of which it simultaneously *is* and *can be conceived*.

If "order" determines the unity of a manifold in terms of formal logic, perfection is the specific unity of a manifold prescribed by the *essence* (the logical-geometrical construction design) of a thing. Order is regularity pure and simple ("Aehnlichkeit des mannigfaltigen");¹²¹ perfection is such regularity considered in its agreement or *togetherness toward the kind of thing it constitutes* ("Zusammenstimmung des mannigfaltigen")¹²² – what a specific regularity "amounts to" or "adds up to."¹²³ Reflecting Leibniz's and his own attempts to reconcile mechanistic and teleological modes of explanation, Wolff oscillates between formal requirements and purposive ones; the "how" of a thing's specific constructability or essence and the "what for" or the usefulness of a thing. Perfection is thus order, judged ("beurtheilet") on the basis of a thing's general construction design; what *kind* of thing a recognized regularity is supposed to incarnate.

"Perfection" in this sense can be judged in two regards according to Wolff.¹²⁴ First, by holding up the unity of a manifold constituted by an essence to the highest perfection, or the

in difference. It is order *qua* truth, identity in difference, that guarantees that the world is shaped like the human understanding; and that the world can in principle, however unfinishable the project may be, be (re)constructed and thus understood from the movements of the stars down to the structure of a blade of grass.

¹²¹ Ibid., 68 (§132).

¹²² Ibid., 79 (§152).

¹²³ ("vielerley Theilen ... diese insgesamt als ihre Zusammensetzung gehen da hinaus, daß"). 152

¹²⁴ These two ways of judging perfection point back to the double Aristotelian and Platonist genealogy of the concept. The Aristotelian lineage points to the concept of *τελειωτής*, the goodness of a thing relative to the kind of thing it is; the Platonic heritage to the goodness of a thing relative to the supreme good. The origins of

divine. Different classes of things thus come with different degrees of essential perfection (e.g., any clock is more perfect than any hammer). The second regard is more consequential for Wolff: perfection in this sense measures the extent to which a particular thing actualizes *its* essence, how “perfectly” it instantiates its own kind (there are, for example, more or less perfect clocks; more or less perfect hammers).¹²⁵ Different degrees of actualization are possible because a thing’s essential determinations (its general construction design) leave a number of specific determinations open (a clock, for instance, may be constructed with a more or less complex mechanism, be more or less exact at telling the time, while still remaining a clock). Perfection measures how felicitously these contingent determinations are “filled in” in realizing an essence.¹²⁶

The concept of perfection is thus the linchpin of Wolff’s metaphysical edifice. It sanctions logical possibilities as divine possibilities, and it ensures that the actual world can be exhaustively understood in terms of these possibilities, as their (more or less perfect) instantiation.

Now, the operation of judging perfection in the sense of goodness relative to its own kind can occur in two directions (which Wolff describes in terms strikingly similar to Kant’s

“perfection” as a metaphysical concept roughly coincides with the genealogy we traced for Gottsched’s nature concept above: the Scholastics combined the Aristotelian conception with a (Neo-)Platonist tradition by conceiving of God as *ens perfectissimum*, the most perfect being in relation to which all other things count as relative imperfections that mirror (reflect, but imperfectly) the perfection of God. See the article in *Ästhetische Grundbegriffe* by Früchtel and Mischer, “Vollkommen/Vollkommenheit.”

¹²⁵ This sense of perfection and its instantiation thus maps on the genus-species-individual classificatory scheme.

¹²⁶ Another complication is added in “composite perfections” in which the perfections of parts get into each other’s way and so that the perfection of the whole requires a compromise between the relative perfections of parts. This is also how Wolff (like Gottsched) explains exceptions to rules, as well as imperfections in the “composite perfections” that is the actual world: as relative imperfections required to allow for another greater perfection to be realized.

distinction between determining and reflective judgment in the introduction to the *Third*

Critique):

Die Vollkommenheit kan auf zweyerley Weise erkannt werden. Einmahl geschieht es, wenn ich den Grund daraus sie beurtheilet wird, zuerst endecke, darnach die Beschaffenheit des mannigfaltigen untersuche und gegen den Grund des Vollkommenheit halte. In der andern Manier muß ich zuerst die Beschaffenheit des mannigfaltigen untersuchen, und alles, was man davon angemercket, miteinander vergleichen, um daraus den Grund der Zusammenstimmung zu schließen.¹²⁷

One can either descend from the top down, knowing the thing's essence first and then holding an empirical manifold up to that essence to judge the perfection of its instantiation – or one can ascend from the bottom up, inferring the essence from the given manifold to extrapolate the judging ground proper to that manifold. Both operations link up actual manifolds with the possible designs they are supposed to embody. In marked contrast to Kant, this operation of linking up a manifold with its judging ground always succeeds in both directions; there is, in Wolff, no place for an essential excess of a manifold to the design it embodies. The concept of perfection ensures precisely that the differences between the two levels is always one of degree, of a relatively *imperfect actualization* of an essential construction design rather than an actual excess to or deviation from it.

Wolff's *examples* of deductive and inductive determinations of the ground of perfection are a *window* and an *eye*. His elucidation of these examples is innocent enough. We know, Wolff writes, that it is the nature of a window to be good both for the illumination of enclosed chambers ("Gemächer zu erleuchten") and, in a second instance, for looking outside from

¹²⁷ Wolff, *Deutsche Metaphysik*, 82 (§157).

within such chambers (“zur Aussicht dienen”).¹²⁸ As a composite perfection, we thus judge the window’s perfection by two determining grounds: how well the parts that make up the window fit together to fulfill these two essential determinations. With the eye, the directionality is reversed. We dissect the anatomy of the eye and find that its parts are so arranged that it is good for receiving distinct impressions of outside things.¹²⁹

This calls for commentary. After all, we just identified perfection as a matter of “seeing together” a manifold of parts under a specific unity, and thus a procedure for ordering and selection in the field of vision as the privileged epistemic sense. Wolff’s two examples, in fact, evoke the two components of the *camera obscura* model of the mind: the window in an enclosed space (the *camera obscura*’s pinhole) which illuminates the dark chamber inside (“Gemächer zu erleuchten”), where internal representations serve as a basis for knowing the outside world (“zur Aussicht dienen”);¹³⁰ and the inner eye which observes the projections of light inside the dark chamber and turns impressions into distinct perceptions.

Wolff’s examples thus betray the epistemic apparatus at the heart of the ontology of perfections.¹³¹ The critical moment in how this apparatus culls perfections from manifolds of

¹²⁸ Ibid., 82–84 (§158).

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ In the case of a philosopher for whom (as Wolff feels obliged to clarify in the paragraph following his illustrations) examples do no more than illustrate a general rule, no *bona fide* interpretation would read Wolff’s examples in isolation. And yet this is precisely the moment for a little bit of bad faith, some well-placed suspicion of Wolff’s explicit procedure. Wolff’s examples often seem too conspicuously overdetermined to pass as mere illustrations of metaphysical matters. Remember Wolff’s illustration of “order”: its emphasis on the precedence of nobles in an orderly procession reads like a not so subtle wink to future hermeneuts of suspicion that what he conceives as the metaphysical structure of the world is in fact (depending on the metaphor of choice) rooted in, reflects or participates in a historically specific social order that allots to every person their proper place in a hierarchy. And yet the same unfaithful examples that threaten pull the rug out from under Wolff’s metaphysical pretense paradoxically also account for what makes his metaphysics more than the pedantic reflections of a peri-

sensation is contained in the brief injunction in the passage above, “alles, was man davon angemerket, miteinander vergleichen.”¹³² The little addition summarizes, in one phrase, the cognitive function of attention (*Aufmerksamkeit*) as understood by Wolff and his school. It consists of two moments represented, in more extensive accounts, by two types of attention.¹³³ The first consist in the inner eye’s taking note (*anmerken*) of the features of which a thing is composed by selectively foregrounding them in perception. The second, protracted form of attention considers these features in relation to each other (*miteinander vergleichen*) and thus provides the basis for the understanding’s judgement about what perfection a thing embodies.¹³⁴ Attention is of cognitive relevance – and Wolff only mentions it – in the second case, when one begins with a manifold of sensation and has to infer the perfection on this basis.¹³⁵ The basic function of attention in its different forms is thus to process sensations in such a way that they can be understood as embodying the constructions designs (essences) the mind can think up within the dark chamber, when the pinhole is shut.

Attention, we could summarize, mediates between empirical manifolds and possible essences. And at least in principle, it always does so (so the assumption of Gottsched and Wolff)

wigged professor. They indicate, inadvertently, that this metaphysics in fact reaches deep into contemporary practices, and can thus be read as articulating those practices – and how the world appears to him in their light.

¹³² Wolff, *Deutsche Metaphysik*, 82 (§157).

¹³³ They are “attention” pure and simple and attention *qua* reflection. See the introduction for a summary of Wolff’s account.

¹³⁴ See Wolff, *Deutsche Metaphysik*, 149–152 (§268–273); Gottsched transcribes Wolff’s account of attention in *Erste Gründe der gesamten Weltweisheit*, 1983, 1:488–489 (§907–909).

¹³⁵ By mediating between manifolds of sensation and “possible essences,” attention is crucial to the acquisition of *empirical* knowledge – so crucial, in fact, that being the product of attention is, for Gottsched and Wolff, the *definiens* of empirical knowing: “Die Erfahrung nennet man dasjenige Erkenntniß, was wir durch die Aufmerksamkeit auf unsre Empfindungen erlangen.” Gottsched, *Erste Gründe der gesamten Weltweisheit*, 1983, 1:155 (§126). Wolff formulates the same thought but renders *Aufmerksamkeit* as “acht haben” in this case; *Deutsche Metaphysik*, 181 (§325 [misprinted as 125]).

successfully. This notion of attention as seamless mediator between thought and things is the reason why *Aufmerksamkeit* plays no significant role in Gottsched's poetics. Because the moment of perception is of no inherent interest, poetry is not concerned with the *process* of perception but with conveying *recognized perfections* as they are recorded in the registers of philosophy; or with conveying truths (perfections as recognized by reason) in the form beauty (perfections as represented to the senses).

The Coherency of Gottsched's Concept of Nature Imitation

If we return to the irritation that prompted this excursion into Wolffian metaphysics, we can see that the supposed conflict between a merely "formal" level of nature imitation concerned with order and regularity and a "substantial" one that deals with nature in its empirical particulars vanishes before the background of Gottsched's own understanding of the nature of things. Seen through the pinhole of Wolff's and his own metaphysics, particulars are not essentially separate from a rational order of things, but exist precisely as more or less perfectly particularized rational essences. As the observance of perfections, the concept of nature imitation can accommodate the proper representation of things in empirical nature (Gottsched's first kind of nature imitation) as well as proper representation of the perfections and relative imperfections inherent in human nature (Gottsched's second kind of nature imitation). To represent things in accordance with verisimilitude (the next form of "nature imitation") simply entails not particularizing the general natures of things all the way down to its minutest determinations. This leaves Gottsched's poet room to exceed existing things without leaving the wider nexus of nature at all: when (empirical) nature fails to be perfectly

natural, for instance, poets can produce works that are “more natural” (less limited by their particularization) than (empirical) nature herself; i.e. they can produce works that reflect the rational order in a purer and more typical form than this sometimes happens in the real world, where different perfections get into each other’s way and mutually block their full actualization.¹³⁶ In the case of fables featuring speaking animals, included in the final kind of nature imitation (the invention of a plot), a certain degree of artificial imperfection is allowed – yet only as a necessary detour to return to the order of perfections (the moral truth contained in the fable) by way of a representation that is intentionally imperfect on the surface. Once the true meaning behind the fable is discovered, everything resolves again into the order of natural perfections.

The distinction between form and content is thus foreign to Gottsched’s poetics, and we apply it to its conception of nature only at our own peril. And yet some such peril – the sparks produced by a little retroactive cross-wiring – might be just what we need to illuminate its contours as they appear to us. If we thus try to explain the absence of the distinction by means of the distinction, it appears to result from an inability of conceiving of form, the *how* of perception, conception and artistic representation, “as such.” Gottsched sees the world through the window of perfection, but he does not see the window itself. The forms of conception and perception, the designs for “seeing manifolds together” and judging them as an ordered unity – all the moments associated, in Wolff, with the labor of attention – never come into view as *mere* forms that could also be exchanged for others, or against which the actual

¹³⁶ Wolff, *Deutsche Metaphysik*, 86–88 (§162–165).

“content” of reality could be mobilized. As a result, every deviation of empirical manifolds from their pre-given judging grounds can be contained *in* and *as* an imperfection. A thing’s relative non-conformance to the order of perfections attests to a relatively low degree of instantiation of an essence-form, rather than, for instance, an incongruence between form and content, or an excess of the latter over the former.¹³⁷ As we also saw in Gottsched’s explanation of poetic nature imitation, deviation from the blueprint of the order of nature leads nowhere, to a merely privative *lack* of being (rather than, say, the representation of content under a different form).

The same absence of a conception of form “as such” is also responsible for the irritation noted above – that principles that are “for us” as transparently culturally and socially constructed as the principles of decorum can count as nature imitation for Gottsched. Herrmann concluded from this that imitation of nature was largely a formal principle.¹³⁸ Yet conventional forms of social and literary propriety do not come into view “as” mere conventions in Gottsched.¹³⁹ The thought that one might choose to exchange the conventions of proper literary representations for others and represent or conceive of things under a *different* set of forms is never seriously considered. As a consequence, Gottsched’s “nature” of

¹³⁷ This is clearly legible in Wolff’s explanation of “essence.” If a thing changes, this does not constitute a change in its essence, but it means either that the limitations *qua* (contingent) determinations of this essence change, or that a thing *becomes a different essence*. Otherness to essence thus always means another essence, not essential otherness. With actually existing things in space, Wolff explains that all that really happens when a thing becomes a different essence is that the first essence “recedes back” into the realm of possibility, and a second essence “transitions into” actuality from there. There is thus in the metaphysical realm never any essential change, only being: “Einem Wesen kann nichts Fremdes mitgetheilet werden.” See *ibid.*, 22–23 (§42–43), 56 (§108), 58 (§115, should be §113).

¹³⁸ Herrmann, *Naturnachahmung und Einbildungskraft*, 134.

¹³⁹ In the context of the *Critische Dichtkunst*, the passage on nature imitation quoted at length above is precisely meant to refute suspicions that the taste and artistic habits of the Athenians might be relative to historical circumstance and change with it.

perfections includes cultural norms and social hierarchies that we are accustomed to viewing as its very antithesis. Forms are naturally or divinely given; they belong to the realm of the non-human, or rather, the “not humanly changeable” (since, as we have seen, humans have their proper nature just as or even above everything else): they are, in short, nature.

In Conclusion

Gottsched accepts the invitation of Wolffian metaphysics to understand essences in terms of logical-geometrical construction designs. The metaphysics behind his poetics hinges on the fact that he understands these structures as the *natures* of things – that the contingency latent in understanding essence in terms of possibility remains contained by the divine sanction of the current world as the best one possible. In his belief that rational construction designs indeed provide a “firm and necessary ground of nature” that exhaustively explains empirical manifolds, Gottsched’s poetics remains faithful to the harmonizing and restorative aspects of Leibniz’s and Wolff’s projects – their attempt to reconstitute a form of classical metaphysics on the basis of modern rationality.

Ex negativo, Gottsched’s poetics of perfection can illuminate the role of *Aufmerksamkeit* in poetics and aesthetics *after* Gottsched. The question of attention will assert itself to the degree that a gap opens up between the order of perfections and its instantiation in the actual world, and mediating between the mental constructs Wolff takes for essences and external manifolds becomes inherently problematic. This is the problem of *attention* that writers of poetics like Breitinger, poets like Brockes, and the inventor of aesthetics Alexander Baumgarten will seize on. The same constellation is also the reason why the problem of description, the

lowest form of “nature imitation” for Gottsched, will be emancipated from its containment as a minor poetic technique: for Gottsched, description cannot possibly do no more than report surface details of what is essentially already known – in stark contrast to Breitinger, who will organize his poetics around the notion of novelty. Description will become the dominant poetic practice only when the complexity of the world is no longer intelligible as the embodiment of a pre-given natural order, turning attention to attention, as the perceptual processing of the details of empirical reality.

The variability of attention, or the idea that one might also see things differently, never becomes thematic in Gottsched. And yet at one point, Gottsched’s *Critische Dichtkunst* comes close to making precisely this move of allowing poets such variability in forms of conception – to readjust the window frame and the attentive activity of the inner eye so as to look at a different world, or look at this world differently. It is the other strategy of accounting for “counter-factual” nature imitation (such as fables featuring speaking animals) that he briefly considers twice but then dismisses for more commonsensical explanations, lest “unphilosophisch[e] Köpf[e]”¹⁴⁰ should get unnecessarily confused. With Wolff, whom Gottsched quotes in this context, Gottsched suggests that one could understand fictional plots like those of novels as “Historie aus einer andern Welt”¹⁴¹ – and accordingly as “imitating” not the present course of nature, but the course of nature in a different possible world. The consequences of this proposition remain unexplored in Gottsched’s poetics and do not affect its

¹⁴⁰ Gottsched, *Versuch einer kritischen Dichtkunst*, 204. The idea picks up on a similar formulation in Wolff, *Deutsche Metaphysik*, 349–350 (§571).

¹⁴¹ Gottsched, *Versuch einer kritischen Dichtkunst*, 204.

general framework. The gesture towards possible world metaphysics remains an isolated episode, contained as a curiosity that does not come into conflict with Gottsched's fundamental belief in the harmonious order of given nature. And yet the window onto different possible worlds – the other possibilities of conception latent in Wolff's concept of essence as possibility – has been pushed open.

CHAPTER TWO

ON SEEING OTHERWISE: JOHANN JAKOB BREITINGER'S POETICS OF ATTENTION

Much of the literature on Johann Jakob Breitinger's *Critische Dichtkunst* (1740) – the mature formulation of the Swiss critics Bodmer and Breitinger's poetological endeavors – is concerned with positioning the work within a history of the emancipation of the poetic imagination in the eighteenth century. Disagreements arise over whether Breitinger already develops a "productive," "subjective," or "autonomous" concept of the imagination and thus anticipates the genius movement and Romantic irrationalisms, or whether he is still committed to rationalist principles and a corresponding depreciation of the freedoms of the imagination.¹⁴²

This focus on the analytical category of the productive imagination, especially when coupled with the rationalism/irrationalism schema, has sometimes obscured rather than illuminated the specific set of assumptions that inform Breitinger's poetics; even those concerning the concept of the imagination itself. In the broadest sense, Bodmer and Breitinger understood imagination as the mind's capacity for imagistic representation – the "wax tablet" of the mind that receives, stores, and retrieves mental images.¹⁴³ Above all, the Swiss critics'

¹⁴² I am following Gabriele Dürbeck's classification here, who offers an overview of the literature on Breitinger and Bodmer on the question of imagination in *Einbildungskraft und Aufklärung*, 266–67. Assessments of Bodmer and Breitinger's merits usually coincide with the position authors take on the famous *Literaturstreit* of the Zürich critics with Gottsched.

¹⁴³ In their early works, Bodmer and Breitinger repeatedly use the Lockean wax tablet as an analogy for the imagination; see Hans Peter Herrmann's *Naturnachahmung und Einbildungskraft*, 185–87. Herrmann's study remains perhaps the most lucid account of German early eighteenth-century poetics.

focus on imagination thus grounds a *poetics of representation* for which poetry unfolds in the arena of the mind.

My goal in this chapter is to excavate a constellation of knowledge surrounding *attention* that was central to the representational paradigm as one of the pillars of Breitinger's poetics. The early eighteenth-century discourse on attention, I will argue, provides the matrix for several of Breitinger's most distinctive poetological concepts: his central notion of "poetic painting" (*Poetische Mahlerey*); his legitimation of poetic license through a theory of "the new" (*das Neue*) and "the marvelous" (*das Wunderbare*); and the "immanent deconstruction"¹⁴⁴ of the principle of nature imitation in Breitinger's conceit of "imitating possible nature" (*Nachahmung der Natur in dem Möglichen*). Re-reading the *Critische Dichtkunst* in this new context makes it possible to observe a discursive event of some consequence: how a discourse on attention as a non-mimetic moment in *perception* became the basis for a non-mimetic concept of *poetic representation*.

Such a re-reading has become possible because of an increasing understanding of the internal complexities of what Foucault described as the representational paradigm governing the "classical age" of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.¹⁴⁵ Invoking categories such as

¹⁴⁴ Menninghaus, "Klopstocks Poetik der schnellen Bewegung," 291.

¹⁴⁵ See the pertinent chapter in *The Order of Things*, 46–214. David Wellbery has convincingly situated German literary theory and aesthetics in the eighteenth century (especially 1740 to 1790, beginning with Breitinger) in the context of this paradigm; see *Lessing's Laocoon*, 1984, 1–8, 203–27.

observation,¹⁴⁶ evidence,¹⁴⁷ and indeed attention,¹⁴⁸ recent scholarship in the context of historical epistemology has focused on the infrastructure of procedures, practices, and techniques that make representation possible. The classical role of *attention* in this context can be illustrated – rather schematically, to be sure – by reference to what Jonathan Crary has described as the *camera obscura* model of the mind. Crary has argued that the paradigm of representation in the seventeenth and eighteenth century is defined by a technical-epistemological background metaphor that imagines the mind along the model of a *camera obscura*; a darkened box into which images of the outside world are projected through a pinhole on a wax tablet, screen, or canvas inside.¹⁴⁹

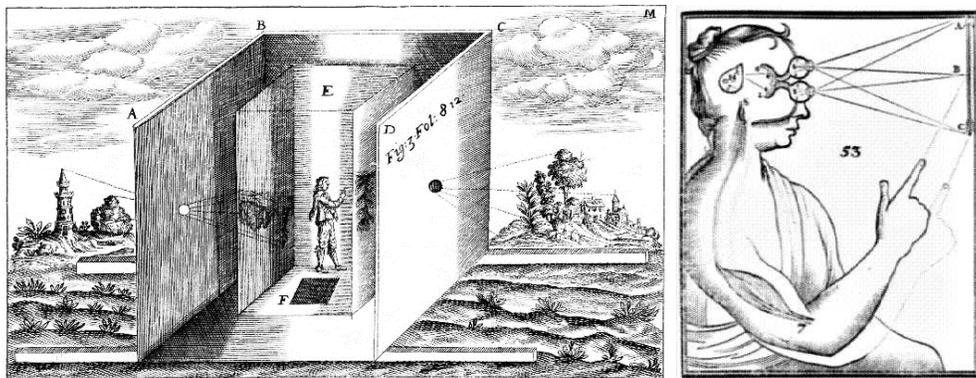


Figure 6: Model of “large portable camera obscura” (left) and Descartes’ depiction of epistemic vision as analogous to a camera obscura

¹⁴⁶ See, for example, Singy, “Huber’s Eyes”; Campe, Holland, and Strowick, “Observation in Science and Literature”; Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*, 1992; Daston, “The Empire of Observation, 1600-1800.”

¹⁴⁷ Rüdiger Campe has elaborated the question of evidence (what is or can be made evident in intuition as a basis for truthful inferences) as a defining problem of the project of grounding knowledge in subjective certainty in the age between Descartes and Kant; see, for instance, “Shapes and Figures—Geometry and Rhetoric in the Age of Evidence”; “Epoche der Evidenz. Knoten in einem terminologischen Netzwerk zwischen Descartes und Kant”; “‘Improbable Probability’: On Evidence in the Eighteenth Century.”

¹⁴⁸ My approach is informed by studies on attention in the eighteenth century by Lorraine Daston, Hans Adler, Michael Hagner, and Barbara Thums; see Daston, *Kurze Geschichte der wissenschaftlichen Aufmerksamkeit*; Adler, “Bändigung des (Un)Möglichen: Die ambivalente Beziehung zwischen Aufmerksamkeit und Aufklärung”; Hagner, “Toward a History of Attention in Culture and Science”; Thums, *Selbstbildungen: Wahrnehmung, Aufmerksamkeit und Diätetik*, 2008.

¹⁴⁹ Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*, 1992, 25–66.

These internal images, however, only attain their status as representations of external objects by virtue of their inspection by an internal observer, the metaphorical eye of the mind: “All the knowing gets done,” as Richard Rorty notes in his deconstruction of Locke’s wax tablet metaphor of the mind, “by the Eye which observes the imprinted tabled, rather than by the tablet itself.”¹⁵⁰ It is this gradual “inspection” or “observation” of internal images (those produced by sensation and those recalled into the imagination) that was, in the representational paradigm, the domain of attention.¹⁵¹

Breitinger appropriated this concept of attention to explain the mental operations involved in the production and reception of poetry. This transfer from philosophy to poetics became possible because the representational philosophy of Leibniz and Wolff understood the soul in terms of a single power of representation (*vis repraesentativa*)¹⁵² that explained everything souls can do – and thus provided a space in which philosophy and poetry could meet and mingle on the same terrain. The following notes trace the effects of this encounter on both parties. They excavate how Wolff’s concept of attention informed Breitinger’s poetics of representation and how the poetic transformation of attention recoiled on the philosophical

¹⁵⁰ Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 143–44.

¹⁵¹ Because of the ocular paradigm of perception and the fact that observation was first and foremost understood as *internal* observation in the representational context, the association between attention and observation was very close; the two, in fact, designated different aspects of the same activity. Diderot’s and d’Alembert’s *Encyclopédie* only articulates common knowledge when it defines observation simply as the mind’s direction of attention toward objects: “OBSERVATION ... c’est l’attention de l’ame tournée vers les object qu’offre la nature” (de Chambaud, “Observation”). In general terms, observation tends to refer to the *end*, attention to the *techniques and means* for achieving the end of observation (or, as Bonnet puts it, to the “spirit of observation”). On this co-implication of attention and observation, see Daston and Galison, *Objectivity*, 234–51.

¹⁵² Leibniz and Wolff define the soul in these terms; see, for instance, Wolff’s *Psychologia rationalis*, 46 (§68).

concept, revealing a constitutive selectivity and partiality of attention that had remained latent in Wolff.

Breitinger's Poetics of the Inner Eye

The bulk of the introductory first chapter of the *Critische Dichtkunst* is taken up by a detailed exegesis of the Horatian *ut pictura poesis* based on the different modes of signification employed by poetry and painting. As a verbal art, poetry works with arbitrary signs – which Breitinger understands with classical semiotics as conventional but perfectly reliable conduits for mental content – and thus “paints” its images directly into the minds of the audience: “[die Poesie] kan ... dadurch ihre Bilder unmittelbar in das Gehirn anderer Menschen schildern.”¹⁵³ Painting, by contrast, works with natural (or iconic) signs which affect the mind indirectly, through after-images perceptible to the mental eye once the visual shapes of material paintings have passed through the physical organs. Here, too, the essential “painting” does not happen on the physical canvas but on the canvas of the mind. What matters are the mental images painters evoke *by means of* material painting (“welche der Mahler *vermittelt der Farben durch das Auge in dem Gemüthe* erwecket”¹⁵⁴). Because actual painting can only affect the mental canvas through the detour of the physical eyes, poetry is, so Breitinger’s surprising conclusion, in many respects more adept at “painting” (or mental representation) than the art of painting properly so called.

¹⁵³ Breitinger, *Critische Dichtkunst*, 1:20. For a lucid discussion of Enlightenment semiotics and its connection with an aesthetics of representation, see Wellbery, *Lessing's Laocoon*, 1984, esp. 17-24.

¹⁵⁴ Breitinger, *Critische Dichtkunst*, 1:20 Emphasis mine.

Directness of representation is, however, not the only, and not the most important advantage of poetry over painting. What ultimately makes poetry the superior art for Breitinger is that poetry not only conveys mental images but simultaneously instructs the eye of the mind (“Auge des Gemüthes”) in *observing* these images: “Gemählde der Poesie ... geben Anweisung, wie man die Sachen von Stücke zu Stücke mit Vernunft und Ueberlegung anschauen soll.”¹⁵⁵ Breitinger’s observing inner eye combines the *evidentia* topos of rhetorical poetics (vivid visualization “before the eye of the mind”) with the internal observer presupposed by the *camera obscura* model – the disembodied inner eye that registers impressions on the internal canvas and thus turns them into conscious perceptions of the soul.¹⁵⁶ In Breitinger’s interpretation, the detailed description characteristic of rhetorical *evidentia* guides the gradual inspection, feature by feature, of visual manifolds imprinted on the internal wax tablet, screen, or canvas.

Such piecemeal inspection of the mind’s impressions was identified with the task of attention; and it is consequently the discourse on attention (*Aufmercksamkeit*) and its associated terminology (*Zerstreuung, sammeln, merckwürdig, Absonderliche*, etc.) that organizes Breitinger’s account of poetry’s unfolding in the space between the mental canvas and an attentively observing inner eye:

Da der poetische Mahler hingegen das Auge des Gemüthes aus der Zerstreuung sammelt, von einem merckwürdigen Umstande zu dem andern gemächlich hinführet, und es nötigt, bey jeglichem absonderlich diejenige Betrachtung zu machen, welche seinen Zweck zu befördern dienet. Denn indem dieser

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 1:28.

¹⁵⁶ How the Aristotelean terminology (“putting-before-the-eyes”) merges effortlessly with the discourse of representational philosophy (“clear representation of objects”) is apparent in Breitinger’s first citation of the *evidentia* topos in the context of his definition of poetic painting: “dem Auge der Seelen die Gegenstände in solch einer Klarheit vorstellen, als ob sie gegenwärtig vor uns stühnden”; Ibid., 1:12–13.

künstliche Mahler mit einem jeden Worte, als mit einem neuen Pinsel=Zuge, sein Gemälde in der Phantasie des Lesers vollführet, und immer einen Begriff an den andern hinzusetzet, so läßt er demselben keine Freyheit, mit flüchtigem und ungewissem Gemütths=Auge müßig herumzuschweifen, oder sich in der Vermischung des Mannigfaltigen zu verirren; sondern er bindet seine Aufmercksamkeit auf das Absonderliche, dessen künstliche Verknüpfung er ihm der Ordnung nach vorweist, auch zuweilen kurtze, aber nützliche Unterrichte einfließen läßt, wodurch nothwendig Licht und Klarheit in dem Begriff entstehen muß ...¹⁵⁷

Breitinger's description of the mental mechanics of poetry clearly follows Wolff's two-step theory of attention, which proceeds from the focus on isolated features to the reflection of their interconnection. Poetic descriptions guide the mental eye from one remarkable feature to the next ("von einem merckwürdigen Umstande zu dem andern"). In this way, poetry, too, concentrates the mind's attention on features isolated from a compound perception ("das Absonderliche") and demonstrates the interconnection ("Verknüpfung") of distinctive parts.¹⁵⁸ In one decisive aspect, however, poetic attentiveness works differently from the program of perceptual clarification Wolff prescribes to philosophers. Poetry, to be sure, brings some light and clarity ("Licht and Klarheit") into notions by foregrounding distinct features of things. But it does not, as philosophical cognition must, strive toward a complete inventory of essential features. The goal of poetry, in other words, is not clarity and distinctness – perceptions in which all relevant distinguishing features are clearly recognized – but patterns of selection that serve poetry's purpose of producing images that move and please. In Breitinger's words, a

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 1:22–23. The first sentence is elliptical in the original.

¹⁵⁸ Similar to the term "merckwürdig," the word "absonderlich" should be understood in a double sense: literally as what the mind is "sundered from" (*abgesondert*) from a compound representation; and figuratively as what stands out as "strange" (*sonderbar*). The wavering of both terms points to the hybrid nature of attention as a voluntary and involuntary activity. This hybridity, and the transition from being *affected* by poetry to paying active attention to its subject matter, figures prominently in Breitinger's theory of the new and the marvelous (see the next section).

philosopher “muß ... alle Umstände und Merckmahle einer Sache ... sorgfältig auf= und zusammensuchen ... hingegen muß der poetische Mahler, der ... das Gemüthe in Bewegung setzen will, nur die kleinsten und absonderlichsten Umstände auslesen, und miteinander verbinden.”¹⁵⁹

With the telos of philosophical apperception suspended, attention is released from the task of cataloging essential features and can come into view for its own activity – and that means, first of all, for its constitutive selectivity in distinguishing and combining marks and features. The presupposition and the reinforced effect of this confirmed selectivity is the divergence of mental images and their inspection by the inner eye – the idea that the two need not necessarily be congruent. Breitinger’s account of poetic painting pivots on this “freedom” of the mental eye vis-à-vis images on the mental canvas. The argument for the inferiority of painting presupposes this freedom as a potential for going astray: because the mental eye is free to take note of this or that feature of a representation (or let features pass unnoticed altogether), it can get distracted and lost in the manifold pictorial material conveyed by paintings. Poetry compensates for this deficiency by collecting the reader’s attention and guiding perception. That it *can* and *must* do so, however, again presupposes that mental images leave it open how they are to be inspected. That poetry can and must teach people how to pay attention, in other words, rests on the possibility of distraction.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁹ Breitinger, *Critische Dichtkunst*, 1:48.

¹⁶⁰ Attention and distraction thus stand, here and elsewhere, in a relation of co-implication. This is why it is futile – as was fashionable in the wake of Benjamin’s artwork essay and a poststructuralist predilection for disunity – to play off one against the other. The more interesting distinction is that between attention concepts which understand attention in terms the possibility of distraction (with selectivity as the unity of the distinction) and those that employ different differentials (such as attention and inattention, or attention and habit). In Breitinger, we see the emergence of the former type of attention concept.

Even in philosophy, the idea that the features discerned in a representation could perfectly map onto all essential characteristics of the thing represented was, with Leibniz's revision of Descartes, relegated to the level of a regulative ideal rather than an actually attainable goal.¹⁶¹ Even so, however, it continued to give to philosophical apperception its teleological structure, which ensured that the difference between the world and its apperception could be no more than a mark of the finite mind's relative imperfection. In Breitinger – certainly less by intention than as an effect of cross-wiring poetic description and philosophical apperception – the activity of the inner eye renounces its alliance with the pre-given structure of things, and begins to take on a life of its own. Drawing the consequences from his theory of poetic attention, the introductory chapter concludes by emphasizing that poetic representations do more than simply *reflect* objects as they are in given nature:

Die Natur und der geschickt nachahmende Mahler legen ihre schon verfertigten vollständigen Wercke auf einmahl zur Schau vor, *müssen aber der Fähigkeit des Zuschauers überlassen, was für einen Eindruck diese auf sein Gemüthe machen ...* der poetische Mahler hat auch die Würckung seiner Gemähde in seiner Gewalt, und regiert dieselbe nach seinem Belieben ... Darum kan man mit Grund sagen, daß *er durch seine geschickte Nachahmung die Schönheit und Kraft seines Urbildes nicht nur erreichen, sondern auch übertreffen könnte*; denn die Würckung einer guten poetischen Schilderey ist nothwendig und gewiß ... da hingegen die Schönheit und Kunst eines Gemähdes, oder auch eines Originales in der Natur, den gröberem Sinnen öfters verborgen bleibet.¹⁶²

¹⁶¹ In contrast to Descartes, Leibniz claimed that even clear and distinct perceptions do not capture the truth of a thing but merely provide sufficient marks for explicitly distinguishing it from others (they thus capture the “nominal” rather than the “real” essence of a thing, which is hardly ever attainable for finite minds); see Leibniz's foundational “Meditations on Knowledge, Truth, and Ideas,” 1989, 23–24. On the importance of Leibniz's adjustment for the development of aesthetics in the eighteenth century, see Adler, *Die Prägnanz des Dunklen*, 1–11, 38–40.

¹⁶² Breitinger, *Critische Dichtkunst*, 1:27–28. Emphases mine.

The shift of perspective announces itself in the peculiar use of the term “Eindruck,” which conflicts with the term’s passive connotations. According to the passage, impressions are in effect “made” by the spectator’s powers of (internal) observation rather than by external things or their painterly depictions. This constructive aspect of apperception was, of course, foundational for philosophical cognition as well; it was, in fact, the implicit basis for the epistemic certainty of clear and distinct representations. The mind has complete insight into such representations precisely because they are, in the clarity of their composition, as good as self-constructed; internally “reassembled” from parts that attention had isolated from compound representations. Echoes of the maker’s knowledge principle at the heart of this notion of cognition are audible in Breitinger’s formulation that works of painting have the disadvantage of being “already fabricated and complete” (“schon gefertigten vollständigen Wercke”), whereas poetry is (so the implication) closer the philosophy by demonstrating the process of manufacturing its works before the eye of the mind. In the case of philosophical apperception, however, the constructive moment could be contained as a reconstruction that reassembles things before the eye of the mind exactly as they are in themselves (or as exactly as possible for finite minds). Because poetry is not bound by reconstruction, it is free to “construct imitations” that surpass originals in nature.

With the *impression* made by things having become contingent on the *activity* of apperception, a systematic gap has opened up between things and their perception; and it is within this gap, in the interstices between mind and world, that Breitinger lodges his theory of poetic representation. The key terms on the basis of which he unfolds this theory are “the new” (*das Neue*) and “the marvelous” (*das Wunderbare*).

The New and the Marvelous: Poetic Representation as Defamiliarization

Breitinger's reflections on the new begin by evoking a prelapsarian state in which *no* gap would exist between things in nature and the impressions they make on the mind. If that were the case, he reasons, poetry could be "imitation of nature" in the sense of a simple re-presentation of natural objects: successful representations would make impressions commensurate with those made by things themselves, and poetry would borrow all its power to affect the mind from the originals it represents. However –

Dieses würde in der That also geschehen, wenn nicht auf Seite des Menschen die betäubende Gewohnheit diesen Würckungen allen Zugang und Einfluß in das Gemüthe versperrte. Die Macht dieser Gewohnheit ist so groß, daß sie ... uns in eine achtlose Dummheit versenket; so gar, daß uns weder das Schöne noch das Grosse, weder das Lehrreiche, noch das Bewegende im geringsten rühren kan, wenn es uns täglich vor Augen schwebet, und wir mit ihm allzu sehr bekannt werden.¹⁶³

The opening comparison between poetry and painting had already shown that things and their impressions diverge. With the force of habit, Breitinger now provides an anthropological explanation for this discrepancy.¹⁶⁴ Repeated exposure to the same thing anaesthetizes the mind and (to read Breitinger with Blake) clogs the doors of perception. We still see "all too familiar things," to be sure; but we no longer *see* what we see: impressions continue to enter the dark chamber of the mind, but their inspection has fossilized into worn-out of patterns that no longer excite the inner eye, and as a result drain overly familiar representations of any force to move and please.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 1:107–8.

¹⁶⁴ As in other areas, Breitinger here picks up suggestions from the poetics of Dubos. In the sensualist poetics of Dubos, the argument serves the different function of legitimizing the arts as an antidote to the human mind's potentially destructive need for distraction; Dubos, *Critical Reflections on Poetry and Painting*, 5–32.

The source of the pleasure evoked by poetic representations consequently lies in the new and unfamiliar. Novelty – the new, unusual, strange, and extraordinary¹⁶⁵ – induces wonder (“mit einer angenehmen Bewunderung überraschen”¹⁶⁶) and, in this way, reactivates the attentiveness required for things to make forceful impressions. Confronted with new and unusual material, the perceiving inner eye is reawakened from its phlegmatic slumber and set *in motion*: poetic beauty is thus equivalent to “was ... das Auge der Seele durch den Glantz einer verwundersamen Neuheit auf eine angenehme Weise entzückt, und das Gemüthe mit einer süßen Unruhe anfüllet.”¹⁶⁷ It is this metaphorical movement of an inner eye aroused (“entzückt”) from its habitual stasis which is experienced as pleasurable. The emotive force of poetry thus rests above all on the pleasure of discovery for Breitinger; the sweet unrest of an inner eye avidly scanning new and unfamiliar material.¹⁶⁸

The nexus between novelty, attention, and the passion of wonder elaborated in Breitinger’s reflections on the new draws on a network of historical knowledge concerning wonder and attention that, as we have seen, finds its locus classicus in Descartes’s doctrine of passions. In the *Passions of the Soul*, Descartes had defined wonder (*admiration*) in words still echoed by Breitinger as “sudden surprise of the soul which brings it to consider with attention

¹⁶⁵ Breitinger, *Critische Dichtkunst*, 1:110.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 1:109.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 1:296.

¹⁶⁸ Despite striking anticipatory echoes, Breitinger’s combined theory of poetic novelty and beauty is not a theory of “free play”: as the opening chapter makes clear, the inner eye’s activity is not free to roam on its own but guided by the descriptions of the poet, in whose traces the readers perform their observations. In addition, Breitinger makes sure to remind poets to always keep the *prodesse* function in mind – although such reminders often seem little more than afterthoughts.

the objects that seem to it unusual or extraordinary.”¹⁶⁹ This epistemic passion of wonder became the centerpiece of a new type of descriptive poetry that sought to reveal the “marvels” of nature – most prominently represented in the German context by Barthold Heinrich Brockes¹⁷⁰ – but also figured prominently in the rise of the modern natural sciences.

As indicated by several comparisons of poets with scientists conducting observations and experiments,¹⁷¹ the relocation of wonder in the eye of the beholder in the context of scientific methodology¹⁷² is a defining model of Breitinger’s understanding of poetic representation. Novelty, Breitinger soon clarifies, lies less in a particular set of marvelous objects than in the way objects are perceived.¹⁷³ Poetry is thus not representation *of* the extraordinary, but an extraordinary *mode of representation* (“Art der Vorstellung”).¹⁷⁴

Breitinger struggles throughout the *Critische Dichtkunst* to articulate a place for this contribution of “form” in representing a given “content.”¹⁷⁵ Sometimes, he draws on the classical imagery for rhetorical ornament, and explains the form of representation as a supplementation of truth with new and unusual clothing, make-up, or sugar-coating – implying that the inner core of the represented content remains unchanged by the outward draping, or

¹⁶⁹ Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings*, 1984, 1:353 (§70). Descartes’s reflections on wonder acknowledge the involuntary side of attention, but only as a gateway to active and voluntary attention. Wonder occupies a special place among the passions because it facilitates a transition from passive affectedness to active mental scrutiny. This transition informs Breitinger’s idea of how affectedness by poetic representations can educate and teach the attention.

¹⁷⁰ On attention, wonder, and description in Brockes, see Kreienbrock, “‘Merk’s! Merk’s!’”

¹⁷¹ See for instance Breitinger’s comparisons of marvelous poetic representations with Réaumur’s microscopic observations of insects or the work of astronomers; *Critische Dichtkunst*, 1:110, 112, 120.

¹⁷² See the introduction for an account of this process.

¹⁷³ Breitinger, *Critische Dichtkunst*, 1:123–25.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 1:295, 300. Breitinger uses *Vorstellung* (similar to English “representation”) indiscriminately for representation in the mind and artistic (re)presentation. A concept of *Darstellung* is not yet available.

¹⁷⁵ Like Gottsched’s poetics, the *Critische Dichtkunst* lacks a systematic distinction between “form” and “content,” but begins to develop one on the basis of the category of the “novel” presentation of a “model” in nature.

accidental to its essential truth.¹⁷⁶ At other times, however, when giving a more technical account of the process in terms of the representational paradigm, Breitinger understands the formal contribution as a *transformation* or *deformation* of things, modeled on the distortion of mental images under the influence of the passions (which make things appear “in einer ganz andern Grösse, Figur und Gestalt, als sie haben”).¹⁷⁷ The distortion of things seen through the “eyes of the passions”¹⁷⁸ thus becomes a general model for the way poetry and its rhetorical devices “deform” representations.¹⁷⁹ Their purpose, in terms of Breitinger’s representational poetics, is not the embellishment of language, but the deformation of mental images in order to make things appear in a new, strange, or extraordinary shape or form.¹⁸⁰

The legitimacy for such poetic license is provided by what we could call a defamiliarization theory *avant la lettre*: “die poetische Kunst [ist] vermögend ... auch den gewöhnlichsten und unachtbarsten Wahrheiten und Umständen einen solchen verwundersamen Glantz beyzulegen ..., daß der dadurch entzückte Leser sich nicht erwehren kan, seinen Vorstellungen alle Aufmercksamkeit und Bewunderung zu gönnen.”¹⁸¹ As defamiliarizing representation, the apparent deformation does not ultimately distort things but

¹⁷⁶ *Critische Dichtkunst*, 1:6, 53–56, 115, 132, 292, 299, 346, etc.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 1:309.

¹⁷⁸ The distortion results from the fact “daß die Leidenschaften alles mit eigenen und ganz andern Augen anschauen”; *ibid.*, 1:308.

¹⁷⁹ This parallels the genealogy of the term “sensory” for a type of representation in Baumgarten’s aesthetics. In Wolff, *sensitivus* had designated a desire accompanied by a confused or distorted representation of the good; Baumgarten generalizes this epithet to denote all “confused” representations under the level of clear and distinct ones. See Baumgarten, *Meditationes*, 8–9 (§III); also Heinz Paetzold’s introduction to *ibid.*, XI; and Campe, “Effekt der Form,” 2014, 127–36.

¹⁸⁰ In relation to the tradition of rhetorical poetics, this means that *evidentia* effectively becomes the paradigmatic trope of poetry; the master-trope in terms of which all other figures and tropes are reformulated – as so many techniques of (dis)figuring things on the mental canvas before the eye of the mind.

¹⁸¹ Breitinger, *Critische Dichtkunst*, 1:295.

amount to a *renewal of perception*. This can be interpreted in two ways. Either the unusual representation *renews the possibility of perception* (and merely facilitates re-cognition through the detour of a defamiliarizing representation). Or it reveals *new possibilities of perception* (suggesting that what seemed like distortions were in fact alternative modes of perception).

Both interpretations are explored in the *Critische Dichtkunst*. According to the *first* interpretation, defamiliarization is only *temporary* and therefore *restorative*. Breitinger's characterization of poetic artifice as "Schein der Neuheit"¹⁸² condenses these moments in a single phrase. Poetry represents things in a new light – the alluring luster (*Schein, Glantz*) of strangeness that spurs the inner eye into action and boosts a natural light of truth dimmed by the force of habit.¹⁸³ The novelty of representation, however, also remains *Schein* in the sense of mere semblance, as the strange representation ultimately does nothing but restore an inherent recognizability that was only temporarily obscured.

The *other* interpretation comes into play when Breitinger distinguishes between the new and the marvelous. The terms are sometimes used interchangeably, with the marvelous merely implying a greater degree of strangeness. When a distinction is made, however, it marks the point where the difference of *degree* that separates original truth from its "novel" representation turns into a difference of *kind*; where the connection to ordinary truth is stretched so thin that it breaks down – or rather, where it *seems* to break down ("entgegen zu stehen scheint"):

¹⁸² Ibid., 1:110, 295, etc.

¹⁸³ This type of light imagery (light of truth, light of nature, light as clarity of representations, poetic representation "in a new light") suffuses the *Critische Dichtkunst*; see, for instance, *ibid.*, 1:112, 131, 231, etc.

Nach dem Grade dieser Entfernung [vom Laufe der Dinge] wächst und verstärket sich die Verwunderung, die durch das Gefühl dieser Neuheit in uns entsteht; wenn denn die Entfernung so weit fortgehet, biß eine Vorstellung unsern gewöhnlichen Begriffen, die wir von dem ordentlichen Laufe der Dinge haben, entgegen zu stehen scheint, so verliehret sie den Nahmen des Neuen, und erhält an dessen statt den Nahmen des Wunderbaren.¹⁸⁴

If this contradiction is to remain merely apparent; if marvelous representations are to continue to convey a form of truth – and Breitinger insists on this throughout – then this truth must be of a kind that can no longer be recovered by “subtracting” the temporary semblance of novelty. In the leap from a gradual to a categorical deviation, the factor of refraction separating the original light of truth from the *Schein* of its presentation has become indeterminable. This inextricable entanglement between *mode of representation* and *represented content* finally finds expression in the paradoxical image of a completely unfamiliar but transparent mask:

Hingegen leget das Wunderbare den Schein der Wahrheit und Möglichkeit ab, und nimmt einen unbetrüghlichen Schein des Falschen und Widersprechenden an sich; es verkleidet die Wahrheit in eine *gantz fremde aber durchsichtige* Maßke...¹⁸⁵

The imagery of clothing has transformed into one of masking and disguise: the artificial addition no longer, like good make-up, enhances the truth’s natural features but completely conceals them. At the same time, however, it is supposed to remain transparent and reveal a truth. The coincidence of total defamiliarization and transparency suggests that the disguise itself generates its own kind of transparency here: what is visible “on the mask” or “through the mask” is no longer distinguishable; poetic truth is, according to the logic of the metaphor, no

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 1:129. Emphases mine.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 1:130. Emphasis mine.

longer what remains after subtracting artificial additions but the function of a specific mode of representation.

The Possibilities of Poetic Representation: Imitating “Possible Nature”

The principle of nature imitation compels Breitinger to confront the metaphysical implications of the license he sometimes grants to poetry. Nature imitation is, after all, a principle of both poetics and metaphysics; or, as Hans Blumenberg has elaborated, a principle that ties poetics to classical metaphysics by relegating *ars* and *technē* to the derivative order of an imitation, reflection, or prolongation of the given order of nature.¹⁸⁶ We have seen that the *Critische Dichtkunst* participates in an eighteenth-century reinterpretation of nature imitation in terms of the representation of absent objects.¹⁸⁷ It has also become clear that poetic representation does, however, not simply reflect reality but is given license to reconfigure, alter, and even surpass reality – at least in the mode of semblance. Breitinger’s unconventional way of negotiating these alterations with nature imitation leaves the imitation-relation untouched – but expands the realm of what may count as the model or correlate of poetic representations. Poetry does not represent *actual* but *possible* nature; things not as they *are* but, he asserts invoking Leibnizian metaphysics, as they *could be* in other possible worlds: “Nachahmung der Natur in dem Möglichen [ist] das eigene und Haupt=Werck der Poesie.”¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁶ See the pertinent works of Hans Blumenberg; esp. the early essays “Nachahmung der Natur” (which ascribes an important role to Breitinger in the demise of nature imitation, 42-45); and “Das Verhältnis von Natur und Technik als philosophisches Problem.”

¹⁸⁷ Nature imitation thus merges with representation and *evidentia*, as Breitinger’s definition of *Nachahmung* shows: “die Kunst der Nachahmung thut mehrers nicht, als daß sie die abwesenden Gegenstände gleichsam herbey bringet und vor Augen stellet”; *Critische Dichtkunst*, 1:84.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 1:57 (see also 60). The characterization of poetic fictions as “stories from possible worlds” has antecedents in Leibniz, Wolff, and Gottsched; Breitinger is the first to elaborate it into a full-fledged theory.

Surprisingly, Breitinger seems to think that the conceit of “imitating possible nature” is suited to *deflect* the hubris of poiesis and poetics vis-à-vis the given order of nature. Responding to contemporary interpretations of the topos according to which poetry can improve upon by nature by combining (as the legendary Zeuxis in his portrait of Helen) the best features of various models into a new picture that exceeds the beauty of any single original, Breitinger rejects such “proud expressions”¹⁸⁹ and argues that what others take to be an improvement of nature should properly be called imitation of possible nature – which, he claims, does not improve nature at all.¹⁹⁰ This defense strategy is hardly convincing; especially once it becomes clear what imitating possible nature entails. It is not bound to an idealization of nature that exceeds reality for the exemplary (as Zeuxis did) but allows representing any possible entity as long as it remains consistent with formal logic, that is, free from contradiction. It thus effectively grants to poets a license that would have made Zeuxis’s apologists blush. “Imitation” of a nature synonymous with formal possibility prescribes and obliges nothing, and can hardly serve as a check on the hubris of poetic production.

While Breitinger’s insistence on nature imitation may be internally inconsistent, its inconsistency is hardly due to Breitinger’s lack of philosophical rigor, as several commentators have suggested.¹⁹¹ Quite the contrary, it is rather his excessive literalism in adopting central motifs of Wolff’s philosophy that produces symptomatic inconsistencies in the text. The

¹⁸⁹ “Nur kann ich nicht ungeantet lassen, daß die stolzen Ausdrücke ... der Ehre des Schöpfes der Natur höchstnachtheilig und verkleinerlich seyn, wenn sie under andern sagen, der Poet sey vermögend die Natur zu verbessern”; *ibid.*, 1:267.

¹⁹⁰ “wenn man diese Reden im rechten Lichte betrachtet, so wollen sie nichts mehrers sagen, als, der Poet könne vermöge seiner Kunst nicht alleine würckliche Dinge, sondern auch mögliche, die zwar nicht sind, aber dennoch seyn könnten, geschickt vorstellen”; *ibid.*, 1:268.

¹⁹¹ Herrmann, *Naturnachahmung und Einbildungskraft*, 248–49; Finken, *Die Wahrheit der Literatur*, 63.

classical principle of nature imitation presupposed that the productions of art should reflect a cosmos of unchanging essences. “Imitating possible nature” is an entirely consistent reoccupation of this topology with the essence concept provided by Christian Wolff, who, as we saw, defined “essence” as the *possibility* of a thing,¹⁹² or the principle behind an internally non-contradictory set of essential properties. Geometric shapes like triangles, whose possibility or impossibility can be “seen” in the act of constructing them in the mind, are paradigmatic of such essences.¹⁹³ But the pertinent concept of possibility extends to all logically consistent combinations of essential properties, such as the evident possibility of a “wooden plate” (in contrast to the evidently self-contradictory “wooden iron”).¹⁹⁴

The *advantage* of such knowledge of possibles is that it is not *found in* the world but holds true independently of existence, across all possible worlds (what we might see as the thorough empiricity of “wooden plates” notwithstanding). The *disadvantage* is that one still has to find out in which possible world one happens finds oneself – or, in the cognition of any particular entity, which “possible” essence the thing in question happens to incarnate. Knowledge of essences (i.e., insight into the inner possibility of essential of properties) is thus absolutely certain; but a moment of uncertainty pertains to the question *which* of the infinitely many possible essences the mind can think up is at hand in the case of any particular actual thing.

¹⁹² “Das Wesen eines Dinges [ist] seine Möglichkeit”; Wolff, *Deutsche Metaphysik*, 19 (§35); see also §16, §34–44.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 19–23 (§34–44).

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 7–8 (§12).

Gottsched, in his appropriation of Wolff, had sidelined this problem, confident in the pervasiveness of an order that saw empirical nature as an unproblematic particularization of general essences. For Breitinger, however, this juncture between the actual and the possible – and with it, the question of attention – becomes critical. Wolff saw the faculty of attention (and its derivative operations, like reflection and abstraction) as crucial to *co-ordinating* the order of possible mental constructs with the order of actually existing entities. Attention *analyzes* manifolds of sensation into basic elements or properties; and it *selects* what to include as essential property and what to ignore as accidental.¹⁹⁵ By converting actual entities into sets of properties whose inner possibility is transparent to the mind, methodical attention informs the mind which “essence” any individual thing embodies. It is obvious that this mediation between the actual and the possible is structurally identical with the attentive inspection of impressions that guided Breitinger’s opening comparison of poetry and painting. At stake in both cases is perception understood as the activity of converting empirically given manifolds into intelligible constructs. To put it in terms of the *camera obscura* metaphor, mediating between the possible and the actual involves matching the entities the mind can intuit within the dark chamber when the pinhole is shut with the impressions it receives from outside.

¹⁹⁵ According to Wolff, essences contain accidental properties that are only determined when the possible essence becomes actual. This means that Wolff’s essences are in effect identical to what Leibniz calls “nominal essences” rather than “real essences.” Epistemologically speaking, the difference between them concerns the criteria for complete insight into their possibility. Nominal essences are “internally” possible; i.e., their essential properties include no contradictions. Real essences, by contrast, are “possible in the context of a world.” Insight into their possibility would thus require knowing that they do not contradict any other entity in this possible world. Such insight is, in the case of contingent actual entities, open only to the divine eye that surveys all entities in a possible world in one stroke. The shortcoming of Wolff’s essence concept – that it pertains, in effect, to nominal essences only, and thus remains stuck on the level of abstract universals – will be, according to Alexander Aichele, the entry point for Baumgarten’s critique of Wolff, and the systematic motivation for his aesthetics. See Aichele, “Wahrheit - Gewißheit - Wirklichkeit”; “Allzuständigkeit oder Beschränkung?”

When spelling out what poets do in imitating possible nature, Breitinger accordingly relies on the same terminology of attention that served to distinguish poetry from painting. Poetic imitations of possible entities are formed by abstracting features from various objects (“merklichsten Eigenschaften ... zusammentragen”¹⁹⁶ or “aufmercksam und sorgfältig zusammensuche[n]”¹⁹⁷) and recombining them into new logically possible entities (“in einem neuen Bilde geschickt zu verbinden”;¹⁹⁸ “in eine willkürliche ... Verknüpfung zu versetzen”¹⁹⁹). Like attention as the handmaiden of philosophical cognition, what we might call poetic attention – Breitinger proposes the neologism *abstractio imaginatio*²⁰⁰ – transforms the actual into the possible. It consists, as the section heading explains, in “Verwandlung des Würcklichen ins Mögliche.”²⁰¹ But mediating between the two levels means something quite different in each case. Poetic attention is, in its analytic and its synthetic capacity, released from the task of matching actual things to the possible entities they incarnate. It is free in selecting and disregarding this or that aspect in perception, and free to rearrange fragments of “world” into all kinds of possible entities.

In Breitinger’s interpretation, the figuration of such creative vision in poetic works amounts to a reversal of the process of perception – the *re-actualization* of possible entities

¹⁹⁶ Breitinger, *Critische Dichtkunst*, 1:273.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 1:287–88.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 1:274.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 1:272.

²⁰⁰ In the Wolffian school, attention and abstraction are closely associated; abstraction is conceived as selectively attending to some features rather than others (making it possible to “detach” select features from the original representation); like reflection, abstraction is thus understood a type of attention. *Ibid.*, 1:286.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 1:286, etc.

assembled in the poet's mind. This puts the poet in the place reserved for the creator god in Wolff's and Leibniz's philosophy:

Ein jedes wohlerfundenes Gedicht ist darum nicht anderst anzusehen, als eine Historie aus einer andern möglichen Welt: Und in dieser Absicht kömmt auch dem Dichter alleine der Nahme ποιητοῦ, eines Schöpfers, zu, weil er ... die Dinge, die nicht für die Sinnen sind, gleichsam erschaffet, das ist, aus dem Stande der Möglichkeit in den Stand der Würcklichkeit hinüberbringet, und ihnen also den Schein und den Nahmen des Würcklichen mittheilet.²⁰²

As he does with many *topoi* from the tradition of poetics, Breitinger rearticulates the classical *alter deus* motif on new philosophical ground: Poets resemble the creator god in their free disposal over the realm of possibility, and in their ability to turn select possibility into actuality. The difference between the two figures is that, in the creator poet's mind, things do not dwell as possibilities *before* their actualization in creation, but *after* given reality is, as it were, dissolved back into mere possibility.

Like Breitinger's opening comparison between poetry and painting and his reflections on the new and the marvelous, the conceit of imitating possible nature exploits the non-mimetic exercise of attention to negotiate a place for the *artifice* of poetic representation – including all those aspects topologically associated with the merely artificial, such as fabricated fiction and rhetorical technique. The section on nature imitation formulates this license in ontological terms, as the freedom to imitate entities from other possible worlds; but the idea is, of course, not to be taken literally. Imitation of possible nature is not supposed to recommend narratives (like the closing parable of Leibniz's *Theodicy*) that venture into other metaphysically possible

²⁰² Ibid., 1:60; also 136-136, 426.

world edifices. The overall function of the idea is to sanction poetry's transformation or "distortion" of reality in poetic representation.

The same tension between regarding poetic artifice as an inessential supplement and ascribing to it an epistemic force of its own also pervaded Breitinger's reflections on the new and the marvelous, although these sections negotiated poetic license as it concerned *modes of representation* rather than (as in the section on nature imitation) the *models or correlates of representation*. This confusion between originals and imitations, objects and their representations, is systematic in the *Critische Dichtkunst*. Later sections continue to recommend different ways poet should modify things for a forceful effect. Some of these sections ("Von der Verwandlung des Würcklichen ins Mögliche") focus on altering the models of representation; others ("Von der Kunst gemeinen Dingen das Ansehen der Neuheit beyzulegen," "Von etlichen absonderlichen Mitteln die schlechte Materie aufzustützen") focus on altering the mode of representation. But the recipes prescribed across these sections, and the terminology used – creating new, strange, or marvelous representations by deforming things or combining select aspects of things into new entities – make strategies for altering originals increasingly indistinguishable from those for altering their representations.

The deeper reason for this indistinguishability is the effect captured in the image of the completely strange but transparent mask. As evident in the opening comparison between poetry and painting, Breitinger's poetics is based on the structural dissociation of modes of perception and representation from pre-given reality: how the inner eye attends to things is not prescribed by images themselves. This very dissociation, however, tends to fuse representation and reality in a novel way, as reality is no longer simply given independently of a particular form

of representation. Niklas Luhmann has described this as the contingency-effect of second-order observation: Observing other observations reveals that all observation is based on schemata that could also be chosen differently, and therefore contingent.²⁰³ Breitinger's attention to attention, his reflections on *how representations are made* edges toward this insight – but his continued attachment to nature imitation and its associated metaphysics ultimately preclude him from formulating it positively, even if he tests and sometimes crosses the boundaries.²⁰⁴

Nevertheless, the tendencies that surface in the *Critische Dichtkunst* (and not least its symptomatic inconsistencies) are extraordinarily instructive about the emergence of a non-mimetic concept of poetic presentation (*Darstellung*) from a constructive moment inherent in the paradigm of representation (*Vorstellung*). We have traced this constructive moment in the form of the activity of attention, the active inspection of impressions that makes representations out of internal images. As Hans Blumenberg and Ernst Cassirer have suggested, the *Critische Dichtkunst* may, however, also help us to understand an emerging sensibility for creative production (*Herstellung*) in the eighteenth century, which begins to see human works (both within and outside the fine arts) as eccentric to a given order of nature.²⁰⁵ Cassirer and Blumenberg had characterized Breitinger's historical innovation as the appropriation of Wolff's and Leibniz's logical idealism – the prerogative of thought's architectonic constructions over given nature – for the formative powers of artists, whose creations can now draw from a realm

²⁰³ See Luhmann, *Beobachtungen der Moderne*, 98–101. On the connection between second order observation, artificiality, and art in modern societies, see Luhmann, *Die Kunst der Gesellschaft*, 104, 148–53.

²⁰⁴ I elaborate Breitinger's place within a rising consciousness for the contingency of knowledge in the eighteenth century in more detail in my contribution to the anthology *Kosmos und Kontingenz*, "Poesis im 'Gegenhalt' der anderen Welten: Epistemische und kosmologische Kontingenz bei Breitinger und Brockes."

²⁰⁵ See Cassirer, *Freiheit und Form*, 109–11; Blumenberg, "Nachahmung der Natur," 42–45.

of the logically possible before determinate existence. Our analysis allows us to spell out the basic mechanism that constitutes this place before determinate existence: The claim to an external vantage point relied on the disposal over an interiority in which the limits of the outside world have been liquefied into possibility ('negated,' as the German idealists will say), and from where it can then externalize, like a second creator, new entities constructed within.

In Conclusion: The Poetics of Attention

In his effort to integrate poetics with the philosophical system of Wolff, Breitinger rearticulated the traditional stock of rhetorical poetics on the basis of Wolff's concept of attention. The *Critische Dichtkunst* can thus be characterized as a *poetics* of attention. In short-circuiting poetics and philosophy, however, Breitinger also hit upon the poetics of *attention*: the moment of *poiesis* inherent in a model of perception that Wolff and his school already understood in (re)constructive rather than mimetic terms.

In the case of philosophical and scientific cognition, the poetics internal to attention remained latent because of the stipulation that there was, at least in principle, *one correct* way of selecting (and discarding) features. Distractions from the proper form of attention were, of course, possible; but only as relative imperfections which, as such, confirmed attention proper. The right attention successfully "winnowed the wheat from the chaff,"²⁰⁶ as Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison describe the role of attention in this context, and discarded only those features that did not belong to the essential properties of an epistemic object in the first place.

²⁰⁶ Daston and Galison, *Objectivity*, 240.

The selectivity and partiality of attention could thus be contained as a moment in the reconstruction of epistemic objects. Capable of disassembling and reassembling nature at its inherent joints, such internal reconstruction of objects could seamlessly take the place of mimetic accounts of perception and cognition.

This changed with Breitinger's transfer of attention into the field of poetics. By exploring the selectivity of attention for its capacity to produce representations that move and please, even if – or rather, precisely because – they constitute “distorted” representations of reality, Breitinger created a space to reflect on different possibilities of selection as something other than a corruption of attention, or a failure of attention to measure up to its object. The question of what is foregrounded and backgrounded, what is registered and what is disregarded in perception can thus be formulated as a problem in its own right.

If Cray and others have suggested that the selectivity of attention was the byproduct of the fragmentation of experience through the shocks of industrial modernity in the late nineteenth century, we have seen that this fragmentation was preceded by another, less noisy but no less incisive type of perceptual disintegration. The “unified and homogenous coherence” Cray ascribes to classical models of perception was already the product of an assemblage; of a reintegration of perceptual fragments into unified picture.²⁰⁷ Selectivity was thus already at the bottom of attention concepts in the eighteenth century, even if it was officially contained and defused by a notion of seamless reconstruction. In Breitinger's case, this selectivity and

²⁰⁷ See Cray, *Suspensions of Perception*, 24; for a (convincing) critique of Cray in this respect, see Singy, “Huber's Eyes,” 69, note 18.

variability of attention provided the model for a new, incipiently creative and non-mimetic understanding of poetic representation.

The example would catch on. Alexander Baumgarten's aesthetics also begins, as Baumgarten writes in an early project sketch, with an "art of attention";²⁰⁸ and he, too, will articulate central problems of his new science of sensory cognition in terms borrowed from Wolff's concept of attention.²⁰⁹ The difference between Baumgarten and Breitinger – the difference that will turn Baumgarten into the founder of a new philosophical discipline – is that Baumgarten challenges the topology between the active eye of the mind and passive sensory impressions more systematically than Breitinger. Sensory perception is, for Baumgarten, already a form of attending.²¹⁰ In Baumgarten's conception, the inner eye is, as it were, folded back into the mental canvas. Sensory cognition and its representation therefore could and had to become a topic of philosophical interest in its own right – the *explanandum* of the new discipline of aesthetics.

²⁰⁸ "Den Anfang macht die Kunst der Aufmerksamkeit," Baumgarten, *Zur Grundlegung der Ästhetik*, 69.

²⁰⁹ These include the "loss of abstraction" (effected by the selectivity of attention) as a precipitating moment of Baumgarten's aesthetic approach; and the notion of *claritas extensiva*, which is based on Wolff's law of the inverse proportionality between the intensity of attention and the extent of the cognitive material it can subsume. See Baumgarten, *Aesthetica/Ästhetik*, 2007, 1:538 (§560); Baumgarten, *Metaphysica/Metaphysik*, 280–283 (§521–533). Baumgarten, *Aesthetica/Ästhetik*, 2007, 1:538 (§560); *Metaphysica/Metaphysik*, 280–283 (§531–533).

²¹⁰ This is not least visible in the way Baumgarten treats attention in his *Metaphysica*. The traditional place for attention in Wolff's school is at the lower end of the higher faculties, marking the onset of the mind's inspection of the impressions received by the senses. Baumgarten retains this traditional place for the *faculty* of attention, but introduces a form of *attending* that happens already at the sensory level, before the *Metaphysica* moves on to discuss the higher faculties; Baumgarten, *Metaphysica/Metaphysik*, 280–281 (§529); 330–331 (§624–628).

CHAPTER 3

ATTENTION AND DESCRIPTION:

POETRY AS EDUCATION OF ATTENTIVENESS IN BARTHOLD HEINRICH BROCKES

The scholarship on Barthold Heinrich (Hinrich) Brockes, author of one of the first literary bestsellers in the German language and the eminent poet of German Early Enlightenment,²¹¹ has long emphasized the importance of sensory perception and of the sense of vision in particular for the poetics of his nine-volume *Irdisches Vergnügen in Gott* (published 1721-1748). In an early foundational study, August Langen saw an “apotheosis of vision” at work in Brockes’ texts;²¹² more recently, Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf characterized Brockes’ poetry as a whole as a “school of seeing.”²¹³ The question I will consider in this chapter elaborates on these characterizations: if Brockes’ poetry is indeed a school of seeing – what kind of seeing does it teach? What mode of vision is propounded in Brockes’ poetry?

As these questions make clear, I propose that what is at stake in Brockes is not vision as such but – to appropriate John Berger’s felicitous term – a historically specific *way of seeing*.²¹⁴ The characteristic innovation of Brockes’s poetry has sometimes been located in his expansion of the subject matter of poetry to include trivial and mundane phenomena, especially the kind

²¹¹ Brockes’s volumes of poetry went through 42 editions and re-editions during in his lifetime alone, and reached a larger audience than any other literary author of the first half of the eighteenth century; Welle, *Der irdische Blick durch das Fernrohr*, 61.

²¹² Langen, *Anschauungsformen in der deutschen Dichtung des 18. Jahrhunderts*, 18. My translation.

²¹³ Wagner-Egelhaaf, “Gott und die Welt im Perspektiv des Poeten,” 186. My translation.

²¹⁴ Berger is concerned with ideologies of seeing that are embodied in images such as early modern oil painting, which he links to the rise of the commodity form; Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 7–112. It is not this specific way of seeing that is at stake in this chapter, but the general idea that vision – and *written* vision as well as, or perhaps even more than, *painted* vision – follows a historically specific logic.

of phenomena also studied by contemporary natural sciences.²¹⁵ In this chapter, I propose that Brockes's descriptions of such particulars as the anatomy of a moth, the corona of the sun as seen through a telescope, or the reproductive organs of a pumpkin plant do not simply *expand* the range of the poetically visible but rather introduce a new form of visibility altogether—that is, a new way of structuring the real by a specific technique of seeing. The poems not only cast this form of vision in verse but frequently thematize and propagate the technique of perception they practice, regularly inviting readers to “see along” with poems and adopt their mode of vision. Brockes's poetry thus understands itself quite literally as a “school” that teaches, propagates and disseminates a certain type of gaze.²¹⁶

Adopting Brockes's own term for the proposed visual technique, I will investigate his education of seeing as an “art of attention.” I propose that, below and beyond the foregrounded themes of his poems, the practice of this art of attention is the underlying subject matter of the poems that are collected in the nine volumes of *Irdisches Vergnügen in Gott*.

Brockes's poetics of attentive perception reimagine poetry as an experiment in perception and thus institute a model of poetry as “exercise of the senses” that will be formative both for later eighteenth-century poetry and for the emergence of aesthetics in the middle of the eighteenth century in Germany. He is the first poet in the German language to practice his art in the *medium* of perception – the in-between space of the orders of thoughts and things whose opening up defined the modern projects of literature as well as science. As

²¹⁵ Preisendanz, “Naturwissenschaft als Provokation der Poesie,” 474.

²¹⁶ Anticipating the scholarly verdict of 20th-century literary criticism, Brockes characterized his own technique already as a “Schule des Gesichts”; Brockes, *Irdisches Vergnügen in Gott*, 1740, 6:302. It appears that Wagner-Egelhaaf arrived at her designation independently of Brockes's self-characterization.

someone who inhabited this space only to eliminate it and close once more the circle of a cosmos without fissures, he, however, occupies a peculiar position in relation to later developments. Already the subsequent generation of poets like Hagedorn, Gellert, and Gleim will appropriate this medium for practices and exercises of the senses on their own terms. And aesthetics, as a theory of art and perception that in Baumgarten emerged out of the same epistemological problem constellation as Brockes's poetics of perception, will come into its own only once the possibility of an unbroken succession of cognition from sensory perception to clear and distinct cognition is put into question. Brockes thus occupies a place simultaneously at the foundation of and outside of an "aesthetic" understanding of art – a place of foundational eccentricity that can illuminate historical presuppositions of such an understanding that are difficult to see from within this paradigm.

Already in his time, Brockes was seen as a popularizer of the modern, natural-scientific world view.²¹⁷ It is for this reason that his oeuvre has recently attracted renewed interest within the larger context of a trans-disciplinary poetics of knowledge – an approach to literary studies that is sensitive to the ways scientific knowledge is enabled, reflected, and negotiated by literary works.²¹⁸ However, as already indicated, the connection to the natural sciences consists less of a direct borrowing of scientific content. What Brockes borrows from the natural sciences are above all *formal techniques* of perception and description and a concomitant understanding of the *structure* of objects. A related qualification concerns the characterization of Brockes as a

²¹⁷ Gottlieb Stolle observes in 1736, using the proper name Copernicus as *pars pro toto*: "Mich deucht: er sey der erste Poete, der in seinen teutschen Versen einen Copernicaner abgegeben"; *Anleitung zur Historie der Gelahrtheit*, 229; also quoted in Zelle, "Das Erhabene in der deutschen Frühaufklärung," 226.

²¹⁸ Recent work on Brockes from the perspective of a *Poetologie des Wissens* includes Borgards, *Poetik des Schmerzes: Physiologie und Literatur von Brockes bis Büchner*; and Rössler, "Gedanckenreisen der Aufklärung."

poet of physicotheology – a theological current that enjoyed great popularity in the eighteenth century, and which attempted to prove the workings of divine providence on the basis of the apparent “design” of nature that could be discovered by means of the newly emerging sciences.²¹⁹ As several commentators have pointed out, however, the alleged physicotheologian is strangely uninterested in providing arguments or proofs.²²⁰ On the contrary, Brockes’s poems produce physicotheological evidence in the precise sense of rhetorical *evidentia* – that is, in staging, experimenting with, and propagating a particular type of epistemic vision. Here, too, the goal of Brockes’s poetry is above all to *make readers see as the poets does*.²²¹

The physicotheological motif is important for demonstrating that Brockes’s way of seeing is not an isolated technique, but embedded within – and perhaps the centerpiece of – a vision of the world as a whole. This is why in the following sections close-readings of poems will enter into conversations with contemporaneous discourses in scientific methodology, philosophical epistemology, ontology, and even cosmology. Staging such conversations will prove instructive less because Brockes read these texts (which in many cases he did indeed) or

²¹⁹ On the tradition of physicotheology in Brockes’s context, see for instance Zelle, “Das Erhabene in der deutschen Frühaufklärung,” 228–33; Steinmann, *Absehen-Wissen-Glauben*, 27–150.

²²⁰ Wagner-Egelhaaf, “Gott und die Welt im Perspektiv des Poeten,” 184; Thums, “Selbstbildungen: Wahrnehmung, Aufmerksamkeit und Diätetik,” 2008, 34.

²²¹ This poetic construction of visibility is also the unacknowledged basis of various other intellectual and literary historical characterizations debated in the scholarship – such as that of Brockes as the “first realist” (Arno Schmidt) of German literature, as an Early Enlightenment didactic poet, or an adherent of Neo-Platonist or Augustinian light metaphysics (as well as others discussed below). These labels highlight different ways in which the technique of seeing practiced in Brockes’ poetry can be functionalized and interpreted by Brockes himself or by the scholarship. See Kreienbrock, “‘Merk’s! Merk’s!,” 240–41 (on Brockes as a “realist”); Kemper, *Geschichte der deutschen Lyrik*, 2:128–30 (Brockes as Enlightenment poet by contrast to Baroque gallant poetry oriented toward courtly representation and entertainment); Steinmann, *Absehen-Wissen-Glauben*, 151–88 (excellent if one-sided study of the legacy of Augustinian light metaphysics in Brockes).

intended to illustrate them in his poetry (which he sometimes did as well),²²² but because the problems the different texts negotiate are related at a deep structural level and thus can serve to illuminate each other. The suspicion that structures of seeing and structures of being may be inextricably entangled arises for Brockes as he looks, in the final poem that I will discuss in this chapter, through a colored pane of glass, realizing that his own gaze profoundly affects the world. An unsettling thought for Brockes, this insight will serve as the guiding thread of my investigation.

My reading of Brockes's way of seeing will proceed in three steps. Focusing on Brockes's meta-poetological (or meta-perceptual) poems, the first two sections will elaborate Brockes's "art of attention," and expound the senses in which Brockes thinks of attention as an "art." First, I will suggest that it is an art in the sense of *technique* – a skill that must be cultivated through training and exercise – and trace this understanding of attention to the requirement in early modern scientific methodology to avoid precipitate perception and fix the gaze on particulars. Attention is thus also, in a second sense, an art as something not given by nature. Paradoxically, in Brockes's self-understanding as well as in contemporaneous science and philosophical epistemology, this artificial technique of perception is, however, interpreted as granting access to nature as it really is.

Nonetheless, Brockes's poetic exploration of attention is also "art" in the more obvious sense of an artwork or a poem. The third and fourth section of this chapter will therefore focus on Brockes's gaze as a *literary gaze*, as *seeing in writing*. A close-reading of Brockes's

²²² This is the case especially for Brockes's "Neujahrsgedichte," which often discuss philosophical and theological questions in versified form.

“Betrachtungen aus der Anatomie” (a poem reminiscent of scenes of scientific observation) will focus on the underlying rhetorical structures that govern Brockes’s seemingly artless descriptive technique. In conversation with different understandings of the poetics of description I will suggest in a theoretical excursus that the rhetoricity of Brockes’s gaze should be understood as an enabling condition rather than an obstacle for engaging with an understanding of reality that becomes increasingly indistinguishable from reality itself.

The third and fourth sections will explore the strategy that allows Brockes to reconcile an emphatically artificial technique of perception with the confidence in the pre-given or “natural” status of objects of perception. Examining Brockes’s poetic engagements with perspectival and prosthetic seeing in the context of contemporary discourses on the plurality of worlds, I will both elaborate this constellation in Brockes and identify its breaking point. The result of the impending collapse of the constellation espoused by Brockes and others will, I suggest, be a growing awareness for the contingency of epistemic relations. Like Breitingen’s poetics, Brockes’s poetry thus hits upon a partiality of perception that will become central to later eighteenth-century conceptualizations of attention – in particular, Alexander Baumgarten’s aesthetics.

Observation and Attention, or Techniques of Sense

In the context of a growing interest in historical epistemology, techniques of epistemic vision have in recent years become a small but burgeoning subject of scholarly interest. We have noted that the operative term in the great majority of this scholarship is “observation,” understood as a disciplined way of seeing that was formative not only of the modern natural

sciences but also of the modern understanding of literature and art, especially in the seventeenth and eighteenth century.²²³ Generally speaking, these historiographies of observation are animated by the assumption that, as Peter Singy representatively summarizes the presupposition of his approach, “observation is governed by a set of historically contingent rules that altogether form what we might call a *regime of perception*.”²²⁴ As suggested in the language of “rules” and “regimes,” much of this work understands itself as a continuation of a Foucault’s archeology of knowledge that hopes to unearth an implicit system of rules of combination – a “grammar” regulating the possibilities of observation within a given period.

Foucauldian insights such as the historical mutability of perception and the idea of an epistemic unconscious that displays considerable regularity within historical periods remain fundamental to this study. My approach in this chapter is, however, also theoretically informed by the model outlined by Marcel Mauss’s brief but influential 1934 essay on “Techniques of the Body” (“Les techniques du corps”).

Mauss identified activities like walking, swimming, or giving birth that seem to be governed by merely physiological processes as culturally specific ways of using the body, which are transmitted by education and training, vary between different sociocultural groups, and can change dramatically over time.²²⁵ The first advantages of conceiving Brocques’s ways of seeing as a *sensory techniques* along this model is that Mauss’s approach allows taking into account the idiosyncrasies, variations, and experimentations *within* a given paradigm as more than non-

²²³ See note 47 in the introduction for the pertinent scholarship.

²²⁴ Singy, “Huber’s Eyes,” 57.

²²⁵ Mauss, “Techniques of the Body,” 70–76.

essential variations of a single structure that reigns supreme in between radical epistemic breaks. The second advantage is that it provides tools for understanding the complex interaction between (internalized) techniques and (external) technologies; and that it puts an emphasis on training, exercise, and education as processes through which techniques are “incorporated” or “em-bodied” – a moment which can be eclipsed in the Foucauldian emphasis on implicit rules.

To illustrate these points, it helps to briefly consider Mauss’s recurring example of *manners of walking* as techniques of the body. Manners of walking differ historically, culturally, and socially in their everyday forms but especially in institutionalized forms of disciplined walking, like marching in armies or walking in rows in schools. These historically changing models do not, however, eliminate differences in individual *gait*, or in the way a specific walking technique is appropriated by an individual walker. Mauss also emphasizes the way technologies fundamentally change techniques of walking (think of shoes) and how media disseminate such techniques (Parisian women, he noticed, began to walk like actresses in American movies). The main point of his essay, however, is to show that even absent any visible prostheses, the body is already a prosthetic object: *we always wear our feet as “shoes,”* even if the technique is not externalized in a technology. Finally, he emphasizes the importance of implicit and explicit education for acquiring these techniques: “I can still remember my third-

form teacher shouting at me: 'Idiot! why do you walk around the whole time with your hands flapping wide open?' Thus there exists an education in walking, too."²²⁶

The shift of theoretical emphasis to the techniques underlying historical discourses is also the reason why the principal term in my description of Brockes's technique of seeing will not be "observation," but "attention." Brockes himself uses the term "Betrachtung" (for observation)²²⁷ and the terms "Aufmerksamkeit" as well as "Achtsamkeit"²²⁸ (for attention) to characterize the proper way of seeing. *Betrachtung* and *Aufmerksamkeit* do not designate different *kinds* of activity in Brockes but describe the same activity seen under different aspects. *Betrachtung* is, broadly speaking, the end of observation; *Aufmerksamkeit* the means of achieving that end. Attention thus portrays perception under an instrumental a priori – in a similar way as sensory techniques can be said to constitute the psychophysical groundwork of "regimes of perception" described in the Foucauldian tradition.

Brockes's Art of Attention as a Sensory Technique

Many of the over one thousand five hundred poems from the *Irdisches Vergnügen in Gott* are variations on a basic pattern.²²⁹ In a typical "observational" poem, the speaker is

²²⁶ Ibid., 72 (direct quote), 72-74, 82 (other passages on walking). Mauss's essays also played an important role in the development of the concept of "cultural techniques" in recent German media theory, allowing for intersections with this approach; see Geoghegan, "After Kittler," 71-72.

²²⁷ The word "Beobachtung" hardly appears, and if it does, then in the old sense of "observance of a rule"; see the preface to Brockes, *Irdisches Vergnügen in Gott*, 1740, vol. 6, n. pag.

²²⁸ "Aufmerksamkeit" tends to denote the more technical side of directing attention while "Achtsamkeit" emphasizes the moment of "paying respect (*Achtung*) to things by paying attention"; the differences does, however, not appear to be systematic, and the two words can sometimes occur interchangeably.

²²⁹ In addition to descriptive "observational" poems, the *Irdisches Vergnügen in Gott* also includes brief sententious poems of a few lines and more reflective/didactic poems, especially "Neujahrsgedichte." Georg Guntermann has gone through the trouble of counting all the poems and arrived at the number 1540, on 5098 pages of Brockessian

placed in a situation – often in nature or in a garden – where he encounters an object of interest. Sometimes after an initial moment of confusion or feeling overwhelmed,²³⁰ the speaker collects himself and begins to observe what is in front of him “mit aufmercksamem Blick” or “aufmerksamer, als sonst.”²³¹ *Aufmerksamkeit* or *Achtsamkeit* thus mark the beginning of a state of perceptual exception²³² that will allow the speaker to discover splendor and order (“Schmuck und Ordnung”) in things that initially seem to lack both – such as a worm, a moth, a vegetable, a fallow field, etc. The discovery of such order and splendor then leads, in a third and final stage, to an invocation of the glory of God as the origin of the order revealed by the attentive gaze.²³³

The meat of Brockes’s poems lies in the middle parts, the scenes of attentive observation, which are often wedged between rather formulaic beginnings or endings. One of the striking features of Brockes’s poetry is that in these scenes, his speakers usually not only reflect on the splendor and order of observed objects but also on the perceptual techniques by means of which these objects can be made to appear *as* marvelous²³⁴ – to the degree that such reflections can sometimes take over the poem and eclipse the object under observation. A

verse; Guntermann, *Barthold Heinrich Brockes’ “Irdisches Vergnügen in Gott” und die Geschichte seiner Rezeption*, 339.

²³⁰ Carsten Zelle has elaborated the dialectic of initial confusion/nausea/terror of the speaker followed by his recuperation of his bearings (typical of many Brockes poems) as a “Zweitakt einer den Schrecken relativierenden Reflexionsbewegung”; this marks, according to Zelle, the beginning of an aesthetics of the sublime; “Das Erhabene in der deutschen Frühaufklärung,” 228.

²³¹ Brockes, *Irdisches Vergnügen in Gott*, 1740, 6:301; *Irdisches Vergnügen in Gott*, 1748, 7:660. These two examples stand in for many similar formulations in Brockes’s poems. The spelling of “Aufmer(c)ksam(keit)” seems to change randomly between versions with a “k” and “ck.” The male pronoun seems warranted given the proximity of speaker figures to the author Brockes.

²³² For this formulation see Hagner, “Aufmerksamkeit als Ausnahmezustand.”

²³³ Wolfgang Preisendanz arrived at a broadly similar schema; “Naturwissenschaft als Provokation der Poesie,” 481.

²³⁴ This has also been emphasized by Wagner-Egelhaaf, “Gott und die Welt im Perspektiv des Poeten,” 186–187, 191–192 (with several examples).

number of poems are staged exclusively on this meta-level and thus have no other topic than the technique of perception itself. As legible in the titles of many of these poems, they are essentially meta-reflections on attention: “Aufmercksamkeit,”²³⁵ “Unselige Unaufmercksamkeit,”²³⁶ “Sinn=reiche Bestrafung der Unachtsamkeit,”²³⁷ “Unglückselige Folgen der Unachtsamkeit,”²³⁸ or – a title that could well serve as the heading of Brockes’s entire poetry collection – “Die Kunst vernünftig sehen zu lernen.”²³⁹

With occasional cross-references to other poems, I will focus on one such meta-poetological reflection, the poem “Mittel gegen die Unachtsamkeit.” As suggested in its title, the poem reflects on the attentive gaze as the *means* or even the *medium* of Brockes’s poetic technique. The poem begins with an ex negativo definition of the properly attentive way of seeing:

Mittel gegen die Unachtsamkeit.

Daß man an so vielem Guten sich so selten nur vergnügt,
kommt, daß der Gewohnheit Stärke die Aufmerksamkeit besiegt.
Doch es schadet zum Vergnügen die Gewohnheit nicht allein;
Nein, auch dieß, daß die Gedanken mehrentheils zerstreuet seyn,
Der Beschäftigungen Vielheit, und der Vorwürf. Es verhindern
Auch die Trägheit des Gemüths, nebst der Unempfindlichkeit,
Andrer Irrenden Exempel, Stolz und Unzufriedenheit,
Den Genuß des vielen Guten. Diese Feinde muß man mindern,
Und sie zu bekämpfen suchen, eh wir zur Aufmerksamkeit,
Als dem Schlüssel zum Vergnügen und zum Dank, gelangen können.

²³⁵ Brockes, *Irdisches Vergnügen in Gott*, 1740, 6:365.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, 6:429–30.

²³⁷ Brockes, *Irdisches Vergnügen in Gott*, 1753, 4:123.

²³⁸ Brockes, *Irdisches Vergnügen in Gott*, 1746, 8:567–68.

²³⁹ Brockes, *Irdisches Vergnügen in Gott*, 1740, 6:300–304. As Jörg Kreienbrock has shown, attention is not *always* visual attention in Brockes but can include modes of auditory attention as well. The great majority of Brockes’s attention poems, however, do focus on visual attention in accordance with his own hierarchy of senses, which values the visual sense as the most important one, with the other distance sense of hearing coming in a distant second; Kreienbrock, “‘Merk’s! Merk’s!,” 253–54.

Wann nun dieses sonder Mühe, ja fast sonder Kampf und Streit,
 Nicht erhalten werden kann,
 Und sie wirklich eine Kunst, eine solche Kunst zu nennen,
 Welche nicht so leicht zu lernen; ach! So fange man doch an,
 Sich mit Sorgfalt zu bemühen,
 Die sich stets zerstreunden Blicke, den nicht minder flüchtgen Geist,
 Zu bezähmen, und sie beyde fest auf einen Punkt zu ziehn,
 Weil, auf solche Art zu sehen, eigentlich nur sehen heißt.
 Beyder concentrirte Kräfte werden dann zuerst erblicken,
 Wie die Werke der Natur sich Bewunderns=würdig schmücken
 Dadurch muß und wird Bewunderung in der regen Seel' entstehen.
 Man wird tausend Ding' entdecken, die man nie vorher gesehn.²⁴⁰

The most salient formal feature of the poem is the truncation of two lines, both of which deal with the difficulties of sustaining the proper kind of attention. Brockes often uses relatively free *Madrigal* verses that give many of his poems a rather prose-like quality. This poem, by contrast, features a strict trochaic octameter with a clear caesura after the first four feet.²⁴¹ The caesura here seems to work like an actual cutting-off device, mirroring the necessary interruption of what the initial lines decry as “Gewohnheit” and “Trägheit des Gemüths.” It takes considerable effort, indeed internal strife and struggle (“Kampf und Streit”) to domesticate (“bezähmen”) the tendencies of the inner and outer gaze to flee into distractions – which is why, in a typical invitation to imitate the kind of gaze demonstrated in the poem, the speaker recommends after an interjected “ach” at the center of the poem that readers should begin practicing right away. The properly attentive gaze does not come naturally but must be acquired, Brockes exhorts his readers, by exercise and practice.

²⁴⁰ Brockes, *Irdisches Vergnügen in Gott*, 1746, 8:572–73. Eight lines celebrating the creator follow.

²⁴¹ The meter may be familiar from Poe’s “Raven.”

The poem initially portrays the properly attentive attitude as a struggle between the antagonists *Aufmerksamkeit* and *Gewohnheit*. The victory of attention is, however, itself achieved by a form of habituation – by learning, through practice, to notice things that escape a desensitized perception. In a parallel passage from the poem “Die Kunst vernünftig sehen zu lernen,” Brockes explicitly invites the reader to *become accustomed* to an attentive way of seeing (“dich nur ... gewöhnen”) and to teach this art to children by having them practice sketching.²⁴² The true struggle thus unfolds between *two different forms* of habituated attention: one that develops automatically and is blunted by factors like “Trägheit des Gemüths” and blindly following “Andrer Irrenden Exempel”; and another one – the art of attention Brockes propagates – that is cultivated through conscious practice. That the two can even enter into a struggle is indeed predicated on the fact that they are different varieties of the same malleable behavior. If the blindness of humans were a fault of human nature – a mark, say, of original sin – it could only be mourned, not corrected and improved. The art of attention can only be learned because *inattention* is *itself* a form of habituated behavior.

What this art entails is suggested by the metric pattern of the word *Aufmerksamkeit*, which receives a suggestive stress on the usually unstressed *merk* syllable in Brockes’s poems.²⁴³ The proper attention concentrates the mind and the gaze into a single point (“auf

²⁴² Brockes, *Irdisches Vergnügen in Gott*, 1740, 6:304.

²⁴³ In “Mittel gegen die Unachtsamkeit,” the stress of *Aufmerksamkeit* can – especially in the first occurrence of the term – also be interpreted as a *deviation* from Brockes’s usually highly regular meter that *preserves* the natural stress. Whether the meter is interpreted as overriding the natural stress or the natural stress the meter – both occurrences of the *Aufmerksamkeit* mark centers of rhythmic tension in the poem. (The unusual stress of “Aufmerksamkeit” on the second syllable is more unambiguous in poems such as “Iris Persica” and “Betrachtung des Mondscheins” and many others; *Irdisches Vergnügen in Gott*, 1747, 3:588; Brockes, *Irdisches Vergnügen in Gott*, 1744, 1:50.)

einen Punkt ... ziehn") in order to selectively take note (*auf-merken*) of details, one by one.²⁴⁴ Brockes's art of attention thus consists in scanning the visual field with a laser-like focus in order register minutiae missed by a habitually inattentive gaze. This focus on previously overlooked details is the key ("Schlüssel") to the *Vergnügen* promised in the title of Brockes's poetry collection: The discovery of new worlds of visibility in front of everyone's eyes fills the soul with pleasurable wonder and amazement ("Bewunderung").

The art of attention does, however, not end with this selective taking note of details. If it did, the chain of focused perceptions resulting from this technique would fall back into the unruly dispersion of things it was called upon to remedy.²⁴⁵ At least in its programmatic form – whether Brockes's poems live up to this ideal is another matter to consider later – the focused gaze is therefore paired with the mind's capacity to draw the perceived details together into a unity. Mirroring Wolff's two-step of selective "Aufmercksamkeit" and successive "Reflexion"²⁴⁶ that also informed Breitinger's poetics, Brockes's analytic gaze is followed up by a synthetic moment. This second step is not explicitly elaborated in the "Mittel gegen die Unachtsamkeit" but regularly invoked in parallel poems. In the aptly titled poem "Bewährtes Mittel für die Augen," for instance, Brockes explicitly follows up the dissolution of the visual field into discrete

²⁴⁴ In a parallel poem, the "tunnel vision" implied in focusing on one small part of the visual field only is physically represented by a hand folded like a telescope in front of the speaker's eye: "Man darf nur bloß von unsern Händen die eine Hand zusammenfalten,/Und sie vors Auge, in der Form von einem Perspective, halten;/So wird sich, durch die kleine Oeffnung, von den dadurch gesehnen Sachen/Ein Theil der allgemeinen Landschaft, zu einer eignen Landschaft machen." See the canonical poem "Bewährtes Mittel für die Augen" in *Irdisches Vergnügen in Gott*, 1748, 7:660–63.

²⁴⁵ Langen calls this phenomenon that can sometimes result from the "rationalistischen Grundsatz der Vereinzelung" a "Bilderkette"; Langen, *Anschauungsformen in der deutschen Dichtung des 18. Jahrhunderts*, 26.

²⁴⁶ See the description of this process in the introduction. Brockes describes successive attention to details in terms almost identical to Wolff's *Deutsche Metaphysik* in the poem Sinn=reiche Bestrafung der Unachtsamkeit": The goal of attention is, "[etwas] nach allen Theilen durchzugehen"; Brockes, *Irdisches Vergnügen in Gott*, 1753, 4:123.

details by the effort, “zu einer Einheit sie zu ziehn.”²⁴⁷ As in philosophical cognition, the details registered by an attentive gaze are to be recombined into a unity whose composition is now transparent in its parts.

The “Bewunderung” that concludes Brockes’s reflection on the art of attention furthermore points to the cultural *dispositif* of “wonder” as a source for Brockes’s poetic practice. Again paralleling Breitinger’s theory of poetic representation, Brockes’s poetic practice is inspired by the mutation of the wonder *dispositif* that reimagined wonder not in terms of an inherent extraordinariness of things but as the effect of a *defamiliarizing gaze* that breaks with habits of seeing in order to reveal something *as* extraordinary. In Brocke’s poem, “Bewunderung” is not the precipitating emotion that sparks attentive observation but the reward of having *mastered* the self-discipline at the heart of the art of attention.

All things considered, Brockes’s poetic reflection on “Mittel gegen die Unachtsamkeit” documents the connection between the *internal* discipline of a technique and a way of relating to *external* nature – or rather to nature *as* something external, as a set of objects mediated by the distance sense of vision. Learning the art attention extricates perception from habitual stimulus-response loops that fuse inside and outside in thoughtless automatisms. It thereby distances things as external objects than can be deliberately inspected, observed, and admired as if from afar. Brockes’s best-selling poetry, with its implicit and often explicit invitations to adopt his way of seeing, functions not least as a medium for the dissemination of a specific

²⁴⁷ Brockes, *Irdisches Vergnügen in Gott*, 1748, 7:660.

perceptual habitus among a general readership, well beyond the lecture halls and scientific societies where the technique of attention was formulated as an explicit epistemic program.

Seeing and Describing

The characterization of Brockes's poetic reflections on *Aufmerksamkeit* as "meta-poetological" suggested that when talking about attention, Brockes does not simply discuss one subject matter among others but addresses the central problem of his poetics. In this section, I will suggest that this is indeed the case, and that the technique of structuring objects discussed under the heading of attention also informs poems where attention does not become thematic. The general shape of the attentive gaze outlined by Brockes – narrowing the focus to parts which are observed one after another until their connection becomes evident – is also, I propose, the general shape of Brockes's descriptive poetic technique. For Brockes, detailed description is thus above all a way of *casting attention in writing*, and vicariously demonstrating to an audience how things are to be considered with the proper attention – "wie man die Sachen von Stücke zu Stücke mit Vernunft und Ueberlegung anschauen soll,"²⁴⁸ as Breitinger, too, characterized the mission of poetry.²⁴⁹

As several commentators have noted, Brockes's mission of spreading a certain type of epistemic gaze connects his poetic technique closely with the techniques of knowledge production employed in the contemporary natural sciences. Several recurring type of poems demonstrate this affinity in an especially pronounced way. These include Brockes's frequent

²⁴⁸ Breitinger, *Critische Dichtkunst*, 1:28.

²⁴⁹ Breitinger praises Brockes's several times in the *Critische Dichtkunst* for his focus on revealing the marvels of the natural world, see, for instance, *ibid.*, 1:117.

descriptions of plants, which, as Ulrich Kinzel has demonstrated, correspond closely to naturalists' practices of describing and categorizing plants according to the spatial arrangement, form, quantity, and magnitude of salient features or marks (*Merkmale*).²⁵⁰ Similar connections to contemporaneous scientific practice have been suggested for Brockes's poetic observations of celestial bodies, whether with or without telescopes.²⁵¹ Christiane Frey has suggested that Brockes's poetic descriptions of small creatures like insects and worms through microscopes and magnifying glasses follow the protocol of experimental reports established in the context of the Royal Society in specifying observer position, instrument and mode of observation, and finally the observed object.²⁵² Such reports were not only meant to facilitate replications, but aimed to produce – much like Brockes's ekphrastic technique – the effect of “virtual witnessing,” defined by Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer as “the production in a reader's mind of such an image of an experimental scene as obviates the necessity for either direct witness or replication.”²⁵³ As noted earlier, the scientific regime of observation was itself defined by

²⁵⁰ Kinzel, “Von der Naturbeschreibung zur ‘literarischen Biologie,’” 75–87. Kinzel bases his analysis on the characterization of natural history in Foucault's *The Order of Things*, esp. 136-179; 287-304. Of course, not hundred percent correspondence – Kinzel as Foucauldian has to claim – recent criticisms?

²⁵¹ See Richter, “Teleskop und Mikroskop in Brockes' Irdischem Vergnügen in Gott”; Rössler, “Gedankenreisen der Aufklärung.”

²⁵² Frey, “The Art of Observing the Small,” 384. The invocations of “observation” in an “experimental” protocol is no coincidence. In contrast to the modern opposition between “passive” observation and “active” experiment, observations and experiments were seen as closely related practices in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; if a difference was made, it was between (basic) observations “under natural conditions” and experiments as observations “under artificial conditions”; see Daston, “The Empire of Observation, 1600-1800,” 83–87. The connection of Brockes's poetic technique and practices of experimentation in the context of the *Royal Society* is also emphasized in Kreienbrock, “‘Merk's! Merk's!,” 242–44.

²⁵³ Shapin and Schaffer, *Leviathan and the Air-Pump*, 60. The passage is also quoted in Steinmann, *Absehen-Wissen-Glauben*, 12 who identifies virtual witnessing with *evidentia* as the rhetorical underpinning of experimental knowledge production.

specific techniques of attentiveness. Parallel to experimental reports, the virtual witnessing of Brockes's poems thus *makes readers pay attention like a scientist*.

The stakes of Brockes's poetics can be elaborated on the basis of "Betrachtungen aus der Anatomie," one of Brockes's anatomical poems.²⁵⁴ A rather typical poem from *Irdisches Vergnügen* as far as setup, structure, length, and rhetorical devices are concerned, the poem features a subject matter that combines several of the main threads that characterize Brockes's descriptive technique. As an anatomical investigation of the mechanism of the human body, it stages a primal scene of early modern scientific observation.²⁵⁵ More importantly, however, the "dissection" of the visual field characteristic of Brockes's attentive technique becomes quite literal in the anatomical scene, recommending the poem as a test case for my claim that attention's *structuring of perception* and the *structure of objects* constituted by this technique are indeed equivalent.

Betrachtungen aus der Anatomie.

Begierig, doch mit ein'ger Abkehr, fast bald verwirrt vor Lust und Grauen,
Erstaunens= und Bewundrungs=voll, nahm ich, aus Carpsers kluger Hand,
In seinem Hause, Menschen=Knochen, woran der Sehnen zähes Band,
Mit grosser Sorgfalt aufgetrocknet, in ihrer Lag annoch zu schauen,
Die er aus Franckreich mitgebracht, nicht ohn Gemüths=Bewegung, hin.
Ich dachte, daß sie das vor kurtzen gewesen, was ich jetzo bin;
Ich dachte, wo ihr Geist wohl sey. Die Augen liefen hin und wieder,
Und, in den Augen, meine Seele auf die vom Rumpf getrennten Glieder.
Es war ein Fuß und eine Hand, ein Knie und auch ein Ellenbogen,
Woran ich, nach besiegtm Eckel, wie sich der Geist zurecht gezogen,

²⁵⁴ Others include "Gedanken bey der Section eines Körpers" and "Die wächserne Anatomie." Alexander Košenina discusses Brockes in the context of "Anatomie, Vivisektion und Plastination in Gedichten der Frühen Neuzeit" but surprisingly makes no mention of this poem.

²⁵⁵ For anatomical observations as a formative influence on the eighteenth-century paradigm of observation, see Zelle, "Experiment, Observation, Self-Observation"; Singy, "Huber's Eyes." In its original usage, the "physico-" modifier in "physico-theology," too, referred not to nature as a whole, but to human *physis* as a product of divine providence; see Steinmann, *Absehen-Wissen-Glauben*, 19–20.

Und der Natur Geschafft erwog, Bewundrungs=werthe Wunder fand.
 Zumal kam mir die Hand beträchtlich, und so bewunders=würdig vor,
 Daß ich fast alle Kraft, zu dencken, bey diesem Wunder-Werck, verlohrt.
 Nicht nur die Nägel, die Gelencke, die Sehnen, die den Stricken gleich,
 Erfüllten meinen ernsten Sinn. Die Brücken, die wie starcke Rollen,
 Die Seilen-förmgen Sehnen decken, und wehren, wenn wir greifen wollen,
 Daß sie uns nicht im Wege seyn, sind auch nicht minder Wunder=reich;
 Sie sind, an jeglichem Gelenke, zu diesem Endzweck, mit Bedacht,
 In einer unergründlichen und weisen Absicht, fest gemacht.²⁵⁶

The poem begins with the familiar moment of nausea and confusion that is soon overcome by a proper adjustment of the gaze, again catalyzed by a technique of producing wonder that makes even unseemly phenomena visually attractive. The body presented to the viewer comes ready-made into distinct parts. After a first inventory (foot, hand, knee, elbow), the speaker further focuses the gaze on the details of one of these parts – the severed bone-hand that appears particularly “beträchtlich” to him.²⁵⁷ Brockes’s non-idiomatic usage of the word “beträchtlich” prefigures the double-sidedness of his descriptive technique. Like English “considerable,” “beträchtlich” usually denotes the objective quality of being substantial or significant. Brockes, however, plays on the root of “betrachten,” characterizing the hand as something that calls out for being *betrachtet* or considered/observed. The quality of an object and the practice of observation thus critically merge at the moment that launches the first of Brockes’s poetic *Betrachtungen*.²⁵⁸

²⁵⁶ Brockes, *Irdisches Vergnügen in Gott*, 1740, 6:330–32.

²⁵⁷ Perhaps he chooses the hand because it has just been *handed* to the speaker by the owner of these human relics, conveniently named Carpser (!) – apparently the actual name, despite the suggestive connotations, of a physician friend of Brockes’s in Hamburg, who owned a large bone collection. See Mauser, *Konzepte aufgeklärter Lebensführung*, 244.

²⁵⁸ Adding a further level of complexity, the word “Betrachtung” itself oscillates between (physical) observation and (mental) contemplation or even meditation.

Rhetorically speaking, the ensuing description of the hand is an example of Brockes's standard technique of *evidentia*, vivid visualization by means of detailed description.²⁵⁹ By recounting one part of the hand after another – nails, joints, sinews, ligaments, then cartilage and bones, as well as some details about their arrangement – the description is designed to compose in the reader's a clear image of the severed bone-hand. Brockes's description reproduces the successive focus on parts and their relations prescribed by the epistemology of attention. Rhetorical *evidentia* thus turns into a form of "evidence." "Evidence" and "self-evidence" were central terms in the scientific methodology and philosophical epistemology in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.²⁶⁰ In an age when (as exemplified by Descartes's *Meditations*) the reliability of knowledge was subjected to systematic doubt, certainty was recovered in privileged forms of epistemic visibility – whether, as in Descartes, in clear and distinct perceptions before the eye of the mind, or the production of controlled first-hand experience in scientific observations and experiments.²⁶¹

As the poet of the scientific gaze, Brockes oscillates between both types of *evidentia*. This makes him, in the first instance, a privileged case for studying the rhetorical deep structure of a certain kind of epistemic visibility – the *evidentia* of evidence, as it were. From the beginning, Brockes's performance of the visibility is overlaid with similes – "den Stricken gleich," "wie starcke Rollen," "Seilen-förmig" – that go beyond the description of visual details

²⁵⁹ See Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, sec. 8.61-8.7.

²⁶⁰ Rüdiger Campe has identified the concept of evidence as a fundamental problem in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century epistemology in a number of scholarly articles in the past two decades including "Shapes and Figures—Geometry and Rhetoric in the Age of Evidence"; "Epoche der Evidenz. Knoten in einem terminologischen Netzwerk zwischen Descartes und Kant"; "'Improbable Probability': On Evidence in the Eighteenth Century."

²⁶¹ See again Campe, "Epoche der Evidenz. Knoten in einem terminologischen Netzwerk zwischen Descartes und Kant," 25–32.

in suggesting that the arrangement of parts in the hand is explicable along the lines of a human-made mechanism. On the basis of the same analogy but lacking the comparative particle, a further level of explanation appears with the final clause, “daß sie uns nicht im Wege seyn”: like in a human artifact, the arrangement of parts can be explained by the *purpose* the mechanism fulfills – in this case, the (overdetermined) purpose of *grasping* (“wenn wir greifen wollen”). The finalistic explanation of the hand-mechanism is then taken at face value, as the evident property of an object that is now seen as product of a premediated act of (divine) production – “zu diesem Endzweck, mit Bedacht, ... gemacht.”

After describing in detail the marvelously purposive arrangement of another body part (the knee), the speaker shifts his attention from the inspected object to the meta-level of reflection:

Indem ich nun mit ernstem Dencken der künstlichen Gelencke Bau,
Der aller Menschen Kunst und Wissen, an Kunst weit übersteigt, beschau:
Befällt mich recht ein heilger Schauer; mein Geist scheint, einen andern Geist,
Der auf ganz andre Weise wirckt, der mehr, und andre Weisheit weis,
(kann ich ihn selber gleich nicht sehn) in seinen Wirckungen zu finden.
Indem ich sein Geschäft erwege: So deucht mich, daß ich ihn verspüre,
Daß ich ihm nahe sey, ja gleichsam, daß mein Geist diesen Geist berühre.
An einer Ehrfurcht, welche sich in meinem ganzen Wesen reget,
Wenn meine Seele seine Wercke, mit rechter Achtsamkeit, erweget,
Erkenn ich seine Gegenwart. [...] ²⁶²

The reflection invokes the first analogy – according to which the anatomy of the body is intelligible as an artful construction – as the basis for a further tropological maneuver. As a construction that is *like* human art but at the same time *far beyond* human art, the construction of the joints reveals a producer that is *like* a human mind (a spirit), but at the same time *far*

²⁶² Brockes, *Irdisches Vergnügen in Gott*, 1740, 6:330–32.

beyond human limitations (a mega-spirit). The metonymy at stake here is, to be sure, not present as an ornament of speech on the sentence level – say, as the substitution of cause for effect, of producer for product – but as a deep-structural trope organizing the epistemic gaze and its linguistic orchestration. As in the gradual built-up of the analogy above, initial markers of the “as if” status of the tropological substitution (“scheint ... zu finden“; “deucht mich, daß...“; “sey” and “berühre” as subjunctives) eventually give way to the unqualified *recognition* of the creator in the creature. Moving from semblance to knowledge and from appearance to epistemic evidence, the speaker declares without qualification: “Erkenn ich seine Gegenwart.” To be precise, the metonymic substitution includes an additional step. It is in the overwhelming *feeling* of awe inspired by the creature that the creator is finally recognized. This is the rhetorical-affective side, as it were, of the manual of seeing that is Brockes *Irdisches Vergnügen in Gott*.

On the basis of the (seeming) recognition, the last four lines of the poem perform a final tropological maneuver characteristic of Brockes’s poetic gaze (and physicotheological and natural-teleological thought in general):

Weil, ob er es unmittelbar, wie, oder mittelbar verricht,
Was in der wirckenden Natur Bewundrungs=würdiges geschicht,
Ihm doch die Ehr allein gebührt, da er allein Kraft, Seyn und Leben
Den Creaturen, welche geistig, auch welche körperlich, gegeben.²⁶³

In a final synecdoche, the presence of the divine discovered in two anatomical specimens – a severed bone-hand and knee – are taken (*pars pro toto*) to reveal the work of God in the whole of creation.

²⁶³ Ibid.

The diagnosis of a pervasive rhetoricity in a poetry that sets out to *describe* things in quasi-scientific artlessness throws into sharp relief the question of the relation between rhetoric and referent. The most obvious conclusion to draw from the reading of the “Betrachtungen aus der Anatomie” is that it fails to capture any reality other than itself; that, rather than opening up onto things as they are, Brockes’s language is from the beginning tangled up in its own maneuvers, and Brockes’s gaze sees nowhere anything but its own reflection. After all, the poem seems to say as much itself. It begins with a wandering gaze in search of the evaporated spirit in the bones and decides to supplement his own soul for it, located (of course) in his wandering eye – “Ich dachte, wo ihr Geist wohl sey. Die Augen liefen hin und wieder, / Und, in den Augen, meine Seele auf die vom Rumpf getrennten Glieder.” In the final lines, the ocular animation appears completed, and a spirit finally looks back at the speaker from out of the anatomical specimen.

Description and Historical Epistemology: The Spirit in the Bone

Assessing the relation between rhetoric and referent, the verdict on this type of descriptive poetry (especially by structuralist and poststructuralist critics) has typically been that it presents a case of *instructive failure*. In the heyday of (post-)structuralism, Michael Riffaterre took Enlightenment descriptive poetry as a test case for the self-sufficiency of literary writing in general: “Le genre descriptif, plus que toute autre forme littéraire, semblait devoir s’ouvrir sur la réalité. Il ne’en est rien : toutes les formes de la mimesis n’y font autre chose que

créer une *illusion* de réalité.”²⁶⁴ If it turns out that even descriptive poetry with its claim to capture reality is concerned only with itself – then surely this must be the case for all genres of literary writing.²⁶⁵ Writing forty years later but informed by the same basic set of assumptions, Heinz Drügh recently arrived more or less at the same diagnosis, with the added twist that the vice of descriptive poetry becomes its hidden virtue. Channeling Lessing through de Man, Drügh tries to show (in reference to Brockes and other descriptive writing) that attempts to describe reality are bound to produce a dense verbiage that blocks rather than grants access to extra-textual reality – with the effect that such texts become particularly self-enclosed. Because it fails so miserably, Drügh suggests, descriptive poetry is the better self-reflexive literature.²⁶⁶

If we will try to re-evaluate Brockes’s descriptive poetry not as *instructive failure* but as something closer to an *instructive success* – then not because it succeeds at what Riffaterre and Drügh have demonstrated such poetry cannot accomplish, namely, adequately capture an external referent in linguistic terms. If this is the bar set for descriptive success, the diagnosis of inadequacy is inevitable. That description fails in this sense is at the same time true and – especially after the four decades of (post)structuralist scholarship framed by Riffaterre’s and Drügh’s interventions – rather unenlightening. That description in this sense is bound to fail was already demonstrated by Hegel in the first chapter of the *Phenomenology*. When prompted to explain what it means by reality, the attitude of “sense certainty,” which takes the real as an immediate presence to the senses to which it can point “here” and “now,” is unable to say

²⁶⁴ Riffaterre, “Système d’un genre descriptif,” 30. Emphasis in original.

²⁶⁵ Riffaterre’s and related scholarship on descriptive poetry is critically discussed in Joanna Stalnaker’s lucid study on description in the eighteenth-century France, *The Unfinished Enlightenment*, here esp. 4-5, 24-26.

²⁶⁶ The section on Brockes in Drügh’s attempt to elaborate an aesthetics of description from the eighteenth to the twentieth century can be found at Drügh, *Ästhetik der Beschreibung*, 32–134.

what it *means*. Sense certainty, Hegel says, would have to pile descriptions on descriptions until it realizes that reality *understood in its (naïve) sense* is constitutively unreachable to language.²⁶⁷

The example from Hegel indicates, however, how to proceed in the case of such failures; namely, by questioning the assumptions that have led to the impasse. The way to go beyond Drügh's and Riffaterre's characterization is therefore to locate the failure not in descriptive poetry itself but in assumptions such as the opposition between reality and illusion (so crassly juxtaposed in Riffaterre's verdict) or the understanding of language as a self-enclosed system on the far side of an abyss that separates it from external reality, as Drügh sets up the problem. To come to a different understanding of Brookes's poetic practice, it will therefore be necessary to challenge the notion that illusion *stands in the way of* describing reality, and the notion that the reality described stands opposed to or is external to language.

The objects described in "Betrachtungen aus der Anatomie" provide a felicitous example for challenging these oppositions. The anatomical samples described by the speaker are at the same time the epitome of a pronouncedly natural object – the merely natural *within* the human – and a highly artificial one. Human *physis* or physique is, after all, handed to him in the form of a carefully prepared ("Mit grosser Sorgfalt aufgetrocknet") anatomical specimen. It is an anatomy *made for the gaze*, as the word specimen from Latin *specere* ("to look at") suggests – and not just any kind of gaze. Cut up into parts, skinned to reveal the inside structure to a

²⁶⁷ "Wenn sie wirklich dieses Stück Papier, das sie meinen, *sagen* wollten, ... so ist dies unmöglich, weil das sinnliche Diese, das gemeint wird, der Sprache, die dem Bewußtsein, dem an sich allgemeinen, angehört, *unerreichbar* ist. Unter dem wirklichen Versuche, es zu sagen, würde es daher vermodern; die seine Beschreibung angefangen, könnten sie nicht vollenden, sondern müßten sie ändern überlassen ..."; Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, 77 (§110).

viewer, stripped of the decaying flesh, the specimens are the perfect match for a gaze that attentively observes the component parts of the body machine. And if this gaze is sustained by a series of rhetorical maneuvers, these are not located on the side of the text alone. The harnessing of the emotions of wonder and curiosity as antidotes against the disgust of having parts cut off a human corpse; the analogy between natural and human works that governs the skinning, drying, and preserving of specific functional units of the corpse for anatomical observation; the metonymic and synecdochic operations that legitimate scientific research as a kind of natural liturgy and overcome long-standing taboos against the dissection of corpses, so that the specimens could be legally sold and transferred into a physician's anatomical cabinet – all these operations re-enacted in Brockes's gaze are not only *not opposed to* but *went into producing* the system of anatomical observation in early modern Europe that Brockes then describes. Seen in this light, the claim that the specimens return the speaker's gaze is no longer so preposterous. There is indeed plenty of *Geist* stored up in these bones, although perhaps not the kind Brockes suspects.

It might appear that the anatomy-poem provides a special case that cannot be generalized for descriptive poetry as a whole, but which perhaps only applies to a subset of descriptions of human-made or human-processed objects. The bones are, after all, physically prepared and shaped in ways that other objects described by Brockes (plants, rivers, or insects) surely are not. Apart from the fact that Brockes indeed prefers domesticated nature – most of the flowers in his poems grow in gardens, the rivers are regulated – the complex preparation of objects by a network of relations also applies to objects that remain physically unchanged, even if this preparation is less obvious than in the anatomy poem, where it is, as it were,

incarnated in the physical makeup of the specimen. When Brockes's attentive inspects insects in his garden, for instance, they appear to him no less as a collection of anatomical body parts, even if the dissection remains only visual in this case: "Die seltsame Figur, / Den runden klaren Kopf, der nichts als Auge scheint, / So manchen Fuß, der sich fast mit dem Kopf vereint, / Den dünnen langen Leib, [...]."²⁶⁸ What Brockes performs here (and elsewhere) is the description of an object as it appears within a certain apparatus or *dispositif* of the "anatomical gaze" – within a certain institution of attention. We might thus seem to have arrived at the same impasse we attempted to circumvent. If the actual topic of Brockes's descriptive poetry is not an external object but what we might call congealed attention, or a certain form of structuring objects, and therefore an already mediated form of reality – then it appears that we are again faced with the impossibility of getting beyond the self-referential play of the text, only now totalized from the poem to historical forms of knowing in general.

To undo this impression, we will have to question the reality/illusion dichotomy more radically, on the basis of the epistemological insight that a certain type of illusion (reduction, partiality, self-reflexivity, contingency) is not an obstacle to cognition, but a condition of its possibility: the lack of any illusion would entail an information overload that would make dealing with reality impossible.²⁶⁹ Non-illusory (which is to say, non-reductive) cognition would be as useless as a Borgesian map that is as large as the empire it charts. Cognition – and we

²⁶⁸ Brockes, *Irdisches Vergnügen in Gott*, 1724, 2:304.

²⁶⁹ This is a central insight of what Niklas Luhmann calls a constructivist epistemology: "[Der alte Skeptizismus] hatte die Möglichkeit einer festen, wahrheitsfähigen Beziehung zwischen Erkenntnis und Realität *nur bezweifelt*, weil alles immer anders sein kann, während man heute sieht, daß eine solche Beziehung *gar nicht bestehen darf*, weil dies zu einer Überlastung mit Informationen führen und Erkenntnis damit ausschließen würde"; Luhmann, *Beobachtungen der Moderne*, 95.

might say the same of Brockes's cognitively oriented practice of description – is not less real for being “rhetorical” and illusory. To consider the example of the anatomical gaze exemplified by Brockes, the analogy of body and human-made machine (to pick but one aspect) was instrumental in producing knowledge about the workings of blood circulation, respiration, and the function of organs without which the writer of this text (and likely its readers as well) would long be dead.²⁷⁰ Illusory knowledge is as real as it gets.

This does of course not mean that it is therefore beyond critique. Quite the contrary, acknowledging the productive moment of illusion enables a form of critique – and a form of criticism – that can do more than point out the illusory nature of attempts to capture reality and instead develop a sensorium for the uses and abuses of specific reality-illusions. The point of such critique and criticism is not to show *that* cultural artifacts render reality invisible, but *how, what, and by which (rhetorical) means* they render invisible (and thereby visible).²⁷¹

We might summarize the argument of this excursus by rephrasing Riffaterre's dictum about descriptive poetry: if even a genre of poetry that claims to describe reality pure and simple is, in fact, concerned with the enabling illusions of a historical understanding of reality – then surely, this must be true for other forms of literary writing that do not claim to be dealing with a reality stripped of illusions in the first place. By these lights, we might imagine a similar re-imagining of the practice of rhetorical reading as a mode of reading that attends both to the

²⁷⁰ On the history of anatomy in this context, see Daston and Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150-1750*, 173–214; Košenina, “Anatomie, Vivisektion und Plastination in Gedichten der Frühen Neuzeit.”

²⁷¹ A good example of this kind of critique is W.G. Sebald's discussion of *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp* in *Die Ausgewanderten*, where Sebald exposes the anatomical gaze as way of rendering invisible aspects of the body and the flesh that exceed the body's usefulness as an instrument of work.

real-existence of the figurative in forms of cultural mediation and to the ability of texts to reflect, reconfigure, and question the real on the basis of crafting and subverting such forms.

All of this comes with an important caveat. This characterization of Brockes's poetry disregards (just as Drügh and Riffaterre) what Brockes takes himself to be doing for a meta-discourse that knows it better. For this procedure to be more than a simple substitution of the poet's discourse by the critic's, we will have to develop the problem of illusion and reality out of Brockes's poetry itself. How, then, does Brockes conceive of the relation between reality and his own poetic practice? He is not, to be sure, a poet of "sense certainty" who believes that truth lies in perceptions as they are immediately given. The entire point of his art of attention is to develop a technique that overcomes naïve sense perception to reveal things in their unexpected complexity. In fact, Brockes may serve an example of what in Hegel's historical reflection is the recuperation of sense certainty at the level of reason. Referring to the paradigmatic epistemic practice of this shape of consciousness, Hegel calls this juncture in the developmental history of spirit "*observing reason*."²⁷²

Observing reason recalls the moment when spirit becomes self-reflexive – when it is no longer under the illusion of directly knowing objects, but goes about knowing by *making* observations – while still taking itself to do no more than reveal through this activity "the essence of things *as things*."²⁷³ The discrepancy between actively making observations while remaining under the illusion that the results of these observations constitute a finding of

²⁷² Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, 164. The translation follows the standard translation of "Beobachtende Vernunft" by Miller.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, 165 (§242). My translation and emphasis.

external essences is, according to Hegel, the immanent contradiction of this form of consciousness. It describes Brockes's conceptions of his own poetic practice strikingly well. Hegel's section on "observing reason" ends where our meta-reflection on Brockes's descriptive poetry started – with the claim that "spirit is a bone." This famous sentence juxtaposes incompatible terms in a speculative proposition that, properly understood, recasts both terms as defined by the infinite oscillation between one and the other. The equivalent juxtaposition in Brockes, I will suggest, is that between nature and art. If the presupposition of Brockes's physicotheological approach is that *nature* is (a kind of) *art*, a second and equally important presupposition of his poetic technique claims that *art* is *nature*. The following section will develop this chiasmus from within Brockes's poetry.

Matters of Perspective

The term best suited to bring into focus how Brockes understands the "art" of perception – including the complex of techniques and technologies associated with the eighteenth-century discourse on attention – is the term *Perspektiv*. In Brockes's time, the German term had a wider spectrum of meaning than today, which included not only "perspectives" in the sense familiar from modern German and English but also optical instruments of vision such as telescopes or spyglasses. In Brockes's oeuvre the neuter noun *Perspektiv* regularly appears both in the sense of an optical instrument and in the sense of a perspectival gaze running from a specific point of view (*Gesichtspunkt*) toward a single focal

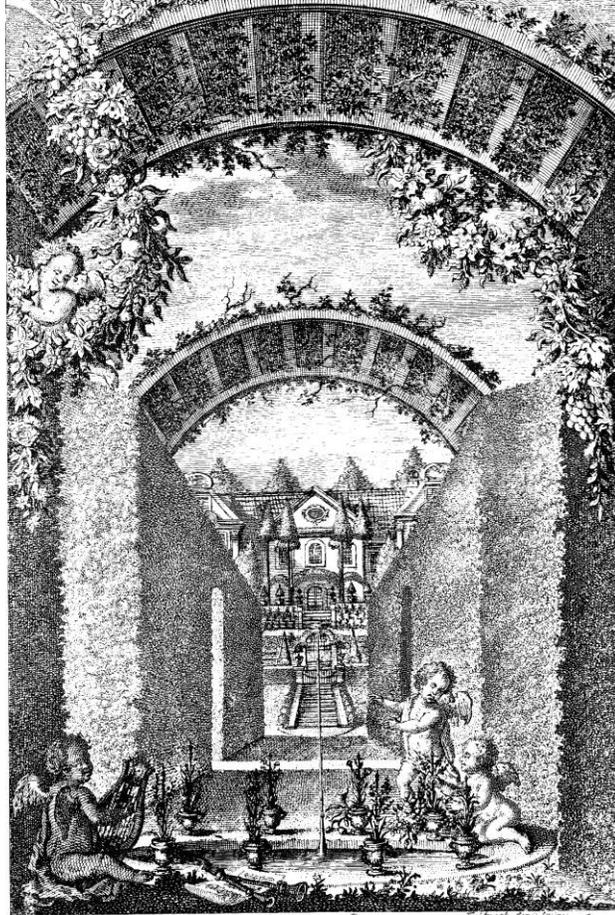
point (*Augpunkt*).²⁷⁴ Such a gaze was also the model along which Brockes's reflection on attention imagined the "tunnel vision" of attention – as a kind of embodied telescope that "zooms in" on one part of the visual field. The question of devices of vision in both senses of *Perspektiv* is thus intimately related to the question of the partiality of perception at the heart of the epistemological quandaries surrounding *Aufmerksamkeit*.

Philosophically, the term is interesting because it has become the shibboleth of a kind of epistemological relativism. That knowledge is "perspectival" suggests that it is marred by a limited standpoint and reflects only a one-sided, necessarily incomplete picture of the whole. Similarly, *Perspektiv* in the sense of optical instruments are associated with the historical moment when, as Joseph Vogl argued with regard to Galileo's telescope, knowledge became media-dependent;²⁷⁵ when it became obvious that there is a mismatch between the human senses and a world that includes stars too distant and micro-creatures too small for the naked eye to see, so that access to reality is contingent on different forms of technical mediation.

In Brockes, *Perspektiv* both of the built and of the personal variety do not yet carry these connotations – and often, in fact, rather take on a significance opposed to the partiality we tend to ascribe to the term. Brockes's sense of perspective and its cultural-historical context are on display in the frontispiece to the eighth volume of his *Irdisches Vergnügen*:

²⁷⁴ Gustav Langen has described the gaze from a specific *Gesichtspunkt* to a focal *Augpunkt* as one of the dominant *Anschauungsformen* of German eighteenth-century poetry; Langen, *Anschauungsformen in der deutschen Dichtung des 18. Jahrhunderts*, 7. Without citing sources, Steigerwald claims that the neuter noun "Perspektiv" and feminine "Perspektive" were consistently used to differentiate between "telescope" (neuter) and "perspective" (feminine) in Brockes's context and by Brockes himself. This is not the case, as indicated by poems like Brockes's "Gedancken über ein Perspektiv," a poem that reflects on *central perspective* rather than telescopic viewing. The two terms are less clearly delineated against each other in Brockes's oeuvre than Steigerwald suggests. See Steigerwald, "Das göttliche Vergnügen des Sehens," 24.

²⁷⁵ Vogl, "Medien-Werden."



Von allen Schmuck der ganzen Erde. Gras, Kräutern Blumen, Bäumen und Früchten
 sind Gärten recht der Stubeort. Es läßt sich die Natur, wie sehen,
 sie, so in ihrer eignen Pracht, als mit der Kunst, Verlich nicht, ist,
 Genießen wir sie, Gott zum Preise; so handelt wir nach weyern Pflichten.

Figure 7: Frontispiece to volume eight of Brockes's *Irdisches Vergnügen in Gott*

Looking past a conspicuously inconspicuous foreground composed of pastoral motifs, the actual subject matter of the engraving seems to be the cone-like shape of the perspectival gaze itself. Like the encasement of a spyglass, the hedges limit peripheral vision and conduct the gaze toward the vanishing point, their edges marking vanishing lines that converge just below the main entrance to the building. The parallel rungs of the overgrown arches further contribute to the perspectival convergence, as does the line in the bottom center that presumably represents a spout of water shooting up from the basin but above all marks the direct line of sight. What is

true for the spout applies to all elements in the middleground of the engraving: they mark the outlines of perspectival vision and are, in this sense, central perspective incarnate.

The engraving's exhibition of perspective is, of course, facilitated by its subject matter. On a representational level, it depicts the central axis of a French formal garden, carefully constructed to provide such views from ideal observer positions. The depicted scene is already a material embodiment of the laws of optical perspective so that the artist can, as it were, draw the perspective from the subject matter itself. The elements that realize the perspectival cone – wall-like hedges and overhead arches that tie growth to structure – are examples of a thoroughly artificial nature; a nature that exists only to fill in a geometric master plan. In the self-understanding of formal French garden design the garden was seen as an extension of the architecture of the mansion with the goal of manifesting an ideal architectonic that underlies built as well as natural environments. And so the façade of the mansion at the entrance to which the perspective converges appears like the natural telos of the gaze – and one that, indeed seems to look back at the observer: the pediment of the building in the center of the engraving features an oculus, a circular window suspended in a triangle like the eye of providence, overseeing the garden landscape from above. The epigram underscores the harmony of art, nature, and the divine suggested in the engraving:

Von allen Schmuck der gantzen Erde, Graß, Kräutern Bluhmen, Bäum und Früchte[n]
sind Gärten recht der Inbegriff. Hier läßt sich die Natur, wie schön,
sie, so in ihrer eignen Pracht, als mit der Kunst Verschwistert, sehn.
Geniessen wir sie, Gott zum Preise; so handeln wir nach unsern Pflichten²⁷⁶

²⁷⁶ Brockes, *Irdisches Vergnügen in Gott*, 1746, 8:frontispiece.

The epigram evokes, like that of Gottsched's frontispiece, a *cosmic* view of nature as adorned and magnificent order – *all* splendor of the *entire* earth is exemplarily gathered, the verses maintain, in the perspectival arrangement depicted above. To the eyes of the Brockessian observer, nature shines forth in its inherent beauty in this scene, distilled to its own geometrical essence and in this, *intertwined* with art – siblings of identical parentage, as the German *verschwistert* suggests. In the epigram's concluding line, the entire construction – art, nature, and the observer's gaze – converge in a praise of the divine as the lines of sight do in a single vanishing point.

This equation of perspectival convergence with divine centeredness is not simply a metaphorical manner of speaking – or rather, it is not an externally imposed metaphor but a metaphor already operative in Brockes's way of seeing. The workings of this metaphor can be witnessed in action in the poem "Gedancken über ein Perspektiv,"²⁷⁷ which enacts a scene of observation similar to that depicted on the frontispiece. Gazing down a shaded alley, the observer is fascinated "daß alles sich zuletzt in ein klein Pünctchen zieht"²⁷⁸ – that everything contracts into a single point in accordance with the laws of central perspective. This observation, however, does not lead him to reflect on the perspectival conditions of seeing and understanding in today's sense – that is, the one-sidedness, partiality, and distortions of a gaze bound to a limited standpoint. Quite the contrary: the speaker reverses the lines of sight in his gaze and instead finds "daß alles sich *aus* einem Pünctchen zieht"²⁷⁹ – that everything flows out

²⁷⁷ Brockes, *Irdisches Vergnügen in Gott*, 1753, 4:287.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, my emphasis.

of a single focal point. For Brockes, even the perspectival condition of the gaze thus turns into evidence of a world focused around a divine center.

A similar strategy for neutralizing and compensating optical distortions also informs Brockes's famous eulogies on *Perspektivs* in the other sense of optical instruments. They are for him, to quote the title of one poem, "Wunder-reiche Erfindungen,"²⁸⁰ marvelous inventions; but inventions, he is quick to add, not in the sense of something humans made up on their own, but something the divine creator has "erfinden lassen"²⁸¹ – has allowed, permitted, or even made humanity invent. The visual defamiliarization effects of optical devices – their production of hitherto unknown forms of visibility – thus do not ultimately threaten the natural adequacy of human perception. While Brockes describes such effects in great detail, he consistently interprets them as *amplifications* of the natural gaze; as an *extension* of the visual field rather than its essential alteration. Telescopes, the speaker of one poem assures, generate *more*, but not a *different* kind of visibility:

Doch darf man nicht hiebey gedenken, es sey es bloß das Glas allein
Und seine Klarheit, die ich hier ein solches Wunder heiße. Nein;
Des Auges dazu eingerichtet' und eigene Beschaffenheit,
Daß es durchs Glas gestärkt sich findet.²⁸²

The eye is already providentially designed to be supplemented by the telescopic apparatus; the supplementation itself is therefore no more than a *strengthening* of the naked eye's inherent nature.

²⁸⁰ Ibid., 4:275.

²⁸¹ Ibid., 4:276.

²⁸² "Die dritte Offenbarung" in Brockes, *Irdisches Vergnügen in Gott*, 1748, 9:438–39 my emphasis.

There are, however, occasional poems in Brockes's poetry collection in which the neutrality of the various devices of vision he explores is put into question. Doubts about the reliability of techniques and technologies of vision often crystallize in poems that speculate about other worlds – less the possible worlds of other metaphysical world edifices than the physical worlds contemporary astronomy presumed to exist in the skies. In prompting Brockes to reflect on other modes of perception, their effect is, however, similar to that of Breitinger's possible worlds.

Contingency

The following note appears in the eighth volume of Brockes's *Irdisches Vergnügen*, wedged between the New Year's poems of the years 1743 and 1745, both of which are hymns to the ubiquity of divine providence:

Das Neu=Jahr=Gedicht auf 1744, welches eine neue, aus der Verschiedenheit anderer Planeten, sowohl im Körper= als im Sittlichen, hergenommene Betrachtung des Zustandes unserer Erde, im Gegenhalt der theils bessern, theils schlechtern Umstände der andern, enthielte; ist, durch einen besondern Zufall, von Abhänden gekommen.²⁸³

Here, the state of the world would have been considered not as it *is* but as it *differs* from other worlds – *held against* the conditions that prevail or rather *could* prevail on other worlds (after all, not even the best telescopes of the time can see which conditions *actually* prevail there).

“Gegenhalt” is an antiquated term for “comparison.”²⁸⁴ The procedure announced in this note would thus have “held the world against” other worlds to arrive at a verdict about the “Zustand

²⁸³ Brockes, *Irdisches Vergnügen in Gott*, 1746, 8:411.

²⁸⁴ “Gegenhalt,” cols. 2241-2242.

der Erde.” As Brockes’s language registers, such a mode of consideration tends to see the world as a *current state* of things whose other possibilities and potential changeability are thereby presupposed.

Brockes’s note succinctly lays out the stakes of the question explored in this section. It not only suggests what it means to disclose the world in the mode of contingency – that is, as “possible in another way as well”;²⁸⁵ it also captures, through its reference to the unfortunate accident that made the publication impossible, the wavering between possibility and coincidence that defines the concept of contingency in its modern understanding.²⁸⁶ A world given in the modality of contingency can be interpreted either as “mutative and therefore accidental” or as “mutable and therefore capable of being manipulated.”²⁸⁷ Depending on which side of the distinction is accentuated, contingency can therefore indicate either a space for human agency or precisely what happens by accident and therefore lies beyond the scope of agency. Both manifestations of the modern contingency concept, however, call into question the necessity not only of this or that event, but of the world order as a whole.²⁸⁸ This

²⁸⁵ This reproduces Peter Gilgen’s rendering of Luhmann’s concise formula for contingency, which is logically defined by the double negation of being “neither necessary nor impossible” – and therefore also possible otherwise; Luhmann, *Introduction to Systems Theory*, 235.

²⁸⁶ For a good overview of the historical development of the concept of contingency, see Makropoulos, “Modernität als Kontingenzkultur.”

²⁸⁷ See Makropoulos, “Architektur und Konsum als Medien objektvermittelter Vergesellschaftung,” 52. The English translation can only approximate the meaning spectrum of Makropoulos’s juxtaposition of the two sides of contingency as “veränderlich und also zufällig” vs. “veränderbar und folglich manipulierbar.” In general, the German discourse on contingency (which is the point of reference here) functions according to a somewhat different logic than the English discussion – owing not least to the fact that, as a technical term of philosophical language, German “Kontingenz” emphasizes the strictly logical rather than the pragmatic aspects of contingency; and that German “Zufall” as one of the historical translations of contingency has valences and connotations that are not captured by any single English term.

²⁸⁸ On this point see (representative for an entire discourse) Waldenfels, “Ordnung im Potentialis. Zur Krisis der europäischen Moderne.” On the two sides of modern contingency, see also Gerhart von Graevenitz’s and Odo Marquard’s preface to the final volume of the *Forschungsgruppe Poetik und Hermeneutik on Kontingenz*, XI–XVI, XIV.

dissolution of a single and inevitable normative world order has been understood as a defining feature of European modernity. Theoretical reflections on the problem of contingency, especially in the German tradition, have therefore tended to coincide with attempts to understand what is specifically modern about the modern age.

For the present purpose of describing and contextualizing Brockes's strategy of hedging in contingency (as well as the breaking point of this strategy), it is sufficient to briefly recall two such theories. One is Hans Blumenberg's derivation of modern contingency consciousness from "the reversal of *ars* and *natura* through the idea of creation," as an early essay puts it;²⁸⁹ the other Niklas Luhmann's interpretation of the historical emergence of contingency in modernity through the figure of second order observation.²⁹⁰ The basic thought is similar in both cases: what is interpreted as *having been made* could also have been made differently or not at all, and therefore does not possess the inevitability of things assumed to exist by nature.

Artificiality thus guarantees contingency. In a general sense, the reverse holds true as well: what is recognized as contingent proves to be receptive for interventions that aim to make things different than they currently are. Blumenberg and Luhmann, however, diverge with regard to the level on which they locate this connection between artificiality and contingency.

Blumenberg explains contingency as the effect of a specific *understanding* of reality: a cosmos

²⁸⁹ My translation of the section heading "Umkehrung von *ars* und *natura* durch den Schöpfungsgedanken" from Blumenberg's untranslated essay "Das Verhältnis von Natur und Technik als philosophisches Problem," 257.

²⁹⁰ *Systematically*, the concept of contingency also plays a crucial role in Luhmann's appropriation of Bateson's concept of "double contingency" as initial condition in the genesis of social systems. In *historical* explanations of modern contingency consciousness, however, Luhmann interprets the rise of modern contingency consciousness consistently through his concept of second order observation (see Luhmann, *Beobachtungen der Moderne*). On contingency in Blumenberg and Luhmann (in the case of the latter, however, focusing on the concept of "double contingency"), see the lucid overview in Campe, "Contingencies in Blumenberg and Luhmann."

founded upon an act of creation loses its ontological inevitability and releases alternative possibilities of being that can eventually be actualized through art or technology.²⁹¹ In Luhmann, by contrast, modern contingency consciousness follows from increasingly reflexive forms of relating to the world. By observing previous forms of knowing or acting – Luhmann’s concept of observation includes both – observations of the second order reveal that what appeared in first-order observations as immediately given is, in fact, mediated by schemata that can always be chosen differently.²⁹² Blumenberg’s explanatory approach, we might summarize, focuses on the theologically founded contingency of the *world*; Luhmann’s on the contingency of *forms of relating to the world*.²⁹³

Brockes’s poetry is part of a larger intellectual-historical constellation in the early eighteenth century²⁹⁴ in which the theologically founded contingency of creation serves as the frame of reference for artificial and technological forms of relating to the world. Within this frame, the different possibilities could, on the one hand, be tied back to the necessary being and neutralized. On the other hand, it served as an incubator for a rising contingency consciousness that eventually threatened to break the frame itself. Only after the unleashing of contingency were the arts in the broad sense of techniques and technologies deemed capable

²⁹¹ For a condensed version of this argument, which is foundational for Blumenberg’s complex genealogy of modernity developed in *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit* and other works, see Blumenberg, “Nachahmung der Natur.”

²⁹² See Luhmann, *Beobachtungen der Moderne*, 98–101. On the connection between second order observation and “artificiality,” see Luhmann, *Einführung in die Systemtheorie*, 156–57; as well as *Die Kunst der Gesellschaft*, 104, 151.

²⁹³ For the purpose of a clear typology, this juxtaposition focuses on the central moments of each thinker’s theory; of course, Blumenberg and Luhmann take both types of contingency into account in their larger theoretical frameworks. See, for instance, Blumenberg’s reflections on *Nicht-Wissen*, perspectival limitations and optical media in *Die Genesis der kopernikanischen Welt*, 607–782; or Luhmann’s recurring reflections on the theological foundations of the contingency concept, elaborated in detail in *Beobachtungen der Moderne*, 106–13.

²⁹⁴ See the reading of frontispieces in chapter 1.

of doing things differently than they were provided for in an order of nature or creation – while at the same time threatening to lose their ability to ever get it “right.”

One particularly striking example from the fourth volume of the *Irdisches Vergügen* is a poem titled “Rothe Glas-Scheibe.” In this poem, the speaker’s eye is supplemented not with a microscope or telescope but, as the title suggests, with a piece of colored glass. It begins in guileless Brockes sound, only to take a quick turn for the terrifying:

Als ich jüngst mich dergestalt an der schönen Welt vergnügte,
Und, zu meiner Augen=Lust, ein Gott schuldigs Dancken fügte;
Sah’ ich dieser Landschaft Pracht, durch ein rothes Scheibgen Glas,
Mit Erstaunen, mit Vergnügen, aber halb mit Schrecken an.
Alles Grüne war dahin, roth war alles Laub und Graß²⁹⁵

In view of the color-inverted landscape, the amazement and pleasure Brockes’s speakers usually feel when experimenting with different modes of vision is mixed with terror. In the red glass pane, the eye is supplemented with a prosthesis that does not expand or contract but *colors* the field of vision. As a device whose effects cannot be neutralized in the manner in which Brockes otherwise domesticates the distortion effects of telescopes and microscopes, the tinted glass raises serious questions:

Ist das Grüne denn nicht grün? sind die Blumen denn nicht bunt?
Kan ein Umstand, der so klein,
Auszurichten fähig seyn,
Daß der gantze Kreiß der Welt anders scheint, anders wird?
Denn wer weiß, ob unser Auge sich bishero nicht geirrt.²⁹⁶

The splitting, in lines two and three, of the trochaic octameter into separate tetrameters at the caesura emphasizes the perplexity of the speaker at the little glass pane’s outsized effect. The

²⁹⁵ Brockes, *Irdisches Vergnügen in Gott*, 1739, 5:171.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 5:172.

asyndetic placing-next-to-each-other of mutually exclusive alternatives on the axis of selection – “anders scheinenen” and “anders werden,” or (only) *seeming* and (actually) *becoming* different – mirrors his main dilemma. In contrast to modifications of quantity, which are by necessity comparable by a common standard, modifications of quality lead to irreducibly different *kinds* of perception. It is not least for this reason that contemporary philosophy from Locke to Wolff sought to establish an observer-independent reality in quantitatively determinable primary qualities (such as extension and motion) while demoting *qualia* like taste, smell, and color perception to the level of observer-dependent secondary qualities. And this is also why Wolff’s magic lantern discussed in the first chapter could admit to inflating the size of projections while color and shape had to remain unchanged for the medium to remain neutral.

Things, as Wolff explains in his metaphysics, can differ in size without changing their essence – just like geometric shapes like triangles retain their properties when increased or diminished in magnitude.²⁹⁷ The gaze through the red glass pane and the unobstructed gaze, by contrast, are categorically different modes of vision irreducible to a common standard or measure. The semblance of change can therefore no longer be reduced to the uncolored gaze by a quasi-quantitative operation; which means, in turn, that the eye’s own nature provides only one possibility of seeing among others, and therefore a potentially fallible one. Indeed, the artificial modification of the gaze threatens to recoil on the naked eye:

Hätten wir ein rothes Häutchen in den Augen überkommen,
Hätte ja für uns die Welt andre Farben angenommen²⁹⁸

²⁹⁷ Wolff, *Deutsche Metaphysik*, 31 (§66).

²⁹⁸ Brockes, *Irdisches Vergnügen in Gott*, 1739, 5:172.

the speaker speculates. Faced with other possibilities of seeing, Brockes hits upon the thought that the supposedly natural gaze may not only be *artificial* – this is something he already presupposes – but *biased* by this artificiality; one art of seeing among others that merely shows the world that corresponds to its gaze. Half a century before Kant’s *Critiques* and Kleist’s letter to Wilhelmine von Zenge, Brockes articulates the suspicion that we might only ever be dealing with phenomena; with things (and Brockes’s phrase here anticipates the philosophical terminology of German Idealism) as they are “für uns,” “for us” – although they may reveal themselves differently to a different kind of gaze.²⁹⁹

The speculations about the plurality of worlds that Gottsched’s frontispiece contained within the bounds of an unlikely cosmic harmony provide Brockes with the language for further articulating the epistemological dilemma:

Und wer weiß, ob in den Cörpern, welche wir Planeten nennen,
Nicht dergleichen den Geschöpfen zugeordnet werden können,
Daß denselben alle Vorwürff’ anders, als sie würcklich, scheinen,
Und, durch ein gefärbtes Auge, sie, von Cörpern, bald vermeinen,
Daß sie roth, dort, daß sie blau, da sie doch von allem nichts,
Und nur bloß ein falsches Blendwerk eines irrenden Gesichts.
Dieser Zweifel quälte mich, und ich konnte mich nicht fassen³⁰⁰

Ostensibly a speculation about the perceptual apparatus of extraterrestrials, these lines in fact negotiate the contingency of *human* perception. What troubles the speaker is, after all, the thought that *we* could be such creatures to whom objects always appear different than they

²⁹⁹ Brockes’s formulation hits the mark of what Friedrich Kittler describes as the optical-medial genealogy of Kant’s transcendental philosophy and German Idealism; see Kittler, *Optische Medien*, 114–19.

³⁰⁰ Brockes, *Irdisches Vergnügen in Gott*, 1739, 5:172.

really are. The moments of cosmological and epistemic contingency emphasized by Blumenberg and Luhmann thus appear in their inextricable entanglement in Brockes's poem.

The subsequent lines try to make the glass pane less terrifying and save the neutrality of perception by arguing that the human eye can, thanks to divine providence, perceive different colors, while the glass tinges everything in a monotonous red.³⁰¹ But this time the speaker himself seems less than convinced by his own explanation. His thoughts therefore continue to digress into extraterrestrial regions:

Aber, ob in andern Welten, oder anderen Planeten,
Die bey uns begrünte Felder sich nicht etwan würcklich röthen
Oder blau, wie ein Sapphir, oder gelb, wie Gold, vielleicht,
Oder sonst gefärbet sind, kann man nicht mit Recht verneinen³⁰²

Revealingly, the formulations that entertain the possibility of different color perceptions on other planets leave open whether this happens, as before, because of the perceptual apparatus of extraterrestrials or "in fact," in things themselves. Precisely the undecidability between the two options troubles the speaker. The closing lines of the poem try to provide a final justification for why it is impossible to rightfully deny the fact that the world can always *be* as well as *seem* possible in another way as well:

Weil des Schöpfers Wunder=Werck' in der bildenden Natur,
In derselben Form und Farben Mannigfaltigkeit nicht nur,
Sondern in der Aenderung unerschöpflich sind und scheinen.³⁰³

The final line coordinates the two options previously kept separate, seeming and being different, and traces both to the common denominator of the creator's inexhaustible capacity

³⁰¹ This point is emphasized by Stadler, *Der technisierte Blick*, 74, note 37. Stadler's footnote provides the only (brief) discussion of the poem I found in the secondary literature.

³⁰² Brockes, *Irdisches Vergnügen in Gott*, 1739, 5:173.

³⁰³ Ibid.

for *Änderung* or alteration. This is perhaps less of an idiosyncratic solution to the problem than it may seem. The problem of contingency as it confronts Brockes in this poem – the suspicion that things do not exist by necessity but could also always be and be perceived otherwise is, if we take Hans Blumenberg’s word for it, above all a legacy of monotheistic religions and their idea of a universe contingent upon an *act* of creation – in contrast to the eternal, self-sustaining cosmos associated with classical antiquity.³⁰⁴ But solving the problem of epistemological uncertainty by referring it to a divine power for arbitrary creation is more convincing as a genealogy of the problem than as a viable solution. A *Schöpfer* (or creator) with an *unerschöpflich* (or inexhaustible) power of creating ever-different entities and semblances hardly seems fit to play the role of a reliable anchor of the order of things, a role essential to Brockes’s cosmology.

The pluralization of the world not only multiplies the possibilities of seeing but also creates something that lies beyond all these possibilities. The fact that upsets Brockes is, after all, not the artificial changeability of perspectives itself – this remains a source of viewing pleasure as always – but the prospect that none of these perspectives may capture the world as it is in itself. This worry can, however, no longer be denied once none of the forms of observation can claim validity as the single correct one, while the many different perspectives can no longer be reduced to a common denominator, either. In this way, the many possibilities exclude not only each other, but also the possibility of a complete understanding of reality. They thus produce a systematic excess that all attempts of understanding have to presuppose

³⁰⁴ Blumenberg therefore sees contingency as a genuinely monotheistic concept. See for instance the early “Das Verhältnis von Natur und Technik als philosophisches Problem.”

without ever being able to retrieve it into comprehensibility. Perhaps this also explains the curious oscillation of contingency between possibility and happenstance. As an instance that is foreseen in none of the many possibilities but can (for lack of comprehensive insight) never be excluded, happenstance becomes the constant companion of possibility in a world of contingency. The two sides of contingency would then be no mere opposition, but aspects of the same multiplication of the world into many possibilities.

What is certain is that the entanglement of *being* and *semblance* in which Brockes's poem terminates marks the breakdown of the mechanism of containment that kept artifice and art within the bounds of the natural order. The claim is, of course, not that the event of this breakdown is somehow localizable in this particular poem. By the next poem in the collection, Brockes will have recovered from the shock; and will delight in the marvelous harmony of nature as ever before. But what the poem *can* show is the basic structure of a discursive event in the making; *how* and by what topological redistributions the constellation came to an end.

Concluding Remarks

Two points from Brockes's poetic reflection on the contingencies of perception are essential for the broader discursive constellation I trace. The first is the becoming-opaque of the technical medium – quite literally in the example of the red glass pane. To be sure, the red glass pane is not itself a technical device; and the figure of the tinted glass is not without precedent in the skeptical literature – Montaigne, for instance, uses similar imagery to question

the possibility of certain knowledge.³⁰⁵ In Brockes, however, the skeptical topos appears in a new context. As one among many supplements of vision explored in his poetry, it takes on the structural place reserved for optical media. The *lesson* of the red glass pane is that such a medium can rub off on the world; that its own makeup contributes to the picture of reality it produces. The second lesson Brockes draws at least intermittently from the red pane of glass is that it affects not only the appearance of external things but also the eye itself. Along the model of the unreliable medium, the eye can come into view in its own contingent makeup; as one possibility of mediating perception among others. The eye itself, so Brockes's suspicion, may not be the neutral medium it was assumed to be.

The common consequence of both realizations is that the moment of mediation between thoughts and things, and thus the moment of perception, takes on a life of its own, thereby undermining the notion of a complete and undistorted access to things in their inherent nature. Together with the reflection on the training and education of embodied attention – including the moment of discipline inherent in such training – Brockes thus reveals two main ingredients of Alexander Baumgarten's aesthetic project: the partiality and the malleability of embodied attention.

³⁰⁵ Montaigne, *Essais*, 2:428.

CHAPTER 4

“DEN ANFANG MACHT DIE KUNST DER AUFMERKSAMKEIT”:

ALEXANDER BAUMGARTEN’S AESTHETICS AND THE DISCIPLINES OF ATTENTION

In 1741, having just been appointed full professor at Frankfurt an der Oder, Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten initiated a philosophical weekly that set itself the task of spreading the new type of *Weltweisheit* taught in German universities to a non-academic audience. Composed of fictional letters penned by Baumgarten himself, the *Philosophische Briefe von Aletheophilus* met with little success and had to be abandoned within the first year.³⁰⁶ The journal lived, however, long enough to produce a document of exceptional importance for understanding the genealogy of modern reflection on art. In the second of his fictional philosophical letters, Baumgarten introduced his readership to a hitherto unknown branch of philosophy concerned with directing the *sensory* faculties of cognition in the same way logic is concerned with the rules for the proper use of the *understanding*. Baumgarten calls this new discipline of philosophy *Ästhetik*.³⁰⁷

While there is broad consensus that Alexander Baumgarten’s foundation of aesthetics as a philosophical discipline marks an important intellectual-historical caesura, what exactly Baumgarten unleashed with his project has remained the subject of an ongoing and newly re-

³⁰⁶ See the editors’ introduction to Baumgarten’s *Metaphysica/Metaphysik*, XXV; as well as Schweizer’s introduction to *Zur Grundlegung der Ästhetik*, XV.

³⁰⁷ It is only the third time the term appeared in print, and the first time in the German language. The first two works in which the word appeared were Baumgarten’s thesis on philosophical poetics at Halle, where he coined the term; and the first edition of his 1739 *Metaphysica*.

intensified debate.³⁰⁸ Some two hundred and fifty years after the publication of the first volume of Baumgarten's *Aesthetica* in 1750, the verdict is still out on whether Baumgarten's aesthetics furnished a theory of sense perception in general (*aisthesis*) or aimed from the beginning at a new understanding of art;³⁰⁹ whether it inaugurated, with Ernst Cassirer's formulation, an "emancipation" of the senses from the dictates of reason, or rather, with Terry Eagleton's pointed rejoinder, their "colonization";³¹⁰ whether it marked the beginning of an ideological suppression of the rhetorical and medial conditions of literature and discourse, or perhaps an early attempt to reflect on these conditions.³¹¹

In this chapter, I offer a re-reading of Baumgarten's aesthetic project through the early project sketch published in the "Second Philosophical Letter." The key to addressing the various questions raised by the Baumgarten scholarship, I will argue, lies in excavating the genealogy of Baumgarten's project in the eighteenth-century practices of attentiveness we have traced – a genealogy that has hitherto been overshadowed, not least because it runs counter to modern disciplinary divisions, by Baumgarten's debt to the more recognizably "aesthetic" traditions of

³⁰⁸ Recent work exploring the specificity and/or arguing for the actuality of Baumgarten's aesthetics from different theoretical angles and disciplinary approaches include an anthology of *Baumgarten-Studien* by Rüdiger Campe, Anselm Haverkamp, and Christoph Menke; studies by Beiser, *Diotima's Children*; Buchenau, *The Founding of Aesthetics in the German Enlightenment*; Menke, *Kraft*; Berndt, *Poema/Gedicht*; Trop, *Poetry as a Way of Life*; and a special edition of the journal *Aufklärung* edited by Aichele, *Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten. Sinnliche Erkenntnis in der Philosophie des Rationalismus*. The proceedings of a large Baumgarten conference in Halle on the occasion of Baumgarten's three-hundredth birthday have just been published (summer 2016) under the title *Schönes Denken*. It was not yet possible to consider the results of this most recent volume for this chapter.

³⁰⁹ Wolfgang Iser and Martin Seel (as two prominent examples) have cited Baumgarten as an authority for their attempts to conceive aesthetics as a theory of *aisthesis* beyond the confines of beautiful art; Ursula Francke has recently argued against this view; Iser, *Ästhetisches Denken*, 9–40; Francke, "Sinnliche Erkenntnis – was sie ist und was sie soll"; Seel, *Ästhetik des Erscheinens*, 15–17.

³¹⁰ Cassirer, *Die Philosophie der Aufklärung*, 370; Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, 15.

³¹¹ The identification of aesthetics with the suppression of rhetorical technique lies at the heart of Paul de Man's *Aesthetic Ideology* and subsequent media-theoretical critiques of the aesthetic tradition. Rüdiger Campe has argued that Baumgarten's aesthetics is on the cusp between transfiguring (rhetorical and technical) *effect* into (metaphysical) *form* and revealing *form* as *effect*; Campe, "Effekt der Form," 2014.

rhetorical poetics and the metaphysics of beauty. Baumgarten's letter situates his project-in-the-making at the cross-roads of the different threads of the tradition we have been tracing: the philosophical psychology and epistemology of attention developed by Leibniz and Wolff; the practices of cultivating embodied attention developed in the natural sciences and appropriated for a new poetics of attention; as well as prosthetic technologies that expand and modify the range of what can and cannot be perceived. That Baumgarten's new *concept* of the sensory is motivated and made possible by new sensory *practices* can easily get lost in the dense philosophical Latin of Baumgarten's fragmentary, two volume *Aesthetica* (1750/58). Revisiting Baumgarten's main work through the early project sketch will therefore unlock a layer of coherence that strictly immanent interpretations of the work are bound to miss.

Two ideas first formulated in the philosophical letter give to Baumgarten's new science its specific coherence. The first is the insight – derived from practices of cultivating embodied attention as an instruments of knowledge – that sense perception is not fixed but malleable through practice. Baumgarten's new science of aesthetics is therefore in the first instance, as he defines the term in the project sketch, a science of the *improvement* (cultivation, formation) of sensory cognition.³¹² The second is the insight that techniques and technologies of perception do not just passively record but actively shape perceptions. The two insights are clearly interrelated: The fact that sense perception can be formed and performed one way or another *demonstrates* that it is not neutral but capable of shaping how something is perceived.

³¹² "Wissenschaft der Verbesserung sinnlicher Erkenntnis"; Baumgarten, *Zur Grundlegung der Ästhetik*, 69.

Conversely, the recognition that sensory perception actively shapes the material of perception explains the need for a philosophical discipline that deals with different sensory practices.

The practices of production and reception of the various fine arts that Baumgarten will join under the umbrella term “aesthetic art” constitute *one* example of such sensory practice; but indeed, as Baumgarten emphasizes especially in his later works, a privileged one. In contrast to sensory practices in the sciences they not only provide material for higher-order cognition but are perfected on the level of sensory practice alone. In doing so, they embody the plasticity of sensory perception in an especially exemplary way – a plasticity that thus becomes the basis for Baumgarten’s conjunction of sense perception and artistic production in a unified theory of aesthetics.

Setting the Stage: Baumgarten’s Art of Attention

How Baumgarten situates aesthetics as the “science of improving sensory cognition” within the nexus of problems we have traced – and how my argument in this chapter will proceed – can be demonstrated by reference to an “art of attention” that marks the nucleus or, in Baumgarten’s own words, the beginning of his new discipline:

Den Anfang macht die Kunst der Aufmerksamkeit, weil sie zur Verbesserung aller übrigen Erkenntnis-Vermögen unentbehrlich ist. Ihre Notwendigkeit wird uns von der ersten Jugend an durch ein oft wiederholtes: beschäftige dich nur hiemit! bedenke, warum du hier bist! gib acht! merk auf! eingeschärft. Wie sollte nicht mancher Schulmeister betreten werden, wenn ihm eines seiner Schlacht-Schafe antwortete: wie, soll ichs denn machen, wann ich acht haben will? Da wir darauf merken, was wir uns klärer, als andre Dinge, vorstellen und uns des entschlagen, davon abstrahieren, das wir uns dunkeler, als andre Dinge, vorstellen, so sieht man, wie genau mit der Kunst des Aufmerkens die Kunst der

Absonderung verbunden sein müsse, ob man sie gleich ganze Jahr lang von einander zu trennen gewohnt ist.³¹³

Baumgarten appropriates Wolff's canonical definition of *Aufmerksamkeit* as the capacity for "selective clarification of perceptions" but gives this definition two momentous twists. The first characterizes attention as an irremediably *one-sided* faculty that has a constant companion in abstraction – the obscuring, disregarding, or blocking out of parts of the perceptual field that Wolff deemed only temporary, recoverable in the final reconstructive synthesis. The other stems from the fact that Baumgarten treats the faculty of attention in the context of *sensory* cognition at all. In Wolff's tradition, attention was seen as the first of the intellectual faculties, marking the onset of the mind's inspection of impressions received by the senses. Baumgarten's introduction of a *sensory* "art of attending" subverts this hierarchy, portraying attention as an *embodied* faculty.

One strand of my reading excavates this *epistemological* dimension of Baumgarten's aesthetics of attention, recovering how Baumgarten draws on Leibniz's theory of apperception to formulate a theoretical account of the knowledge of the senses – a knowledge that, in the case of aesthetic art, will be projective rather than mimetic, disclosing new perspectives or monadic "points of view" on the world. Perceptions, Baumgarten argues against the standard model, not only increase in cognitive richness through an *intensification* of attention (so as to sharply isolate distinct component features) but also through *extending* attention (so as to increase the number of indistinctly sensed features) – even if these features are not clearly differentiated by the mind. The problem of selective attention and the loss of abstraction is

³¹³ Ibid., 69–70.

thus at the heart of the notion of “extensive” clarity that Baumgarten scholarship has long recognized as the basis of the independence of aesthetics from logic,³¹⁴ without, however, recognizing the economy of attention that motivates it.

A further strand of my reading will focus on the *disciplinary* dimension of an education of attention that proceeds, Baumgarten suggests, by imbibing a series of often-repeated commands. This part of my argument will focus on Baumgarten’s conception of attention as a *Fertigkeit* (skill) or *habitus* that is shaped by training or exercise. Although Baumgarten formulates his theory of an aesthetic education of attention in the context an emerging disciplinary society, I argue that it does not simply constitute a *repetition* of the ideology of discipline but a *reflection* on different disciplining mechanisms. As suggested by the question posed to the schoolmaster by his student, such distancing reflection can function as a tool for critique understood in Foucault’s sense of “the art of not being governed quite so much.”³¹⁵ In the *habitus pulcre cogitandi* (the skill of *beautiful* thinking), Baumgarten finally focuses his aesthetic theory around a type of habitus that is not defined by an externally imposed goal but by the immanent perfection of sense perception (Baumgarten’s definition of beauty). In Baumgarten, I finally propose, the open-endedness or indeterminacy of beauty is constituted by the freedom *of* technique rather than the freedom *from* technique (as a later strand of the aesthetic tradition would interpret the central category of aesthetics).

Before expounding these two aspects of Baumgarten’s project, I will elaborate the *coherence* of the epistemological and praxeological strands by taking a close look at how the

³¹⁴ See, for instance, Adler, *Die Prägnanz des Dunklen*, 42–43; Beiser, *Diotima’s Children*, 127–28.

³¹⁵ Foucault, *The Politics of Truth*, 45.

“Second Philosophical Letter” introduces Baumgarten’s new science of the sensory through a reflection on the practices of attention. Doing so will entail identifying the wavering of Baumgarten scholarship between two poles – between an interpretation of the “sensory” as either primarily a matter of *perception and cognition* or primarily as a matter of *embodied practice* – as a defining characteristic of Baumgarten’s own project.³¹⁶ As Baumgarten’s reflection on the practices of attention in the “Second Philosophical Letter” indicates, this project was conceived as an elaboration of the insight that modes of perceiving and knowing can be contingent on embodied techniques – and that, vice versa, techniques of sense formation can disclose new epistemic relations to the surrounding world.

An Organon for the “Lower Faculties”

Perhaps to deflect the irritation caused by its sudden appearance, Baumgarten’s philosophical letter introduces the new science of aesthetics through a complicated setup worthy of a Borges story. Writing under a pseudonym (Aletheophilus), Baumgarten presents to the fictional addressee of the letter an anonymous manuscript containing an encyclopedic

³¹⁶ Standard interpretations of eighteenth-century German aesthetics have focused on its epistemological import or have tried to recuperate pre-Kantian aesthetics as a general theory of *aisthesis* (sense perception), while the most recent scholarship has tended to emphasize the moment of embodied practice and exercise at the expense of cognitive and perception-oriented aspects. Cassirer’s work on eighteenth-century aesthetics is foundational for the former traditions; see especially *Die Philosophie der Aufklärung*, 353–75. For recent emphases on embodied practice, see “Die Disziplin der Ästhetik ist die Ästhetik der Disziplin”; Trop, “Aesthetic Askesis: Aesthetics as a Technology of the Self.” Ursula Franke suggests this coherence when she remarks, in a benevolent criticism of Menke’s one-sidedly praxeological approach, that Baumgarten understands *representation as an activity* (rather than, as Menke claims, the sensory as an activity *instead of* representation). See Franke, “Sinnliche Erkenntnis - was sie ist und was sie soll,” 77.

ground plan of philosophy³¹⁷ – in fact, he speculates, already the copy of the original manuscript – which deviates from conventional subdivisions of philosophy in one decisive detail: It claims that the organon of philosophy (its methodological toolset)³¹⁸ is not, as philosophers had hitherto assumed, exhausted by logic. The “soul,” Baumgarten argues, has sensory cognitive faculties – designated as “lower” in the Wolffian tradition – that are irreducible to the intellectual or “higher” faculties of distinct cognition.³¹⁹ The remaining “lower” part of the philosophical organon, whose space the new ground plan has just created by restricting the domain of logic, is occupied by a new science called aesthetics. This new name is not so new, Aletheophilus remarks, as it has already appeared in print in academic publications – obliquely referring to Baumgarten’s own dissertation,³²⁰ where he had taken up the classical distinction between *aisthētá* and *noētá* (what is “sensed” and what is “thought” in cognition) to formulate the desideratum of his new science of the “lower” faculties of cognition.

The use of this new organon for the sensory faculties becomes clear by Baumgarten’s description of a subdivision of his new science that he calls “Ästhetische Empirik, oder Kunst seine Erfahrung zu verbessern”:

So unterscheidet der Verfasser den Inbegriff derer Empfindungs-Gesetze, die hier [in der ästhetischen Empirik] vorzuschreiben wären, von der Logischen Empirik, oder Lehre von der Erfahrung, die nicht sowohl die Vorteile in denen

³¹⁷ The encyclopedic “Grund-Riss” (ibid., 68) is of course no other than Baumgarten’s own vision of the proper subdivisions of philosophy. A ground plan corresponding to the one described in the latter was found among Baumgarten’s posthumous papers.

³¹⁸ Baumgarten uses the terms “organic” and “organic philosophy” to refer to the Aristotelian organon of philosophy; this is of course not to be confused with the sense of “organic” developed around 1800, which takes as its model from the autonomous living organism.

³¹⁹ Baumgarten, *Zur Grundlegung der Ästhetik*, 69.

³²⁰ Baumgarten, *Meditationes*, 85–88 (§CXVI).

Erfahrungen, Beobachtungen und Versuchen selbst anzuweisen, als vielmehr anzuzeigen hat, wie aus ihnen, wenn sie schon gegeben sind, deutliche Begriffe, Erklärungen und bestimmte Anschauungs-Urteile, aus diesen ferner allgemeine Sätze und andre Folgerungen zu ziehen sein.³²¹

die Logik sagt: gib acht auf das zu Empfindende, und hüte dich für dem Erschleichungs-Fehler. Wie aber soll beides in besondern Fällen geschehen? Darauf hätte nun die Ästhetische Erfahrungs-Kunst weitläufiger zu antworten.³²²

Again, terrain is claimed for aesthetics by demonstrating the limited purview of logic. Like the schoolteacher that demands attention, logic makes demands on sense perception – like that of avoiding the kind of fallacious experience that gives rise to the error of subreption

(“Erschleichungs-Fehler”)³²³ – but cannot say how these demands are to be carried out.

Beginning the examination of cognition with logic thus is like putting the cart before the horse: the organon of logic is useful for forming distinct notions, judgments and inferences on the basis of empirical data only when they are already given (“wenn sie schon gegeben sind”). It is therefore necessary to develop an organon competent on the question how “givenness” comes to be established in the first place. Aesthetics will provide guidelines precisely for this level of a primary “paying attention to what is (to be) sensed” (“auf das zu Empfindende achtgeben”) *before* syllogistic reasoning. This illuminates the sense in which Baumgarten will understand his new science of sensory cognition as (among other things) *gnoseologia inferior*, an epistemological account of the lower faculties.³²⁴ He obliquely reinterprets the lowness that

³²¹ Baumgarten, *Zur Grundlegung der Ästhetik*, 70.

³²² *Ibid.*, 71.

³²³ Before the Kantian transcendental meaning (of a confusion of sensible and intelligible levels), *vitium subreptionis* (another coinage by Wolff’s, perhaps taking up cues from Leibniz) simply means an inference based on mistaken experience – as when I falsely take myself to have immediate experience of something and derive spurious conclusions from this fallacy (“*Vitium subreptionis*; Subreption”).

³²⁴ Baumgarten, *Metaphysica/Metaphysik*, 282–283 (§533); Baumgarten, *Aesthetica/Ästhetik*, 2007, 1:10–11 (§1).

attaches to the senses in the tradition of the Wolffian school (as their corruption, their unreliability without the direction of reason) in terms of their fundamentality: the senses are not *base*, but *basic*.³²⁵

It is thus tempting to assume that Baumgarten introduces an empiricist or even a sensualist element into a tradition that had operated on rationalist assumptions. As if to complicate such classifications, however, Baumgarten adds a caveat to the first passage on sense experience quoted above: “Anfänglich scheint es, als wenn hier nicht viel mehr zu sagen wäre, als: tue deine Augen auf, und siehe! tue deine Ohren auf, und höre usf. Allein wer etwas tiefer in die Beschaffenheit derer Empfindungen einsieht, wird ein ganz ander Urteil fällen.”³²⁶ There is more to the primary acquisition of sense data than an empiricism according to which simple perceptions are passively “taken in” through the open gates of the senses and “imprinted” on the wax tablet of the mind acknowledges.³²⁷ The appearance that Baumgarten endorses empiricist doctrines of the mind’s passivity is thus as deceptive as the supposed obviousness of sense perception – whoever delves deeper into the matter will come to entirely different conclusions (“ganz ander Urteil fällen”).

That sense perception is for Baumgarten already a matter of active, even “technical” mediation is apparent in the list that had indirectly defined the subject matter of this new field of inquiry. In the order of increasing artificiality, they include “Erfahrungen” (in the most

³²⁵ I take this point from Haverkamp, “‘Wie die Morgenröthe’. Baumgartens Innovation,” 28–29.

³²⁶ Baumgarten, *Zur Grundlegung der Ästhetik*, 70.

³²⁷ See Locke’s chapters on “Of Ideas in General, and their Original”, “Simple Ideas” and “Perception” in the *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*., from which these formulations are taken (II, ii, §1, p. 120; II, i, §24, p. 121). Of course, Locke later complicates picture, considering the formation of ideas through reflection on the basis of simple ideas, etc., but the secure of ideas in simple impressions remains central for him.

general sense of experience), “Beobachtungen” (guided observations of natural phenomena), and “Versuche” (experiments or, in the understanding of the time, “observations under artificial conditions”).³²⁸ The list points to the contemporaneous natural sciences from which Baumgarten’s aesthetic empiricism takes its cues. Experience, observation, and experiments not only circumscribe the *explanandum* of aesthetic empiricism; they also constitute the model along the lines of which Baumgarten develops an understanding of sense perception as practice and technique, and thus a historical possibility condition of his new science of aesthetics.

This debt to the sciences becomes explicit in a list that names precursors of Baumgarten’s new focus on sensory experience. The list does not name – as one might expect, and as Baumgarten does elsewhere – writers of poetics, critics of taste, or rhetoricians, but experimental scientists reflecting on their own practices (Boyle, Musschenbroek) and theorists of the new scientific methodology (Bacon, Malebranche).³²⁹ The reference to Bacon is particularly important because it illuminates the deeper reason why a new organon of philosophy is necessary; why the old, Aristotelian organon will no longer do.

In the *Novum Organon* – as its title suggests, the original call for an overhaul of the organon of philosophy – Bacon argued that the Aristotelian organon provides no more than a tool for policing the internally consistent use of notions, while leaving entirely open whether

³²⁸ Daston and Galison, *Objectivity*, 241–43.

³²⁹ Baumgarten, *Zur Grundlegung der Ästhetik*, 71–72. The enumeration of works listed by Baumgarten adds up to a (roughly) reverse chronological genealogy of Baumgarten’s own approach: Bacon’s *Novum Organon* (1620) and his *De Augmentis Scientiarum* (1623); Malebranche’s *De la recherche de la vérité* (1674) and Boyle’s “On the unsuccessfulness of experiments” (1661) were roughly contemporaneous; and Musschenbroek’s *Tentamina experimentorum naturalium...*, which appeared close to Baumgarten’s own time (1731).

these basic notions are at all *in touch with reality*.³³⁰ Bacon famously thinks they are not.³³¹ By his verdict, the entire edifice of Scholastic natural philosophy is erected on premises “abstracted from things without care” so that “there is nothing sound in what is built on them”³³² – it is, in short, one giant, ceaseless *Erschleichungs-Fehler*. The break with the old toolset of philosophy must therefore be as “radical”³³³ as the errors to which it gave rise – in *uprooting* tradition and in paying proper attention to the *roots* of knowledge: “a new beginning has to be made from the lowest foundations.”³³⁴ Aphorism XXXVI of the first book of the *Novum Organon* states the method for properly re-building the edifice of knowledge from the ground up:

There remains one simple way of getting our teaching across, namely to introduce men to actual particulars and their sequences and orders, and for men in their turn to pledge to abstain for a while from notions, and begin to get used to actual things.³³⁵

The truly radical break has, however, already happened once Bacon announces his departure from Scholastic natural philosophy. It is legible in the crass juxtaposition of “notions” and “actual things” that summons the reorientation toward particulars Bacon then explicitly demands. Bacon’s program holds only under the presupposition of a *lack* of natural fit between things and notions. Only then must the Aristotelean organon, with its lack of attention to

³³⁰ See Bacon, *New Organon*, 35 (Aph. XI-XIV).

³³¹ The chutzpa of Bacon’s break is apparent in his swipe at the fundamental concepts of Scholastic natural philosophy: “There is nothing sound in the notions of logic and physics: neither substance, nor quality, nor action and passion, or being itself are good notions; much less heavy, light, dense, rare, wet, dry, generation, corruption, attraction, repulsion, element, matter, form and so on; all fanciful and ill defined” (ibid., 35 (Aph. XV)).

³³² Ibid., 35 (Aph. XIV).

³³³ Ibid., 38 (Aph. XXX).

³³⁴ Ibid., 39 (Aph. XXXI).

³³⁵ Ibid., 40 (Aph. XXXVI).

establishing the basic data of perception, seem insufficient and unfounded, and Bacon's various strategies for properly bridging the gap between notions and things an urgent demand. This independence of notions from things is also, however, the possibility condition of Bacon's own project of re-forming or reconstructing another set of basic notions from the ground up by careful, controlled, and methodical observation of the constituent parts of things ("actual particulars") and their "sequences and orders" in time and space; a program he famously terms "true induction."

Beyond the specifics of Bacon's explicit argument, the *New Organon* propagates a fundamental readjustment of the epistemic attitude that promises to bring things *closer* by first *distancing* them; that *interrupts* seemingly immediate and natural conceptions ("abstain for a while from notions") in order to then re-establish proper contact with the world through a set of methodical techniques. Not only does the right perception not come naturally, but the kind of perception that does come naturally is, because of the mind's tendency to "leap to generalities," the source of all error. Resisting this natural tendency is, Bacon leaves no doubt, a difficult task. The "assistants to the senses"³³⁶ developed by Bacon in the form of methods of observation and experiments are all necessary to remedy this fundamental error.

This error was also the concern of the second authority cited by Baumgarten, Malebranche's *Recherche de la vérité*. If the overall concern of Malebranche's work is, as its subtitle indicates, "avoiding error in the sciences,"³³⁷ the chapter cited by Baumgarten focuses

³³⁶ Ibid., 10.

³³⁷ The full subtitle, in characteristic seventeenth-century length, reads: "Où l'on traite de la Nature de l'Esprit de l'homme, et de l'usage qu'il en doit faire pour éviter l'erreur dans les Sciences"

on the fallacies of sense perception. What may seem like the Cartesian Malebranche's rationalist bias against the senses in fact closely resembles the argument of the "father of empiricism" Francis Bacon: Malebranche polemicizes against "rash" and "hasty judgments" [*précipitation*]³³⁸ based on a naïve trust in the senses – and opposes to them examples of methodical observation and experimentation in the sciences (listing some of the preferred objects of seventeenth century science like the seed of a tulip bulb,³³⁹ experiments with water pumps,³⁴⁰ and again and again, insect anatomy³⁴¹). Unassisted sense perception, for instance, may lead one to judge that insects are small and insignificant, but – as Malebranche demonstrates by an ekphrastic dissection of an insect organism into its parts³⁴² – the concerted study of insects enhanced by microscopes and disciplined observation reveals the complexity of even these seemingly insignificant animals.³⁴³

The common concern of the empiricist as well as the rationalist authorities cited by Baumgarten is thus the propagation of an epistemic attitude that avoids premature judgments based on careless sense perception which leads to "anticipations of nature" (Bacon), "hasty judgments" (Malebranche) or "Erschleichungs-Fehler" (Baumgarten). As an antidote, they recommend an artificially defamiliarized, closely focused and decelerated kind of perception

³³⁸ Malebranche, *The Search after Truth*, 9, 29, 429; also elsewhere.

³³⁹ *Ibid.*, 26.

³⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 30.

³⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 25–27, 31.

³⁴² "[T]hey have legs and feet, and bones in their legs to support them (or rather on their legs, for the skin of an insect is its skeleton). They have muscles to move them, as well as tendons and an infinity of fibers in each muscle; finally, they have blood or very subtle and delicate animal spirits to fill or move these muscles in succession ... it is impossible for those who have not spent their whole lives in anatomy and the study of nature to imagine the number, diversity, and delicacy of all the parts of which these little bodies are necessarily composed." *Ibid.*, 25–26. Translation corrected by adding a missing negation.

³⁴³ *Ibid.*

that lingers with particular details and inspects their arrangement. The code word for this proper technique of acquiring experience (the functional equivalent of Bacon's "true induction") is, already in Malebranche, *attention*. Methodical attention, we could summarize, became necessary as an *intermediary* between thoughts and things once the connection between them had become fundamentally problematic; once an opening, a fissure, a gap was diagnosed between thought and things that made it both necessary and possible to *bridge* this gap in a controlled and careful way.

Observing particular phenomena with the attentiveness prescribed by Bacon and Malebranche faced, however, a serious hurdle: attention cannot simply be controlled by the will but is subject to involuntary distractions away from the observation of particular details.³⁴⁴ Practitioners of the new scientific method had to remedy this problem by developing techniques for eliciting spontaneous attention and reining in distractions through consistent exercise and training. The practices of cultivating embodied attention in the natural sciences thus demonstrated that sense perception is capable of being modified, refined, and trained through exercise. The critical result of these reflections on scientific method for Baumgarten's science of the sensory is thus the mutual interdependence of forms of perceiving and knowing with forms of disciplined embodied behavior.

Since the basic acquisition of data through sense perception is thus, already on the bottom level, not fixed or necessary, but mediated by sensory techniques, the transition to prosthetic instruments and technologies of perception is built into the Baconian science in

³⁴⁴ On this point see Daston, *Kurze Geschichte der wissenschaftlichen Aufmerksamkeit*, 21–22.

which Baumgarten's sees his new science. Internalized techniques (which turn the senses into instruments) and technologies externalized into material supports could be treated as different versions of the same basic practice.

Attention Technologies

The technical a priori of the genealogy into which Baumgarten places his aesthetics comes to the fore in the closing passage of the "Second Philosophical Letter," which turns to prosthetic instruments of observation as another concern of Baumgarten's new science:

Ferner müßte vorerwehnte Wissenschaft, nach des Verfassers Vorschlage, die Hilfs-Mittel, wodurch die Sinnen erhöht und erweitert werden könnten, anweisen... [H]ier [wäre] die Stelle von denen Waffen der Sinnen oder denen Werkzeugen zu sprechen, durch welche wir klar zu empfinden in Stand gesetzt werden, was uns sonst nur dunkel geblieben wäre. Man rechnet dahin mit Recht nicht nur Vergrößerungs- und Fern-Gläser, künstliche Ohren und Sprach-Röhre, sondern auch den ganzen Verrat [sic] der Barometers, Thermometers, Hygrometers, Manometers, Pyrometers usw. die die versuchende Physik braucht, aber daß sie gut seien und recht gebracht werden, billig schon voraus setzt.³⁴⁵

The gesture echoes earlier passages – the necessity of an aesthetics is stipulated against presupposing ("schon voraus setzt") given data without inquiring how they are procured – only this time, aesthetics does not set out to instruct perception by means of the embodied senses, but to remedy the precipitate use of all kinds of sensing instruments. In addition to prosthetic technologies for the eyes and other senses³⁴⁶ these include instruments that cannot simply be

³⁴⁵ Baumgarten, *Zur Grundlegung der Ästhetik*, 72.

³⁴⁶ Microscope and telescope are the paradigm technologies of artificially expanded perception in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. With "artificial ears," Baumgarten is probably referring to "ear trumpets" (*Hörrohre*); funnel-shaped devices that collected sound waves and thus "amplified" sound like those Beethoven would use as his hearing decreased.

counted among the extensions of the five natural senses: state-of-the-art measuring devices (“meters”) constructed to detect physical quantities not clearly accessible to the natural senses, such as (air) pressure (barometer, manometer), temperature (thermometer), or humidity (hygrometer). The final device of Baumgarten’s enumeration representatively illustrates the basic principle behind such measuring devices.

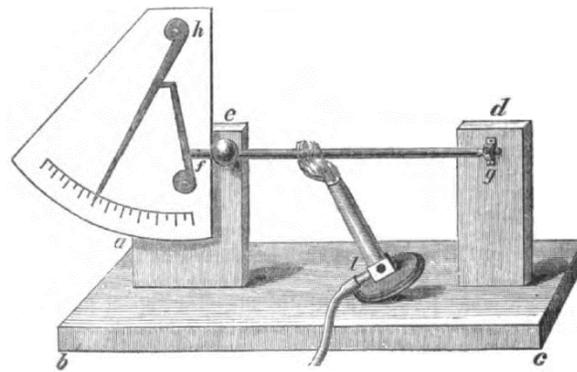


Figure 8: Illustration of Musschenbroek’s pyrometer from a nineteenth-century encyclopedia³⁴⁷

Recently invented by Pieter van Musschenbroek (and presented to the public in the 1731 book cited by Baumgarten),³⁴⁸ the pyrometer could measure the expansion of metals by heat. When heated by a torch, a metal rod would push against an index needle that amplified the dilation of the metal, thus making it perceptible to the naked eye and measurable on a scale.³⁴⁹

The critical point here is how Baumgarten theoretically interprets the utility of such devices: they are essentially enabling instruments by means or through which we acquire clear sensations (“durch welche wir klar zu empfinden in Stand gesetzt werden, was uns sonst nur

³⁴⁷ Trouset, “Nouveau dictionnaire encyclopédique.”

³⁴⁸ Musschenbroek, *Tentamina Experimentorum Naturalium*, II.12 (§1).

³⁴⁹ According to an 1811 German encyclopedia, Musschenbroek’s original pyrometer could indicate dilations as small as 1/12500 Rhineland inches or, converted to the metric system, 2µm (0.002 mm) (Krünitz, Floerken, and Flörke, “Oekonomisch-technologische Encyclopädie,” 140).

dunkel geblieben wäre"). These are almost the same words Baumgarten had used to define the function of *Aufmerksamkeit* earlier in the letter. In the strict sense of Baumgarten's definition, all the devices he lists thus function as *attention technologies*. In making noticeable what would otherwise have remained obscure – the expansion of metals under the influence of heat; imperceptibly small shapes or sounds – they function on a continuum with the embodied attention's capacity to bring aspects of the perceptual fields into focus. Turning one's head to listen in, and straining one's eyes to look more closely count as essentially the same kind of activity as observing the world through magnifying devices or by means of experimental contraptions: they all act as "sensors" disclosing properties that would otherwise have remained obscure. The final point of the "Second Philosophical Letter" thus not only harks back to its initial concern with how attention enables clear perceptions; it becomes obvious that Baumgarten had never abandoned this concern and dealt with variations of the question of *Aufmerksamkeit* all along. Attention in the wide sense discernible in Baumgarten's letter is not or not only a phenomenon of human psychology, but an inclusive concept for the *interface* connecting and separating thought and things – the activities, whether by means of sensory technique or technological sensors, that mediate between the complexity of the world for the mind's capacity for conscious perception.

Baumgarten's sketch of his proposed new science breaks off after the passage quoted above – notably, without ever mentioning beauty or the fine arts. To be sure, this does not mean that he ever pursued a concept of aesthetics that excluded the subject matters that would be closely associated if not identified with aesthetics as a whole. The reason why they receive no mention here is that the letter outlines only the first parts of the first of two major

subdivisions of aesthetics, which deals with sensory cognition itself; while he explicitly passes over the second, which would deal with its vivid presentation³⁵⁰ (and would include, as we know from other skeletal outlines of the new discipline, the subjects associated with aesthetics today).³⁵¹ The “Second Philosophical Letter” only introduces the first parts of the new science – as in the introduction of aesthetics by the art of attention, these are, however, also its *basic* parts. If it has become somewhat of a commonplace in the literature on Baumgarten to identify three relatively independent strands of tradition that converge in the *Aesthetica* – a metaphysics of beauty (beauty as the sensory cognition of perfection), a theory of the liberal arts (especially the rhetoric and poetics of Renaissance humanism), and rationalist faculty psychology (the sense-dependent faculties of cognition as *inferiores*)³⁵² – the genealogy excavated through Baumgarten’s philosophical letter prompts us to add a fourth strand to the list: the “disciplines of attention” developed in the wake of Bacon’s call for a new natural philosophy. In fact, the simultaneously *fundamental* and *technical* understanding of sense perception inherited from the practices, methodologies, and philosophies of the new natural sciences is not only one more tradition integrated by Baumgarten but the space within which the different strands can be woven into a common thread in the first place. Only if perception is already an active process does beauty *qua* perception of perfection become a *technical*

³⁵⁰ Baumgarten, *Zur Grundlegung der Ästhetik*, 69.

³⁵¹ See the Latin-German excerpt from Baumgarten’s outline of a “Philosophia Generalis” (ibid., 73–78).

³⁵² Mirbach, for instance, speaks of a “Verklammerung von Erkenntnistheorie, einer ... metaphysisch fundierten Schönheitslehre und einer Kunsttheorie” in the introduction to her translation of Baumgarten’s *Aesthetica/Ästhetik*, 2007, 1:XXVII. See also Paeztold’s introduction to the *Meditationes*: “Baumgartens Ästhetik vereint in sich drei in der Tradition unverbunden nebeneinander herlaufende Theorieströme. Theorie der Kunst und Begriff des Schönen sind die beiden ersten Ecksteine der Baumgartensehen Ästhetik. Der dritte ist die Theorie sensitiver Erkenntnismodalitäten” (Baumgarten, *Meditationes*, XLVII.). See also similar passages in Schweizer’s introduction to *Zur Grundlegung der Ästhetik*, VIII–IX.

question with an internal poetics; only then can rhetoric and poetics provide a vocabulary for describing perceptual processes as well as techniques of representation; and only then can the lower faculties appear as foundational rather than inferior (their inferiority was, after all, predicated on the fact that reason could guarantee an immediate, necessary, not “technically mediated” access to the being of external objects – and that the intractable senses had no role to play in this enterprise).

Even if the “Second Philosophical Letter” does thus not cover the entire extension of the new science of aesthetics, it renders legible the logic that makes aesthetics possible as at the same time “*scientia sensitive cognoscendi et proponendi*,”³⁵³ as Baumgarten writes in his *Metaphysica*, and that allows him to finally shorten this definition to only “*scientia cognitionis sensitivae*”;³⁵⁴ perception already contains a moment of “*proponendi*,” of active presentation to the mind, so that *cognoscere* and *proponere* are not categorically different, but, like ear trumpet (“*künstliche Ohren*”) and speaking trumpet (“*Sprach-Röhre*”), based on shared principles, and capable of transitioning into one another. Sense perception is, in short, already an “art”; that is why *one* science of aesthetics will be competent to speak about perception and artistic production on the basis of the same set of principles.

* * *

While the “Second Philosophical Letter” indicates the broad intellectual-historical genealogy of Baumgarten’s aesthetics, its systematic articulation in the two-volume *Aesthetica* is based on Leibniz’s philosophical outlook. Accounts of Baumgarten’s debt to Leibniz usually

³⁵³ Baumgarten, *Metaphysica/Metaphysik*, 282–283 (§533). My emphasis.

³⁵⁴ Baumgarten, *Aesthetica/Ästhetik*, 2007, 1:10 (§1).

begin with a reconstruction of the notion of “clear and confused” perceptions, the basic level of cognition afforded by the senses in Leibnizian epistemology.³⁵⁵ Beginning at this level, however, risks repeating the error the “Second Philosophical Letter” warns against, and taking the givenness of sense perceptions for granted without inquiring into their formative process. The insistence that there is a question to ask here is at the heart of one of Leibniz’s main objections against the philosophical systems of Descartes and Locke:³⁵⁶ against their equation of perceptions with conscious (or potentially conscious) states of mind, Leibniz maintained that things occur in the mind *below* and *before* the level of conscious experience, and that these occurrences explain how conscious perceptions arise in the first place. It is at this level before conscious perception that we will have to look for systematic foundation of Baumgarten’s aesthetics. Leibniz famously calls these unconscious perceptions tiny, minute, or miniscule – *petites perceptions*.

Noise

Leibniz’s preferred analogy for the workings of tiny perceptions is the noise of the sea. Like the murmur of countless waves, the stream of tiny perceptions is indistinguishable in its parts; it is impossible to tell where one wave begins and the other one ends. We hear the noise, but we cannot make out determinate sounds. Or if we do listen in and pick out single waves at

³⁵⁵ See for instance the introduction to the *Aesthetica* by Dagmar Mirbach, *Ibid.*, 1:XXXII–XXXVII; Heinz Paetzold’s introduction to Baumgarten’s *Meditationes*, XVII–XVIII; or the generally lucid overviews by Beiser, *Diotima’s Children*, 126–27; and Solms, *Disciplina aethetica*, 37–39. A notable exception is Otabe, “Der Begriff der “petites perceptions” von Leibniz als Grundlage für die Entstehung der Ästhetik.” Menke, *Kraft*, 20–23, also recognizes the importance of Leibniz’s concept of *petites perceptions*.

³⁵⁶ Leibniz’s objection against Descartes is prominently made in *Monadologie*, 2002, 114–115 (§14); the objection is stated in similar terms against Locke in the “Preface to the New Essays,” 295–96.

times, this is because they gush forth loud enough to be distinguishable from the background before they fade back into the murmur of the sea. At the seashore, Leibniz suggests, we can thus “hear” what usually escapes our awareness: “at every moment there is an infinity of perceptions in us ... – that is, changes in the soul itself, which we do not consciously perceive [*appercevons*], because these impressions are either too small or too numerous, or too homogeneous, in the sense that they have nothing sufficiently distinct in themselves.”³⁵⁷ If the lack of consciousness characteristic of tiny perceptions is a function of their indistinctness, the reverse holds as well. Having conscious perceptions is, for Leibniz, a matter of “noting” or “remarking” distinctions.³⁵⁸ Conscious perceptions arise from the background noise by distinction, gradually raised into consciousness like figures from the background pane of a relief. Leibniz calls this raising-into-consciousness of perceptions “apperception”: the gradual conversion of subconscious perceptual noise into sensible and, as we will see, intelligible form. For finite perceivers like human beings, this conversion is necessarily partial. Only a fraction of tiny perceptions can become conscious; the ground, we might say, is never resolvable into the figure. Such depthless vision is the privilege of the infinite mind, for whom the difference between figure and ground would collapse.

We will see how Leibniz formalizes this perceptive activity as the process of apperception; for now, it suffices to address the question whether distinctions are already

³⁵⁷ Leibniz, “Preface to the New Essays,” 295.

³⁵⁸ In his book-length study of Leibniz, Deleuze argues in detail that although Leibniz, as a shorthand, sometimes speaks of tiny and conscious perceptions in terms of parts and wholes, what becomes remarkable are not aggregates of little perceptions but contrasts, perceptions of difference: “There are differential relations among these presently infinitely small ones that are *drawn into clarity*; that is to say, that establish a clear perception” (Deleuze, *The Fold*, 90).

inscribed into perceptions and simply registered by the perceiving soul;³⁵⁹ or whether conscious perception result from an act of *inscribing* distinctions into the flow of tiny perceptions. Leibniz's examples in the context of tiny perceptions suggest a nuanced response. Which unconscious perceptions give rise to a conscious one depends, on the one hand, on the inherent contrast they offer to a situated perceiver. The monotonous "motion of a mill or a waterfall," Leibniz suggests in a related example, offers so little internal differentiation that it easily blur into the background and goes unnoticed. On the other hand, it is only "custom [that] makes us ignore the motion" – only when "we are not alerted ... to pay heed to some of our own present perceptions, we let them pass without reflection and without even noticing them [*sans être remarquées*]." This suggests that whether a difference is consciously registered depends both on the *discernibility* of differences relative to a given perceptual capacity, and on an act of *attending to* some differences rather than others.

Deleuze speaks, in one of his meditations on Leibniz, of different "thresholds" and "filters" of perception in this context, which selectively "let through" certain differences but not others.³⁶⁰ This suggests that attention is a way of tweaking and adjusting such perceptive filters to produce varying sets of conscious perceptions. By illustrating such selective filters with the *umwelt* of Jakob von Uexküll's famously blind and deaf tick, which perceives its environment solely in terms of a limited set of distinctions sufficient to locate its prey,³⁶¹ Deleuze effectively lines up Leibniz's theory of apperception with a range of theoretical debates concerning

³⁵⁹ Leibniz and Wolff define the soul in these terms; see, for instance, Wolff's *Psychologia rationalis*, 46 (§68).

³⁶⁰ Deleuze, *The Fold*, 85–93.

³⁶¹ Such as: above/below, warm/cold (within a narrow range), presence/absence of butyric acid (contained in the sweat of mammals); see Uexküll, *Streifzüge durch die Umwelten von Tieren und Menschen*, 23–26.

environments and their apprehension by selective perception:³⁶² how a perceiving “system” (to use the terminology of cybernetics) processes its environment is determined by its mode of filtering information from the environment’s complexity. Only “differences that make a difference” in terms of the system shine forth as information; the rest blurs into noise.³⁶³

It would seem that we come a long way from the practices of scientific attention evoked in Baumgarten’s letter. In fact, however, Leibniz’s discussion of the noise of perception participates in the same problem complex on a different level. The noise of perception can become a matter of philosophical import only under the condition of the becoming-uncertain of natural perception that was the presupposition and the byproduct of the attentional techniques of the modern sciences. It requires adopting an attitude that echoes Bacon’s recommendation to interrupt the usual intercourse with things: customary perceptions show clearly bounded things, not the data-stream of perceptual noise; to look and listen *past* things to the bits of tiny perceptions below or behind determinate things – perceptions that “custom makes us ignore”³⁶⁴ – is already an effect of perceptual defamiliarization.

Marks

One consequence Leibniz draws from this view of apperception is that notions may be perfectly well analyzed – perfectly clear and distinct – and still not represent the full reality of things. Leibniz makes the corresponding adjustment to the Cartesian concept of clear and

³⁶² Variations of this basic questions are discussed in post-humanism, animal studies, and cybernetics; see for instance, Agamben, *The Open* (citing the tick example 45-47); Wolfe, *What Is Posthumanism?*, 3–30; Luhmann, *Ökologische Kommunikation*.

³⁶³ Luhmann, *Einführung in die Systemtheorie*, 128, 169–79. The formulation is Gregory Bateson’s.

³⁶⁴ Leibniz, “Preface to the New Essays,” 295; *Die philosophischen Schriften*, 5:47.

distinct notions in *Meditationes de cognitione, veritate, et ideis*, a brief essay that laid the groundwork for Baumgarten's aesthetics (and, in fact, for much epistemology in Germany up to Kant).³⁶⁵ In this essay, Leibniz suggests a new classification for the different levels or stages of knowledge that hinges on a single operator: *distinguishing "marks" (notae)* on the basis of which things can be differentiated from others.

Raised one bar from the level zero of tiny or "obscure" perceptions, the first level of cognition is constituted by "clear" notions, the kind of knowledge the senses afford. Clear notions include sufficient marks for recognizing a thing by differentiating it from others across changing spatial and temporal contexts. They are *merely* clear when the differential marks involved are not explicitly understood, but implicitly sensed.³⁶⁶ Knowers by sense can effectively differentiate, but are not aware of the criteria with which they operate – they "cannot enumerate one by one [*separatim*] marks [*notas*] sufficient for differentiating a things from others."³⁶⁷ Such *merely* clear notions are therefore, in Leibniz's terminology, "clear and confused." When the marks themselves are raised into clarity – that is, when one is capable of explicitly identifying enough distinguishing mark to know how a thing is identified as a certain kind of thing – then notions become "clear and distinct," or clear in the second order.³⁶⁸

³⁶⁵ For the following, see Leibniz, "Meditations on Knowledge, Truth, and Ideas," 1989.

³⁶⁶ Sense perception thus also already operates with marks and *make distinctions*. On this point, see Adler, *Die Prägnanz des Dunklen*, 1–11, 38–40.

³⁶⁷ Leibniz, "Meditations on Knowledge, Truth, and Ideas," 1989, 24. *Separatim* added.

³⁶⁸ Because of the progression of orders and the reliance on a single operator, Leibniz's classification could be productively interpreted through Luhmann's concept of observation – which develops from the same cybernetic background Deleuze had already brought in contact with Leibniz's theory of apperception. The "contingency effects" that usually result from second order observation are avoided in Leibniz because he presupposes a perfect, divine observer whose observations a human observer merely retraces or "reconstructs." For an overview of Luhmann's concept of observation, see Luhmann, *Introduction to Systems Theory*, 101–19.

To expand one of Leibniz's examples: one has "clear and confused" knowledge of a marigold if one can identify it on a meadow among other flowers, but could not explain in sufficiently explicit terms how it is that one goes about recognizing it. One would have "clear and distinct" knowledge of the same flower if one could list botanical features sufficient for a botanist to unambiguously identify it as a marigold.

On the basis of this example it is easy to see – and this will be important for Baumgarten's development of aesthetics as a theory of art – that the two levels of knowledge imply different modes of transmission. Because the differential marks cognized in "clear and confused" cognition are dependent on sense-processing, they can only be conveyed to others "by leading them into the presence of the thing and making them see, smell, or taste the same thing we do, or, at very least, by reminding them of some past perception that is similar"³⁶⁹ – as when some demonstrates to someone else on a meadow how a marigold looks, and how it differs from other, similar-looking flowers scattered in its vicinity. Clear and confused knowledge must therefore be conveyed by *examples* and counterexamples that "embody" the relevant differentiating marks. Clear and distinct knowledge, by contrast, is conveyed by nominal definitions (the "enumeration of marks"), and can therefore be detached from a specific sensory embodiment of the relevant differential marks (the botanist's description of a marigold can be encoded in spoken language, braille, or written text).

As orders like to pile up in Leibniz, the second order of clear and distinct notions is not the final one; after all, the distinguishing marks themselves are *merely clear* in clear and distinct

³⁶⁹ Leibniz, "Meditations on Knowledge, Truth, and Ideas," 1989, 24.

notions, not yet distinctly understood all the way down to the minutest differentiations. A notion that explicitly contains all the differences that mark an individual thing would not only be clear and distinct, but “adequate,” so that notion and thing are perfectly congruent. The transition from merely clear and distinct to adequate notions thus functions like a placeholder for all the orders of analysis necessary to make a notion distinct all the way down to the minutest differentiations. Since such a complete analysis would tend toward infinity, adequate knowledge is practically unattainable for finite perceivers like humans – except, Leibniz speculates, in the case of ideal entities like numbers.³⁷⁰

The mental capacity that effects this clarification of notions is *attention*. Wolff’s translation of attention as *Aufmerksamkeit* indicates how this tradition interprets the stretching (*tendere*) of the mind indicated in the Latinate term: it is enabled by the mind’s capacity to selectively pick up “marks” of things. *What the mind really does* when it attends to things is to increase the number of differences registered. Baumgarten’s short-hand definition according to which attention is the capacity to increase the clarity of perception was thus elliptical; the full story is that the relative clarity or obscurity of perceptions is effected by registering or ignoring differences that give rise to these perceptions in the first place. This is what makes things appear clear; this is the mechanism behind the imagistic metaphor of a “stretching-out” mind. Therefore the resonance – in the Latin *nota* as well as in its German and English translations – between a distinctive feature of a thing and the mental capacity to “mark” differences: attention is a capacity for *making* and *marking* distinctions. This is no less true for the primary

³⁷⁰ A final stage mentioned by Leibniz – “intuitive cognition”; the epistemic vision of the omniscient being – could survey all such marks in one stroke. It would no longer perceive any noise but clear and distinct marks everywhere.

level of sensory apperception than the secondary level of reflexive apperception, even though the sensory apperception has no reflexive knowledge of (i.e., cannot in turn differentiate) the marks with which it operates. For Baumgarten, this does, however, not mean that it does not possess its own kind of know-how. Leibniz's example of such *savoir-faire* drops the clue Baumgarten will take up and elaborate: "painters and other artists," Leibniz writes, "correctly know [*cognosco*] what is done properly and what is done poorly, though they are often unable to explain their judgments."³⁷¹ This implicit normativity is the basis of Baumgarten's call for the cultivation of embodied attention.

The systematic location of attention in the topography of cognition is ambiguous in Baumgarten's corpus. On the one hand, his *Metaphysica* lists a separate faculty of attention at the pivot between the "lower" and the "higher" faculties of cognition, and at least in this regard follows the system of Wolff, for whom attention is the lowest of the highest faculties (and attention is thus limited to voluntary, intellectual attention). On the other hand, he already introduces a *facultas attendendi* in the context of the lower faculties, explaining how the clarification of notions functions *below* the level of distinctness.³⁷² In the "Second Philosophical Letter" and in other outlines of his philosophical system, Baumgarten then places attention at the bottom of the cognitive faculties (including the sensory ones) altogether. Baumgarten's student Meier follows him in this latter view, according to which "alle (!) übrige untere Erkenntnisvermögen ... nichts anders sind, als besonderen Arten der Aufmerksamkeit."³⁷³

³⁷¹ Leibniz, "Meditations on Knowledge, Truth, and Ideas," 1989, 24.

³⁷² Baumgarten, *Metaphysica/Metaphysik*, 280–281 (§529); 330–331 (§624–628).

³⁷³ Meier, *Anfangsgründe aller schönen Wissenschaften*, 1976, 2:48 (§283).

That apperception proceeds by way of attention has a further implication that is the central component in all contemporaneous definitions of attention, but is perhaps nowhere as clearly stated as by Georg Friedrich Meier, the great explicator, popularizer (and sometimes trivializer) of Baumgarten's aesthetics:

Wir Menschen besitzen nur ein eingeschränktes Vermögen der Aufmerksamkeit. Da wir nun auf alles aufmerken, was wir uns klar vorstellen, ja da, durch unsere Aufmerksamkeit, die Begriffe als durch das einzige Mittel klar werden; so ist der Grad der Klarheit jederzeit dem Grade der Aufmerksamkeit gleich. Folglich ist ein Grad der Aufmerksamkeit möglich, der alle unsere Aufmerksamkeit übersteigt, und dieser Grad der Klarheit ist bey uns unmöglich.³⁷⁴

That humans can and have to cognize by distributing their attention marks the anthropological conditionality of cognition. Human apperception is suspended between two unavailable ends. It is (in its waking state) always already above the level of tiny perceptions, which are numbly in touch with everything, but in undifferentiated, unconscious form; and it is never entirely clear, can never reach the state of perfect differentiation in which all differences could be surveyed in one stroke. Both limits are the end of attention. What Leibniz calls unconscious "bare" monads cannot (yet) select; the omniscient being would no longer have to select – it could read the noise as a transparent calculus of differences.

Aesthetic Enlightenment

With eighteenth-century *Schulphilosophie*, Baumgarten adopts the Leibnizian framework for classifying different levels of cognition but inserts a lateral branch into Leibniz's

³⁷⁴ Meier, *Anfangsgründe aller schönen Wissenschaften*, 1976, 1:262 (§122).

progressive schema: clearing up or *Aufklärung*³⁷⁵ of notions can not only be achieved by clarifying differentiating marks until notions graduates to distinctness, but also, counterintuitively, by increasing their confusion – that is, by *multiplying the number of indistinctly sensed marks*.³⁷⁶ In less technical language we could say that notions can be further developed not only by *sharpening* them, but also by *broadening* them, so that things are not perceived more *distinctly*, but *more* is perceived indistinctly. The first pathway follows the route outlined by Leibniz, which leads to the “intensive clarity” of distinct notions by focusing in on a select few differential marks. The second branches off into the richness and vividness of “extensive clarity” by binding a larger number of marks, albeit in an indistinctly sensed rather than distinctly understood form.³⁷⁷

The scholarship on Baumgarten has long recognized that the distinction between intensive clarity and extensive clarity provides the model for an independently aesthetic (as opposed to logical) perfection of notions, and is thus the basis of Baumgarten’s eventual claim for the independence of aesthetics from logic.³⁷⁸ What has not been seen is that the distinction itself rests on an economy of attention. In one of the first philosophical works that treats attention as a distinct phenomenon, Wolff established a law of attention according to which

³⁷⁵ The German name for the historical period is originally derived from the word for the process of clarifying notions central to Enlightenment epistemology; Schneiders, *Das Zeitalter der Aufklärung*, 7.

³⁷⁶ In English as in Latin, “confusion” (*confusio*) can literally be understood in terms of a “being-fused-together.” This can be interpreted at the same time as a *lack* of differentiating or as a *surplus* of complexity – the latter interpretation marking Baumgarten’s strategy for rehabilitating indistinct notions. For Baumgarten’s adoption of Leibniz’s framework, see Baumgarten, *Metaphysica/Metaphysik*, 280–283 (§531–533). The precipitating intervention already occurs in the chapter on empirical psychology in Baumgarten’s *Metaphysica*, his textbook on metaphysics, where he lays clear the epistemological ground for the new discipline of aesthetics.³⁷⁶ A first version of the notion of “extensive clarity” is already developed in Baumgarten, *Meditationes*, 16–17 (§XV–XVII).

³⁷⁷ Baumgarten, *Metaphysica/Metaphysik*, 280–283 (§531–533).

³⁷⁸ See, for instance, Adler, *Die Prägnanz des Dunklen*, 42–43; Beiser, *Diotima’s Children*, 127–28.

there exists “an inverse relation between the intensity of attention and the extent of the cognitive material that can be brought under it: the greater the attention, the smaller the part of the visual field to which it extends.”³⁷⁹ Baumgarten similarly distinguishes between “ATTENTIONIS *EXTENSIO*” (glossed in German as “Erweiterung, Verbreitung oder Ausdehnung”), the capacity to apperceive more (*plura appercipiendi*); and “ATTENTIONIS *INTENSIO*,” the capacity to apperceive some things more clearly than merely clear things (*clarius clarioribus ... appercipiendi*).³⁸⁰ At the bottom of the distinction between intensive and extensive clarity, the very distinction that introduces aesthetics as a discipline with its own independent domain, lie mutually exclusive techniques of practicing *ars attendendi*,³⁸¹ the art of attention.

Understanding the distinction between intensive and extensive clarity in terms of attentional techniques helps to explain how both types of clarity increase the cognitive power – the “light” – of perceptions according to Baumgarten. *Intensive* attention is the prerequisite for rational analysis, the dissolution of perceptions into intelligible marks. Through a laser-like focus on select features, it cuts up perceptions into discrete bits (attention proper), clarifies one after another (attention as *reflectio*), and then inspects the interrelation of the now fully

³⁷⁹ This is James Hatfield’s transcription of Wolff’s law in to English (“Attention in Early Scientific Psychology,” 5). Wolff’s summative formulation of the law in his (hitherto untranslated) Latin textbook is the following: “Quo majorem attentionem adhibemus ad visibile, eo minor est pars, ad quam dirigitur” – *the greater* the attention we direct to something visible, *the smaller* the part at which it is directed (*Psychologia rationalis*, 288 (§360)). Baumgarten, in addition to distinguishing between extension and intensification of attention, formulates a similar law in his metaphysics immediately prior to the distinction between intensive and extensive clarity; Baumgarten, *Metaphysica/Metaphysik*, 280–281 (§529).

³⁸⁰ Baumgarten, *Metaphysica/Metaphysik*, 330–33 (§628). Emphases mine.

³⁸¹ Baumgarten, *Zur Grundlegung der Ästhetik*, 73.

perspicuous parts (attention as *comparatio*).³⁸² This interrelation, as the co-presence of a set of clearly understood marks in a perception, is captured by clear and distinct notions, notions clear in their constitutive marks. The attentional technique at the basis of intensive clarity thus serves the classical epistemic project of Enlightenment as *Aufklärung*, the project of creating notions that make the multiplicity of the world transparent onto the constructs of the mind. It is important to note, however, that intensive clarity is not – as is often claimed – already equivalent to a distinct notion, but rather denotes the attentional technique that *enables the conversion* of a perception into a distinct one. Once the intensive attention has successfully completed its analysis, a perception graduates from its sensory origin to a clear and distinct one.

That an extension of attention – the *slackening* of the same cognitive technique that leads to distinct knowledge *also* yields an increase of clarity must appear puzzling. A first, short explanation is that extensive clarity foregoes the isolation necessary for in-depth analysis and allows registering interconnections that intensively clear notions have to block out. To characterize the richness of extensively clear perceptions, Baumgarten also calls them *praegnantes*³⁸³ (“suggestive” or “pregnant with meaning”) – which is Leibniz’s designation for the “cosmic” expressiveness of tiny perceptions; the fact that they register – even in faint and distant form – everything that happens in the universe.³⁸⁴ And this is indeed where the

³⁸² The mental faculties necessary for forming clear and distinct notions are *all subspecies of attention*: “Attentio in totius perceptionis partes successive directa est REFLEXIO. Attentio ad totam perceptionem post reflexionem est COMPARATIO.” Abstraction is for Baumgarten, as we have seen, the flipside of attention; the inattention to certain marks (Baumgarten, *Metaphysica/Metaphysik*, 330 (§624-627; quote from 626)).

³⁸³ *Ibid.*, 274–75 (§517); Baumgarten, *Aesthetica/Ästhetik*, 2007, 2:728 (§732).

³⁸⁴ On the concept of the “pregnant moment” in eighteenth-century aesthetics, see also Adler, *Die Präganz des Dunklen*.

suggestiveness of extensively clear perceptions comes from. Extensive clarity enfolds traces of (tiny) perceptions that are otherwise blinded into the obscurity of the background, and thus “carries them along” into the realm of clarity.³⁸⁵ Put in terms of perceptual technique, Baumgarten assumes that a less sharply focused attention yields “complex” perceptions; perceptions which connote less clearly registered marks alongside those more clearly attended to.³⁸⁶ Taking cues from Baumgarten’s own terminology, we could say that by registering *con-fusions of marks* that intensive clarity has to disentangle, extensive clarity conveys some of the *complexity* built into tiny perceptions.³⁸⁷

In all this it is important to keep in mind that the surplus of extensive clarity consist in an increase of *differential* marks. If extensive clarity approaches the complexity of tiny perceptions then not by merging into a *unio mystica* with an ocean of noise; but by registering, if in “sensory” form, differences ignored in the transition to intensive clarity. Lowering the attentional threshold, the level of intensive focus, thus paradoxically leads to an *increase* of differentiation. Extensive clarity is thus, in one sense, *closer* to the ideal of complete understanding because it contains, even in “noisy” form, more of the marks that would constitute divine knowledge. According to the form of their perception, however, it is further

³⁸⁵ The “REGNUM LUCIS” is located just above the realm of “REGNUM TENEBRARUM” of obscure perception in Baumgarten’s topology of the soul; Baumgarten, *Metaphysica/Metaphysik*, 274–275 (§518).

³⁸⁶ The “connotation” is to be understood rather literally: complex perceptions (*complexa*) contain less clearly perceived “marks” [*notas*] alongside the clearer ones (*notas ... minus claras continens*). The subsequent distinction between “perceptio primaria” (glossed as “Haupt-Vorstellung”) – the part of a perception more attended to – and less clear “perceptio adhaerens” (glossed as Neben-Vorstellung) – the part of a perception that is connoted without being clearly attended to – is, at least as far the terminology is concerned, the model for Kant’s “aesthetic ideas.”

³⁸⁷ If we assume (with modern complexity theory) that complexity pertains when the interaction of elements leads to qualities not reducible to the elements considered separately, and is therefore not susceptible to classical analysis.

removed from this ideal than clear and distinct perceptions, because extensive clarity registers the marks in the “inadequate” way in which they are given to the different sense modalities. Even this inadequacy is, however, relativized already by Leibniz: if we pulled away the curtain of secondary qualities, he writes in his critique of Locke, what we would find is not the ultimate shape of things, but – another level of secondary qualities; and thus *ad infinitum*.³⁸⁸

If the published volumes of Baumgarten’s *Aesthetica* will develop this approach mainly with respect to practices of poetry and the arts, and will not provide the general theory of sense perception that Baumgarten announces, for instance, in the “Second Philosophical Letter,” we can now state why this will be the case. It is not because Baumgarten had abandoned an earlier, more ambitious project encompassing all forms of *aisthesis* in order to replace it with an aesthetics focused exclusively on art.³⁸⁹ The reason is rather that the arts provide paradigm cases of aesthetic practices that cultivate sensory techniques *to their own ends*. Clear and distinct perceptions – the generalizations and classifications undertaken by the sciences – contain, to be sure, their own aesthetics: Baumgarten describes it as the attentional practices behind “intensive clarity.” But this set of sensory practices strive to eventually transcend the sensory level and (even if Baumgarten agrees with Leibniz that this transcendence is never complete) therefore pursue an end that lies beyond the level of sense perception as such. The perfection of sense perception as such – *qua talis* – is, however,

³⁸⁸ Leibniz, *Neue Abhandlungen über den menschlichen Verstand*, 204.

³⁸⁹ This is the view of scholars who want to limit Baumgarten’s aesthetic project exclusively to phenomena of art, even “high” art; see, for instance, Franke, “Sinnliche Erkenntnis - was sie ist und was sie soll,” 79.

precisely what the first paragraph of the main text of the *Aesthetica* identifies as the telos of the work; and it will identify this kind of perfection with beauty.³⁹⁰

We can begin to see here the contours of a “wider” and a “narrower” sense of aesthetics that will still be reflected, for instance, in Kant’s usage of the term for the sensory contribution to cognition *and* a special kind of reflective judgment. Attentiveness in art and the sciences will tend to take separate paths; but these paths diverge from a shared understanding of sensory attention as improvable technique.

The Matter of Perception

The key sections of Baumgarten’s *Aesthetica* that deal with aesthetic truth are suffused with an imagery that contrasts the “formal” perfection of the logical pursuit of truth with the “material plenitude” of its aesthetic counterpart.³⁹¹ The following passage, perhaps the most famous of Baumgarten’s work, contains this imagery in condensed form:

Whatever logical truth contains in terms of formal perfection could only be accomplished by a great loss of material perfection. For what is abstraction, if not a loss [*iactura*]? By the same token, you would not be able to make out of a marble of irregular shape a marble globe without losing at least as much material as the greater value of roundness demands.³⁹²

The loss of abstraction required for logical perfection is then contrasted with an aesthetic approach, which delights in material perfection instead:

³⁹⁰ Baumgarten, *Aesthetica/Ästhetik*, 2007, 1:20–21 (§14).

³⁹¹ Leibniz had introduced the image for apperception according to which clarifying ideas is analogous to a sculptor’s carving the shape of Hercules from a block of marble (and thus, analogous to a craft). Baumgarten draws on the same imagery, with the difference that his analogy drops the “veins” which, according to Leibniz, harbor the shape of Hercules in latent form. What latent forms inhabit and can be “brought out” from the marble, this suggests, is not given in advance, but determined by the craft itself. For Leibniz use of the image, see Leibniz, “Preface to the New Essays,” 294. “Meditations on Knowledge, Truth, and Ideas,” 1989, 27.

³⁹² Baumgarten, *Aesthetica/Ästhetik*, 2007, 1:538 (§560). My (admittedly not so perfectly rounded) translation.

The aesthetic horizon delights in most determinate individuals as its forest, its chaos, its material, from which it carves out [*exsculpat*] aesthetic truth ... in such a way that as little materially perfect truth is lost as possible.³⁹³

This juxtaposition is ground zero for hylomorphic contrasts in aesthetics thought; the first instance in a long tradition that sees aesthetic art – in contrast to and often as a corrective to logic or reason – as especially attentive to the “material” side of things. To recall only a few examples, think of the autonomy of the imagination from the concepts of the understanding in the *Third Critique*; Schiller’s celebration of beautiful art as “freedom in appearance” because its form appears to emerge from its material uncoerced; even up to central motifs in reflection on art that rejects the label aesthetics, such as Heidegger’s claim that artworks are distinguished from equipment by a special sensitivity to a quasi-material “earthly” moment that resists integration into a “world”; or perhaps even de Man’s recurring point that literary writing is uniquely cognizant of the resistant materiality of the signifier. Such resonances certainly suggest vectors of historical influence, but they can also be misleading: Baumgarten’s form and matter are not Kant’s or Schiller’s, not to mention twentieth century theorists.

How the contrast works in Baumgarten should be clear from the discussion above: Baumgarten’s metaphors of chiseling, cutting and carving refer to the different techniques of attention behind intensive and extensive clarity.³⁹⁴ What figures as “formal” in this image are thus increasingly rigorous filters of selection, which are paid for by a desensitization to differences that no longer register as “making a difference.” The intensive attention behind the

³⁹³ Ibid., 1:542–43 (§564). My translation.

³⁹⁴ The notion of extensive clarity is not mentioned by name in the *Aesthetica* but returns as *ubertas*, the “richness” or “abundance” of material that constitute the first concern (*prima cura*) of aesthetic thought; Ibid., 1:92 (§115).

logical approach operates, as it were, with a small aperture that blurs large regions of the perceptual field into the background, or, to use Baumgarten's more incisive imagery, cuts them out of perception (*amputare per abstractionem*).³⁹⁵ In the formation of clear and distinct notions, innumerable differentiating marks (*notas differentiarum ... innumeras*), all those which are not necessary to identify a thing as a member of a certain class (*ea, quibus non opus est ad distinguendum*), fall out of the picture like excess stone in cutting a perfectly regular globe from an irregular block of marble.³⁹⁶ This is how the universal concepts of the sciences are "born from" (*enatis*) individuals,³⁹⁷ and how they achieve their own kind of perfection. Extensive aesthetic attention, by contrast, is a floating kind of attention midway between vigilance and distraction; wide enough to pick up details that a more strained attention might blind out, alert enough not to let them slip into immediate oblivion.³⁹⁸ It thus carves out its beautiful shapes with as little loss of material complexity as possible – that is, by registering differential marks from which logical truth abstracted.³⁹⁹

If abstraction is *iactura*, a loss, a throwing-overboard: what exactly is thrown out in the process? What warrants retaining the "material" of truth against its "formal" attenuation in the logical approach? Two answers suggest themselves upon reading the Baumgarten passages above, not least because they activate background narratives constructed around distinct interpretations of the contrast opened up by Baumgarten: what is lost (and what aesthetics is especially responsive to) is something *whole*; or something *other* to thought. The first response,

³⁹⁵ Ibid., 1:542 (§561).

³⁹⁶ Ibid., 1:536–37 (§559).

³⁹⁷ Ibid., 1:536 (§560).

³⁹⁸ Baumgarten, *Aesthetica/Ästhetik*, 2007, 2:602–5 (§614–616).

³⁹⁹ Baumgarten, *Aesthetica/Ästhetik*, 2007, 1:542–43 (this is a paraphrase of §564).

developed in Baumgarten's Romantic aftermath, thought aesthetics capable of restoring an *original wholeness* lost in differentiation or in the subjective imposition of form. Together with the organicism it entailed, it has fallen largely out of favor, although it continues to play an important role in popular mythologies of the aesthetic. The more current background narrative is one according to which aesthetics, or (if aesthetics is deemed complicit with what is to be defied) some feature of art or the literary, are singularly attentive to the particular, the incommensurable, the irreducible, the non-identical, the radically other – and in this way (as the cluster of negative particles suggests) *resist* something about “thought” or a certain tradition of thought deemed oppressive.⁴⁰⁰ I invoke these narrative patterns not in order to denounce or correct them but to encourage a suspension of familiar assumptions. Despite proleptic resonances and resemblances, the story Baumgarten will tell follows a rather different logic.

That the material plenitude of aesthetic form does not simply recuperate a lost wholeness becomes obvious when we recall that the extensive clarity is, just like its counterpart, the effect of technique. This holds historically – the same “technical” understanding of perception is the possibility condition of *both* pathways for refining perceptions contrasted by Baumgarten – as well as systematically: the extension of attention is, just as its intensification, *habitus*; a skill or proficiency.⁴⁰¹ Even sophisticated reformulations of the “holistic” interpretation that understand the resistance to *isolation* articulated in

⁴⁰⁰ Such narratives will at least, I assume, be familiar to people with a literary studies background. I suggestively recall them here in the form of an extreme simplification that lumps together terminology from a variety of different approaches.

⁴⁰¹ Baumgarten defines *habitus*, in the tradition of Aristotelian *hexis*, as a skill acquired “through the frequent repetition of similar actions”; Baumgarten, *Metaphysica/Metaphysik*, 304–305 (§577).

Baumgarten's aesthetics as a protest against a loss of *wholeness* no longer registered in modern scientific-analytical knowledge therefore miss the point. The very possibility condition for both types of attentional technique is that perception *can never be whole*. Even the extensive attention therefore cannot take in complexity wholesale, but must filter and select – even if its wider mesh filter allows it to filter differently, and allows perceptions habitually blinded out to enter into the perceptual formation process. Immediately after the passage quoted above, Baumgarten emphasizes in a suggestive image that the aesthetic attention must also filter and select, and lose material in the process, even if it “delights” in its chaos: the beautiful form (*pulcra forma*) resulting from the labor of aesthetic attention is a *rotunditas*;⁴⁰² a round shape polished from the excess marble not unlike the regular sphere of logical truth.

The affinities with the second story are articulated in Baumgarten's insistence that the aesthetic pursuit of truth concerns itself with individuals and singulars (*individui, singulares*) rather than generals or universals (*generales, universales*).⁴⁰³ In understanding what this means, however, Baumgarten's post-Leibnizian metaphysics may have something to add to the conversation about perception and complexity reduction that related approaches are not equally poised to register. Baumgarten insists that contingent singulars (rather than timeless universals) contain the largest measure of metaphysical truth.⁴⁰⁴ Such singular beings and events are “contingent” not because they are random or fickle, but because they have their reasons for being (and for being so, and not otherwise) not in themselves, but in another, and

⁴⁰² Baumgarten, *Aesthetica/Ästhetik*, 2007, 1:542 (§565). See also Dagmar Mirbach's introduction, LXII-LXV.

⁴⁰³ *Ibid.*, 1:417–19 (§440-441).

⁴⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 1:418–19 (§441); Baumgarten, *Metaphysica/Metaphysik*, 108–11 (§148-154).

therefore do not exist by necessity.⁴⁰⁵ Strictly speaking, contingent singulars have their reasons for being (or are “contingent upon”) *all* others: As part of a world, a “nexus of interdependent singulars,” they are individuated by their immediate and mediate relations to other things that participate in this nexus.⁴⁰⁶ If they can indeed still count as singulars, then because of the way they gather, inhabit, and congregate these relations into a unique position.

What the orientation of aesthetic truth toward the singular implies for Baumgarten is thus not a privileging of things in their radical disarticulation from everything else, but, quite the contrary, an openness for registering the manifold entanglements of things. With Baumgarten, we would have to understand the concrete and the abstract in ways that invert some of their common connotations (an understanding that will have echoes up to Hegel): the concrete is not the isolated, self-contained, materially bounded entity but rather what is “grown together”; a thing in its embeddedness and determination by its context. The abstract, in turn, is necessarily isolated from the interconnectivity of things, disconnected from the rest and circumscribed by clearly definable boundaries.⁴⁰⁷

The “concrete” relations of things are lost in abstraction precisely because abstraction works by isolation. The extensive attention at the bottom of aesthetic truth can register aspects

⁴⁰⁵ This follows from Leibniz’s and Baumgarten’s ontological understanding of the principle of sufficient reason and excludes the divine singular, which has its reason for being in itself and is by definition a necessary being.

⁴⁰⁶ Baumgarten, *Metaphysica/Metaphysik*, 198–99 (§357): “in omni mundo nexus est partium ..., i.e., *in mundo non datur insula*. ... connectuntur singula cum singulis” [there is in every world a nexus of parts ..., i.e., there is no island in the world. ... (each) singular is connected with (other) singulars.] Which compossible interconnection of things comes to *existence* depends, of course, on divine creation in both Leibniz’s and Baumgarten’s cosmologies, so that the becoming-actual of beings in the world ultimately depends on creation (not, however, their participation in a particular set of compossibles, which pertains to them regardless of their actuality).

⁴⁰⁷ The idea is that correlates cannot be thought without the relation; therefore, thinking one thing entails thinking those it is related to; i.e. mediately the entire universe. “Understanding one thing fully” would consequently entail knowing the entire universe.

of a thing's complex interconnectivity by detecting marks blinded out as superfluous and accidental with respect to a certain knowledge interests of reason. Aesthetic truth would then function as a kind of sensorium for interconnections blinded out by systems of abstraction. The trouble with such systems would not be that they do not respect the individuality of things, but that they are, in a way, never systematic enough: the relations they register necessarily fall short of the wealth of actual interrelations.

Truth and Semblance

Baumgarten's theologically supported metaphysics furnishes a special sensibility for the interdependence and interconnectedness of the given,⁴⁰⁸ but it also presents a potential obstacle to appreciating one aspect of Baumgarten's paradigm art of poetry in particular: *poets lie*; their fabrications often deviate from the way things "really" are in "nature." Where the creation carries a divine seal of approval, unauthorized deviations from nature easily come under suspicion as an (at best) vacuous or (at worst) monstrous outgrowth of human pride.⁴⁰⁹

Baumgarten's solution ultimately involves two steps. In a first instance, poetic fictions are understood (following Breitingner's model) as representing a "heterocosmic truth,"⁴¹⁰ a

⁴⁰⁸ Leibniz's and Baumgarten's focus on interconnectivity seems to stand or fall with their theism (the divine accommodation of substances). And yet we might, as a general reading strategy, also turn the issue around. If Adorno remarks about Hegel's "absolute subject" that "precisely the construction of the absolute subject," by drawing everything into an immanence that gives equal weight to all beings, "does justice to an objectivity indissoluble in subjectivity,"⁴⁰⁸ we might claim a similar paradox for Leibniz: the theistic premise of the mutual accommodation of substances allows him to register an *immanent interdependence* of things that tends to press beyond the premise that allowed its articulation; see Adorno, *Hegel*, 5–6.

⁴⁰⁹ Alexander Pope's "Essay on Criticism" (1711) is particularly vocal about the hierarchy of divine nature vs. human pride in art. Pope's attitude is condensed in a witty couplet: "Nature to all things fix'd the Limits fit, / And wisely curb'd proud Man's pretending Wit"; "An Essay on Criticism," 442.

⁴¹⁰ Baumgarten, *Aesthetica/Ästhetik*, 2007, 1:418–21 (§441).

connection of things as it might exist in a different possible world.⁴¹¹ Poetic fictions are in this way sanctioned as “truth in the wider sense” and lose their transgressive status with regard to divine creation – after all, the poet does not so much deviate from the divine plan as realize other possibilities within the range of this plan; the contingency plans of creation, as it were.⁴¹² Yet the truth-value of heterocosmic fiction is not identical with the represented state of affairs in another metaphysical world-edifice. It is realized in a second step, *by means or through the detour* of the heterocosmic fiction. Although fictions are not true in the strict sense, they can, Baumgarten argues, at times *let us recognize more aspects of an “individual”* (*qua* intersection of relations) and therefore reveal a *higher degree of metaphysical truth* than a corresponding general concept would.⁴¹³ Baumgarten later articulates this as the “general formula” of converting truth to verisimilitude: whenever a fictions reveals “more material truth” than truth in the strict sense, the poet should go with fiction.⁴¹⁴ The truth of fictions thus consists in their power to enable perceptions that would otherwise remain obscure. In this sense, possible worlds do not lie beyond, but traverse the noise of the actual world as so many possibilities of its apperception.

⁴¹¹ In Leibniz’s cosmology (and those of his followers), God famously chooses to actualize the actual world among an infinite number of possible worlds because it contains the greatest perfection. The comparison of poetic fictions with “possible world” is usually thought to originate in Leibniz’s follower Wolff, but it actually stems from Leibniz himself. Leibniz actually uses this analogy quite frequently: See *Philosophical Essays*, 28, 95, 100.

⁴¹² This “sanction” of fiction as heterocosmic narrative is, however, a double-edged sword, as it involves the implicit comparison of the poet with the divine creator who freely disposes over the realm of possibility *before* the creation. Baumgarten’s predecessor Breitinger is more radical than Baumgarten in this respect and makes this comparison of the creator-poet with the Leibnizian creator-God explicit. See Breitinger, *Critische Dichtkunst*, 1:60; 136–137; 426.

⁴¹³ Baumgarten, *Aesthetica/Ästhetik*, 2007, 1:478–79 (§500).

⁴¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 1:542–45 (§565).

This implies that the truth discovered through aesthetic art does not precede its presentation (either as the pre-defined nature of things or as the truths of reason), but is, as in Breitinger's marvelous mask, inextricably linked to and engendered by it. Baumgarten's abandonment of the principle of "nature imitation" (or its reinterpretation as "thinking in accordance with one's given perceptual and intellectual capacities") suggests as much as well.⁴¹⁵ The most explicit account of how Baumgarten understands this non-mimetic mode of truth is developed in a section on "aesthetic thaumaturgy" – the aesthetic art of representing (familiar) things *as* new and wondrous in order to animate the attention. Baumgarten recommends that poets should look for aspects of things that have previously gone unnoticed and "pull them out of obscurity" (*ex tenebris protrahe*) in their presentation.⁴¹⁶ A city, for example, will appear multiplied in perspective when looked at from different places.⁴¹⁷ This, however, is precisely Leibniz's example in the *Monadology* for the monad's point of view. The task of poets as of other artists is thus to create, through aesthetic art, new monadic points of view; different "zones of clarity" or filters that unlock perceptual possibilities. The kind of artworks his aesthetics seem to envision are thus valued as much for what can be perceived *through* them as for what can be perceived *in* them; for the perspective they open up – quite literally: the "vistas" they disclose.

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⁴¹⁵ Ibid., 1:84–85 (§104-105).

⁴¹⁶ Baumgarten, *Aesthetica/Ästhetik*, 2007, 2:844–45 (§825).

⁴¹⁷ Ibid. (§825).

We already saw that the “Second Philosophical Letter” contained hints of yet another side of the new “discipline” of aesthetics. The introductory section on attention made patent that the art of paying attention is no purely epistemological matter – or that what gets *formulated* in terms of an epistemology matters not only for philosophical questions in a narrow sense. We can begin to explore this disciplinary dimension of the aesthetics of attention by revisiting Baumgarten’s striking passage:

Den Anfang macht die Kunst der Aufmerksamkeit, weil sie zur Verbesserung aller übrigen Erkenntnis-Vermögen unentbehrlich ist. Ihre Notwendigkeit wird uns von der ersten Jugend an durch ein oft wiederholtes: beschäftige dich nur hiemit! bedenke, warum du hier bist! gib acht! merk auf! eingeschärft. Wie sollte nicht mancher Schulmeister betreten werden, wenn ihm eines seiner Schlacht-Schafe antwortete: wie, soll ichs denn machen, wann ich acht haben will?⁴¹⁸

Baumgarten’s language is infused with “disciplining” words: paying attention must be *eingeschärft* (“inculcated” or, to convey the connotation of a sharp edge, “incised”) into future adults from the earliest youth; they have to learn to *sich entschlagen* (to repudiate, get rid of – connotatively, by “beating out of” their minds) what they (should) pay no attention to. The discipline of attention is externally induced, but also – but then – enforced reflexively (*sich entschlagen*); done to oneself. The confrontation of the schoolmaster and his “Schlacht-Schafe” (“sheep to be slaughtered,” i.e., students) strikingly recalls a primal scene of an emerging disciplinary society, and commemorates – despite, or perhaps facilitated by the ironic undertone – the violence involved in disciplining one’s attention, and disciplining oneself through paying attention. Mastering the art of attention is thus not only a question of becoming conscious in an epistemological sense: learning how to direct inner and outer

⁴¹⁸ Baumgarten, *Zur Grundlegung der Ästhetik*, 69–70.

awareness, what to pay attention to and what to actively ignore, what to perceive consciously and what to repudiate from consciousness is also instrumental in the formation (*Bildung*) of (properly) conscious subjects.

In instructing how to “cultivate” attention, the new discipline of aesthetics is, on the one hand, an example (if not the paradigm)⁴¹⁹ of a configuration of disciplinary power that works through the institutional instilment of (self-)discipline rather than the direct exertion of force on bodies. The affinity of attention and disciplinary society becomes even more palpable if we transpose the schoolmaster’s call to attention into another mass institution perfected in the eighteenth century: a yell of “attention!” is a military command; it is, in fact, the command of commands, a command that puts soldiers in the state of readiness for being commanded.⁴²⁰ (This is, incidentally, not an externally imposed analogy – Baumgarten himself likens exercises that cultivate aesthetic faculties to the drill of soldiers.⁴²¹) As reflection on and questioning of the subjectivation process,⁴²² however, it also provides – quite literally in the scene recounted by Baumgarten – tools for talking back to power: posing the question how paying attention is to be done leaves the schoolmaster embarrassed and exposed (*betreten*).

⁴¹⁹ This is Christoph Menke’s (hyperbolic) claim. See “Die Disziplin der Ästhetik ist die Ästhetik der Disziplin,” here esp. 242. See *Ibid*.

⁴²⁰ The OED defines this usage of attention as “A cautionary word used as a preparative to any particular exercise or manœuvre” (OED online, headword “Attention”). This usage is first attested in the late eighteenth century.

⁴²¹ Baumgarten, *Aesthetica/Ästhetik*, 2007, 1:40–41 (§49).

⁴²² Christoph Menke has put the process of “subjectivation” front and center in his comprehensive reinterpretation of Baumgarten and eighteenth century aesthetics in *Die Kraft der Kunst*. On the connection between aesthetics and (Foucault’s theorization of) modern disciplinary societies, see esp. Menke’s contribution to *Baumgarten-Studien* edited by Campe, Menke, and Haverkamp, “Die Disziplin der Ästhetik ist die Ästhetik der Disziplin.”

Subiectum

Leibniz's metaphysics had already identified monads endowed with powers of representation (*vis representativa*) as the *ground underlying* all reality. But it is Baumgarten who gives to the bearer of these powers the name *subiectum*.⁴²³ The terms "subject" and "object" had of course been around in philosophy, but in senses different and sometimes reversed to the modern subject/object distinction.⁴²⁴ The introduction of the modern subject/object contrast is often attributed to Kant – even in state-of-the-art dictionaries of philosophy⁴²⁵ – but Kant adopted the usage from Baumgarten, whose textbooks he used for his lectures on metaphysics.

There is, however, in Baumgarten as well as in Leibniz, a further ground to this subject *qua* underlying ground: in the deep strata of the soul, Baumgarten locates a "FUNDUS ANIMAE," a "ground of the soul" composed of the flow of obscure tiny perceptions *below* and *before* self-conscious subjectivity.⁴²⁶

⁴²³ Baumgarten still uses *obiectum* and *subiectum* interchangeably in the early parts of his *Metaphysics*. When it comes to the chapter on "Empirical Psychology," however, where Baumgarten introduces aesthetics and the *subject* of sense perception as the bearer of representative forces, *subiectum*. In the *Aesthetica*, contrast between "subjective" and "objective" truth, consistently used in the sense appropriated (and reinterpreted along the lines of transcendental philosophy) by Kant. It is surprising that this terminological innovation is not more well-known. The fact that Baumgarten introduced the systematic subject/object terminology in the modern sense is confirmed by Beck, *Early German Philosophy; Kant and His Predecessors*; Hacking, "Let's Not Talk About Objectivity," 21 (who quotes Beck); as well as Menke, *Kraft*, 33 who references Schweizer and others; and by Schweizer in his commentary on *Zur Grundlegung der Ästhetik*, 89 (note 53). At the very least, Baumgarten substantially contributed to establishing this terminology in German philosophy after 1750; see the detailed account in *Historisches Wörterbuch für Philosophie* on "Subjekt/Objekt; subjektiv/objektiv."

⁴²⁴ For instance, in the sense of the subject as "bearer of predicates," i.e. as the subject of a proposition; in Descartes, "objective reality" is still the thing's reality *as* ("subjectively") *represented*.

⁴²⁵ See for instance Audi, "Subject-Object-Dichotomy," 886.

⁴²⁶ "Sunt in anima perceptiones obscurae (§ 510). Harum complexus FUNDUS ANIMAE dicitur [der Grund der Seele - BG]" (Baumgarten, *Metaphysica/Metaphysik*, 270–271 (§511)).

This “ground of the soul” provides the departure point of Christoph Menke’s argument that eighteenth century aesthetics ultimately allows thinking the possibility conditions of the modern subject.⁴²⁷ Menke lets the history of modern aesthetics arise out of a debate between Descartes and Leibniz. If Descartes gave a new definition of the sensory as the field of intractable indeterminacy opposed to the self-guided acts of the understanding, Leibniz insisted that the field of the sensory, *despite* its indeterminacy, *also* constituted a form of principled *activity*: the monad’s tiny perceptions are self-produced according to an inner principle, even if this principle is unavailable to the conscious self. Aesthetics unfolds, according to Menke, in the tension between the principled operation of the sensory and its simultaneous indeterminacy; a tension which can be weighted in two different ways: On the one hand, aesthetics interprets the sensory as a field of activity that, although unavailable to immediate direction by the conscious self, can be made docile and appropriated by practice.⁴²⁸ This interpretation gives rise to a concept of the subject as bearer of faculties, both in its disciplinary dimension (faculties have to be “trained into” bodies) and its emancipatory dimension (once acquired, faculties grant individual agency).⁴²⁹ On the other hand, however, the autonomous activity of the sensory can be interpreted as an unavailable ground, a play of “force” (*Kraft*) on which conscious subjectivity depends, but which it can never fully integrate. Aesthetics thus at the same time reflects on the emergence of modern subjectivity and on its undoing. Ultimately, Menke thinks, aesthetics yields an anthropology that thinks the *difference* between the subject

⁴²⁷ *Kraft*; “Die Disziplin der Ästhetik ist die Ästhetik der Disziplin”; “Schwerpunkt: Zur Aktualität Baumgartens.”

⁴²⁸ Aesthetics is for Menke the paradigm of the new disciplinary power which governs by turning people into self-governing subjects (and which Foucault therefore unwittingly analyzes in aesthetic categories according to Menke).

⁴²⁹ The first interpretation is recognizably Foucauldian; the second is associated by Menke with Joachim Ritter.

and what he calls the human (*qua* pre-subjective, pre-social body of forces); and thinks the human *as* this difference between (self-identical) subject and (pre-subjective) non-identity, as a “being-in-between” socialized subject and a-subjective force.

Menke stages this polarity as a historical argument between Baumgarten (an aesthetics of subjective faculties) and Herder (an aesthetics of force) – but a similar tension also unfolds *within* Baumgarten; after all, the *fundus animae*, the concept Herder will elaborate in his fragments on aesthetics, is Baumgarten’s coinage no less than that of the *subjectum* as bearer of faculties. Menke convincingly shows how aesthetics can be read as a reflection on the emergence of conscious subjectivity from an a-subjective ground. The purview of his argument is, however, determined and limited by an action-theoretical a priori. For Menke, as for Faust, the beginning is the deed; cognitive practices accordingly only count as particular forms of carrying out actions; *not* in their cognitive capacity to perceive, disclose, represent the world. In the light of this framework, tiny perceptions appear solely as unconscious *inner actions*. This certainly captures an important aspect of Leibniz’s original concept – tiny perceptions constitute the monad’s own activity – but misses another, equally important one: if monads have no windows to an outside, they also do not, according to a second theorem, possess an *inside distinct from an outside*: as mirrors of the universe, each monad is all reflecting surface, a husk that enfolds only external impressions, hiding no secret inside. If the Leibnizian basis of Baumgarten’s aesthetics involves a genealogy of the subject, it proceeds not (only) from the unconscious inner activity of the soul, but from a point of indifference between the inside of the soul and its various outsides. Menke’s meta-critique of the *subject-as-actor* can and must

therefore be extended to the *subject-as-interactor* with its environments. To this end, we will return once more to the groundswell of tiny perceptions.

All Things Conspire

The fundamental level of Leibniz's cosmology is constituted by a divinely instituted network of metaphysical points or monads. About these metaphysical points, Leibniz makes two equally famous but seemingly contradictory claims. Monads are, on the one hand, perfectly self-enclosed. Without "windows" that would admit outside influence, perceptions are self-produced internal states, propelled by nothing but the monad's own appetites, or strivings for new sets of perceptions.⁴³⁰ On the other hand, each monad's perceptions are attuned to and represent or "express all the others"; they therefore function as a "perpetual living mirror of the universe."⁴³¹ Perceptions are thus, as already mentioned, *entirely internal* and *entirely external* at the same time (a mirror shows everything but itself). Since we are not engaged in a project of first-level metaphysics we can simply grant the premise of pre-established harmony, the perfect accommodation of all monads' perceptual programs to each other, and the metaphysical explanation of this perfect coincidence of inside and outside. Even so, a basic question remains: if *each* element in the network reflects the *entire* network, how are monads individuated at all? What keeps this universe from collapsing, by Leibniz's own law of the identity of indiscernibles, into a single metaphysical point – say, a single substance and its modes?

⁴³⁰ Leibniz, *Monadology*, 15–17 (§7–15). This is the basis of Menke's reading of (tiny) perceptions as self-produced according to an internal principle.

⁴³¹ *Ibid.*, 25 (§56).

The response accounts for the originality of Leibniz's metaphysical vision: Monads are individuated by their unique selection of distinct perceptions from the confused ground of tiny perceptions, in which all monads share. "It is not in the object, but in the modification of the cognition of the object, that monads are limited. They all go confusedly to infinity, to the whole, but they are *limited and distinguished* by the degrees of their distinct perceptions."⁴³² Monads *distinguish themselves from others by distinguishing* in their perceptions. They all share in the same set of tiny perceptions – "σύνπνοια πάντα,"⁴³³ Leibniz quotes Hippocrates; all things "conspire," all things "breathe together" – and they share in them the more, the less they distinguish among them. Inversely, there is a correlation between the degree to which a monad can claim a "self" with a distinct bundle of perceptions as opposed to others. This is why the highest level of "reflecting" monads capable of distinct perceptions have a more heightened sense of self than animals souls, which in turn have a more acute self than bare monads, who exist in the unconscious numbness of a dreamless sleep, ignorant of themselves and others, and of themselves as different from others.⁴³⁴ Monads thus do not so much "have" a point of view or perspective on the world; they are not self-identical onlookers who confront a world that presents itself to them in the form of a perspectival image – they "are" this perspective, as the collection of the network into a singular point, whose position in the network correlates with those relations that are accentuated more clearly than others. The monad's self is a

⁴³² Ibid., 26 (§60). My emphasis. Translation changed ("connaissance" from "knowledge" to "cognition," since it applies to all level of cognition, even those we might not want to call knowledge).

⁴³³ Ibid., 26 (§61).

⁴³⁴ Even bare monads must, to the degree that they inhabit a unique position in the cosmic conspiracy, possess a unique profile of unconscious states that reflects occurrences in their proximity relatively more pronouncedly than distant ones.

gradual differentiation of and from the non-self: this is Leibniz's non-mystical anticipation of a polarity that Nietzsche would associate with the names of the Greek Gods Dionysos and Apollo.

On the phenomenal level of bodies, this all-encompassing interconnection of things is perhaps more intuitively graspable. Assuming that the universe is a plenum, "each body is affected not only by those which touch it, and in some way *feels the effect of everything that happens to them*, but also *by means of them* it is affected by those which touch the former ones... From this it follows that this communication extends indefinitely."⁴³⁵ By "feeling" the bodies in its immediate surroundings, each body is thus mediately – via bodies adjacent to those bodies, and so on – in contact with the entire material universe. Bodies function as each other's "media," transmitting motions from one to the next, although the ripple effect decreases with distance, so that only close surroundings can be clearly perceived.

As already suggested in the example of the watermill discussed earlier, the connection between the two levels is, however, more intricate than is acknowledged by the usual interpretation of the connection between bodies and minds as two parallel levels (with that of monads being fundamental, that of bodies merely phenomenal).⁴³⁶ Despite Leibniz's ostensible idealism (what fundamentally exists are mind-like entities), monadic viewpoints, each monad's "mode" of representing the universe, are contingent on the perspectival limitations that come with having a body located in a particular place in space and time: "the soul ... represents the

⁴³⁵ Leibniz, *Monadology*, 26 (§61); my emphases.

⁴³⁶ One of the most complex accounts of this relationship is given by Adams who recognizes the multidirectional relationship and complicates the picture of a simple parallelism. For a detailed account of Leibniz's changing concepts of the relationship between monads and bodies over the course of his career (and in his esoteric vs. his exoteric writings), see Adams, *Leibniz*, 217–307.]

whole universe *by representing* this body, which belongs to it in a particular way.”⁴³⁷ The fact that the monads’ perceptions should be dependent on its embodiment has puzzled commentators, so much that some assumed Leibniz must have made a category mistake. Lloyd Strickland thinks the phrasing of paragraph 62 threatens to “reverse the proper order of explanation, because he [Leibniz] holds that bodies ... are in some way explained by monads ..., not vice versa.”⁴³⁸ Others have avoided the problem by translating it away: in Hartmut Hecht’s Reclam translation, the monad reflects the universe “according to the universe’s order” rather than “according to their [the monads’] body.”⁴³⁹

Baumgarten, however, had no doubt on how to interpret the passage: he emphasizes like a mantra that the soul is “vis repraesentativa universi *pro positu corporis mei*,”⁴⁴⁰ power of representing the universe according the spatial and temporal location of the body. What Baumgarten grasped was that Leibniz’s philosophy contained, on the far-side of idealism and rationalism, a metaphysics of the situated perceiver⁴⁴¹ who orients herself in the world by making distinctions in an environment. With Baumgarten – and as a complication to Menke’s

⁴³⁷ Leibniz, *Monadology*, 27 (§62).

⁴³⁸ *Ibid.*, 129.

⁴³⁹ In the famous mirror passage of paragraph 63, Leibniz states that “car toute monade étant un miroir de l’univers à sa mode, et l’univers étant réglé dans un ordre parfait, il faut qu’il y ait aussi un ordre dans le représentant, c’est-à-dire dans les perceptions de l’âme et par conséquent dans le corps, suivant *lequel* l’univers y est représenté.” (Leibniz, *Monadologie*, 2002, 136–38., my emphasis). Hecht’s translation takes *lequel* to refer to *un ordre* rather than the grammatically much more likely *le corps*: “... Ordnung ..., der gemäß das Universum vorgestellt wird” (*Monadologie*, 1998, 47). The Schneider translation published with Meiner more convincingly renders the passage as “... Körper, dem gemäß das Universum vorstellt wird” (*Monadologie*, 2002, 139). The Schneider translation seems correct not least because the preceding paragraph unambiguously states that monads (souls) represent the universe by representing their bodies. Adams comes to conclusion that it is in fact the body’s position in the universe that determines the monads representations; Adams, *Leibniz*, 217–55.

⁴⁴⁰ Baumgarten, *Metaphysica/Metaphysik*, 406–407 (§758).

⁴⁴¹ “If life has a soul, it is because it perceives, distinguishes, or discriminates, and because a whole world of animal psychology is first of all a psychology of perception”; Deleuze, *The Fold*, 92.

interpretation – tiny perceptions before differentiation are thus less the domain of private forces or feelings than the site of a *primary exposure* to the surrounding world. “These tiny perceptions ... make up those impressions the surrounding bodies make on us, which involve the infinite, and this connection that each being has with the rest of the universe.”⁴⁴² The ongoing ground, this *basso continuo* from which the soul arises and from where it draws its clear perceptions thus marks its *embeddedness* in an environment, and the infinite environments this first environment contains. The depth of the soul is no other than the breadth of the world in which it finds itself.

To the single perceiving soul, this exposure or embeddedness shows up as no more than noise. Since there is no clear or properly conscious perception of it, it would seem that one can have no knowledge of it, and perceive it only indirectly, as the always receding background of the determinate perceptions it makes possible. And yet Leibniz insists that the noise also makes itself felt in some more primordial fashion; dimly, diffusely, below the threshold of clear perception or sensation, but viscerally palpable nevertheless: tiny perceptions “don’t stop having their effect and making themselves felt in the assemblage, at least confusedly”⁴⁴³ and “determine us in many situations without our thinking of them.”⁴⁴⁴ An example of such a combined effect, such making-itself-felt would be a vaguely sensed and non-localized

⁴⁴² Leibniz, “Preface to the New Essays,” 296. (The language of “impression” is a manner of speaking here, as a monad’s perceptions are technically self-produced, but “coordinated” with the impressions received by their bodies.)

⁴⁴³ Ibid., 295. (Translation altered: Ariew and Garber translate “they do have their effect...” and seem to interpret the “*ne laissent pas de*” as a kind of double negation; I read it as referring to the incessant, even insistent nature of tiny perceptions. One might even read: “They won’t stop producing their effects...” See Leibniz, *Die philosophischen Schriften*, 5:46.)

⁴⁴⁴ Leibniz, “Preface to the New Essays,” 296.

“uneasiness” in contrast to a localized sensation of “pain.”⁴⁴⁵ The impact of tiny perceptions can thus feel like a *mood*: although it yields no distinct sensations, it grounds or colors conscious perception. Leibniz’s invocation of uneasiness anticipates the long career of “mood” as a philosophical concept, especially of the term *Stimmung* in the German tradition.⁴⁴⁶ The uneasiness is neither clearly attributable to the conscious mind, nor to determinate triggers in the environment – it is, as theoreticians of *Stimmung* like to point out, neither inside nor outside, neither “subjective” nor “objective” – but occurs from an interaction prior to this clear separation. Tiny perceptions are the carriers of this sense of primary immersion in an environment; and it is *from* and *out of this* immersion that clear and eventually distinct perceptions arise. This is, if we leave Leibniz’s theological premise aside, the pragmatics of the “attunement of substances” registered in subconscious perceptions: one already finds oneself embedded in an environment, immersed in a mood; and even if one does not register this mood, or lifts oneself out of it by focusing on more determinate things, the mood remains present in the background, and one can always tune back into it. What breaks up a mood, pushes it into the background at least, is an attention clearly focused on particular. Leibniz’s metaphysics of the situated perceiver suggests that it is in such conscious scrutiny of objects that one feels oneself emerge as separate from surroundings in which one always remains embedded.

⁴⁴⁵ Ibid., 297.

⁴⁴⁶ German *Stimmung* means “mood,” “atmosphere,” “ambiance,” as well as, literally, “tuning (in)” or “attunement.” For recent theoretical work on *Stimmung* in the German tradition, see Gumbrecht, *Stimmungen Lesen* and Böhme, *Atmosphäre*. One of the most prominent conceptions of *Stimmung* is of course Heidegger’s use of the term to designate a basic form of being-in-the-world.

Habitus

As a project beginning in an art of attention, Baumgarten's aesthetics is the discipline of regulating the interface between the self and its environments. This regulation has to proceed from the cultivation of the involuntary, sensory attention precisely because its raw form marks a lack of sufficient differentiation from the environment: when the mind is enraptured by the deliverances of the senses, it remains caught within the automatism of stimulus-response schemata that impose immediate reactions. And indeed the psychology of stimulus-response schemata is the area where the key terms of Baumgarten's aesthetic originate. The *analogon rationis*, Baumgarten's umbrella term for the totality of the sensory faculties as the "lower" analogue of reason, is his appropriation of Leibniz's assertion that animals react to outside stimuli in a way that bears a "resemblance to reason."⁴⁴⁷ Leibniz's recurring example of such a reaction suggests how to handle this part of human and animal nature: a dog runs from the stick with which it has once been beaten.⁴⁴⁸ Even Baumgarten's epithet "sensory" for clear and confused representations (and the faculties concerned with them) is borrowed from Wolff's qualification of a certain kind of the mind's inclination toward an object⁴⁴⁹: if the mind is *pulled toward* an object without knowing why this object is desirable (i.e., by a confused idea of the good), its *appetitus* is *sensitivus*. It is from this confused idea of desirability that Baumgarten explicitly transfers the term *sensitivus* onto a kind of representation.⁴⁵⁰

⁴⁴⁷ Leibniz, "Principles of Nature and Grace," 205 (§5); see also *Monadology*, 19 (§26).

⁴⁴⁸ As Rüdiger Campe points out, the example also suggests that the origin of the reason is in fact the master – only retroactively, after having been conditions by the master, does the dog display a reaction that then resembles reason; Campe, "Effekt der Form," 2014, 135–36.

⁴⁴⁹ Wolff, *Psychologia empirica*, 440 (§579).

⁴⁵⁰ Baumgarten, *Meditationes*, 8–9 (§III); see also Heinz Paetzold's introduction to *ibid.*, XI.

The novelty of Baumgarten’s attitude toward controlling the “sensory” distractions to the mind is the suggestion that they not be disciplined by means of a stick or, as Malebranche had suggested, by tricking the involuntary attention into following the mind’s commands, but in the way seventeenth century scientists had demonstrated it could be done – by continuous practice. The basic program of such practice is stated in condensed form in the first paragraph of a section on aesthetic exercise (*exercitatio aethetica*): in addition to certain natural dispositions, the aspiring aesthetic character is required to complete a program of aesthetic practice,⁴⁵¹ “ἄσκησις et exercitatio” – an “ascesis” not as abstention *from* the senses, but as practice *of* the senses.⁴⁵² Such practice is not to be confused, Baumgarten emphasizes, with the pedagogical method of an Orbilius – the infamous teacher of Horace who hammered grammar into his students mind with the help of a cane.⁴⁵³ The new method is less violent, but all the more effective: it consists in performing “frequent repetitions of similar actions” with the goal of acquiring a certain *habitus*.⁴⁵⁴ If we recall that Baumgarten glosses *habitus* as *Fertigkeit*⁴⁵⁵ – proficiency or skill – the intimate connection between *discipline* and *technique* as two key concepts of our reading of Baumgarten’s aesthetics becomes palpable: it is through discipline that the senses – as that in the body and mind which is subjected to the pull of internal and external stimuli; which is thus never sufficiently inside – are turned into instruments; made fit

⁴⁵¹ Baumgarten’s notion of *Übung* is central component of Menke’s interpretation of his aesthetics and has recently also been emphasized by Gabriel Trop; Menke, *Kraft*; Trop, *Poetry as a Way of Life*.

⁴⁵² Baumgarten, *Aesthetica/Ästhetik*, 2007, 1:38–39 (§47).

⁴⁵³ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁴ “Crebrior repetition actionum .. homogenearum ... ut habitus pulcre cogitandi sensim acquirantur”; Baumgarten, *Aesthetica/Ästhetik*, 2007, 1:38 (§47).

⁴⁵⁵ The term *habitus* has a rich tradition that traces back to Aristotelian ἔξις as an “acquired state” of a being. See Ritter, “Habitus.”

to function in the service of the goal-oriented completion of a task. *Technique is habitualized (self-)discipline*. This insight lies at the heart of Baumgarten's new conception of the sensory. Insofar as the direction of attention – its intensification, extension, prolongation – constitute a form of *habitus* and are, as defenses against the pull of outside stimuli, paradigm techniques for controlling and stabilizing the interface between inside and outside, the subject of aesthetics is constituted by habitualized attention. This applies to the subject as *produced by* aesthetics (insofar as Baumgarten's aesthetics consists in instructions for exercising one's sensory attention); but also to the subject as *legible through* aesthetics (insofar as aesthetics is the theory of this exercise). The subject of aesthetics is, in short, attentional discipline become second nature.

But this is not yet where the story of the *felix aestheticus*, the felicitous aesthetic character, ends (at least not since Dagmar Mirbach's complete translation of the *Aesthetica* supplemented the chapters left out in Hans Rudolf Schweizer's abridged translation). In the case of the subject of aesthetics in a *narrow* sense – the subject of beautiful “thought” or art – acquiring this *habitus* prepares a moment of measured immersion in which “almost the entire ground of the soul [*fundus animae*, the flow of tiny perceptions] surges a little higher”,⁴⁵⁶ a controlled flooding of the dams of perceptual habit with the flow of tiny perceptions. Baumgarten explains the groundswell of tiny perceptions in a section on aesthetic “impetus,” which treats all the topics usually associated with notions of artistic enthusiasm. What the ancients misunderstood as divine inspiration, he argues, is really a state of lowered or widened

⁴⁵⁶ “Omnis quasi fundus animae ... surgat nonnihl altius,” Baumgarten, *Aesthetica/Ästhetik*, 2007, 1:64§80.

perceptual threshold – and therefore heightened perceptiveness of the soul toward the complexity of the (inner and outer, past and present) environments in which it participates. The function of such moments of heightened perceptiveness is that they make it possible to re-enter the constitutive moment of *habitus* by allowing perceptions habitually blinded out to register in the perceptual formation process. What is ultimately at stake in this moment is thus not the *undoing* of the boundary between inside and outside, self and environment, but its *reformation*. Aesthetic art as “meta-technique” is thus a way of ensuring that technique *remains* technique – remains contingent and retains an awareness of this contingency – instead of fully solidifying into a second nature; a second order necessity. For the subject of aesthetics, the subject *qua* domesticated attention, this serves as a reminder of its genealogy from a point of indifference between self and environment, and invites it to remain porous and permeable to this environment. Aesthetics in the narrow sense would thus help to expand the range of the sensible by breaking up and reshaping routines of perception – and in this way, articulating and re-articulating the interface between self and environment; and through it, both ends of this relation.

In Conclusion: The Technique of Beauty

Beauty has emerged as the concept Baumgarten employed to differentiate both between sensory cognition in general and specifically *aesthetic* cognition; and between sensory techniques and specifically *aesthetic* ones. Baumgarten’s regime of aesthetic exercises does not prescribe *specific* practices as these will differ, he notes, according to the material media of different arts. What qualifies as an aesthetic technique is thus not determined by substance but

by a special mode of employment reflected in the telos of *pulcre cogitandi*, or thinking *beautifully*. The beautiful as Baumgarten begins to establish it as a central category of the aesthetic marks an internal a unity in perception, a mode of perceiving-many-as-one that goes beyond pre-existing perceptual schemata.⁴⁵⁷ Aesthetic techniques – or techniques practiced aesthetically – are thus quite literally open-ended: Their end or telos, what they give to see, is not circumscribed by a predetermined outcome. At the same time, the possibility of *unprecedented* uses of the senses is premised on their malleability through and as different techniques. Only because sense perception is technique through and through rather than fixed by mechanistic or rational necessity do modes of perceptibility beyond those already established or consolidated into a specific sensory technique become thinkable. Beauty as a central category of Baumgarten’s aesthetics is, in short, based on the freedom *of* technique – the constitutive contingency of modes of practice not pre-determined once and for all by Nature, God, or Reason.

Baumgarten’s project of an aesthetics emerged, as I have tried to show, not simply as a belated symptom of sensory techniques – as a kind of theoretical superstructure unawares of the praxeological foundation that sustains it – but as an early reflection on the fundamentality of technique even in an area as seemingly basic and natural as processes of sense perception. This tentative conclusion, of course, throws into even sharper relief the question why the aesthetic tradition would come to be regarded as the opposite of a reflection on technique, as

⁴⁵⁷ As we have seen, “perfection” is understood in the Wolffian tradition as “unity in variety”; beauty as the perfection of sensory cognition *qua talis* – as such – is a “subjective” unity in variety for Baumgarten. This interpretation of Baumgarten’s aesthetics as the practice of “seeing together” of contingent singulars is also emphasized by Trop, “Aesthetic Askesis: Aesthetics as a Technology of the Self.”

suffering from a thoroughly anti-technical bias. This is, of course, not the place to recapitulate the long history of aesthetics after Baumgarten. But a few markers will perhaps suffice to indicate the direction.

One key turning point is the abandonment by the generation of aesthetic theorists following Baumgarten and his immediate students of Baumgarten's explicitly praxeological orientation. The problem with this development is less that of philosophical speculation becoming too detached from seemingly concrete life – Baumgarten himself is nothing if not a systematic philosopher – but the fact that it leads to a misunderstanding of one of Baumgarten's key theoretical innovations; the redefinition of beauty as the open-ended telos of aesthetic practice. The same open-endedness that, in Baumgarten, signals the freedom *of* technique will – beginning with Moritz, and then entirely in Schelling and his brand of Romanticism – be reinterpreted as a freedom *from* technique. The idea of the perception of unity beyond a pre-defined telos becomes positivized as a place beyond technicity altogether; the site of an only intuitive but substantive truth not marred by the contingency, partiality, and mutability that are necessary byproducts of technique. With this little shift of emphasis, the notion of a freedom enabled by the contingency of technique will have been replaced by a strategy for insulating a space of intuitive truth against the vagaries of contingency.

EPILOGUE

ATTENTION, LITERATURE, AND THE OPEN

In the decades following Baumgarten's *Aesthetica*, the Leibnizian and Wolffian framework that gave discussions on attention remarkable coherence even across different discourses and internal disagreements for more than half a century began to fray. As the system of Wolff lost its integrative power for scholarly discussions in Germany, various aspects negotiated under the umbrella of attention split into smaller questions and problems distributed across a range of discourses. Of course, we might speculate, this fraying of the discourse on attention reflected a wider uncertainty in the reconfiguration of culture in the late eighteenth century concerning what to focus on and what to disregard in any given context – and in this sense, an exacerbation rather than an abandonment of the central problematic of attention. *Aufmerksamkeit* as a nomadic concept between aesthetics and scientific observation continued to be important for individual authors like Karl K. Ph. Moritz, Goethe, and Novalis;⁴⁵⁸ but it could no longer claim the undisputed centrality it had possessed for much of the eighteenth century.

Attention resurfaced twice as a focal topic of discussion, at two further junctures of a modern attention culture that began with the world-shattering effects of lens technology and the dissolution of premodern social structures. Once, as Jonathan Crary has shown, in the shocks of late-nineteenth-century industrial modernity – and then again in our time, stimulated

⁴⁵⁸ For an overview of Moritz's, Goethe's, and Novalis's understandings of attention, see Thums, "Aufmerksamkeit: zur Ästhetisierung eines anthropologischen Paradigmas im 18. Jahrhundert."

by the pinprick shocks of digital modernity and a media environment defined by relentless competition for attention. There is much that distinguishes these different moments. What they seem to have in common, however, is the experience of a profound disorientation, followed by the need to develop practices and techniques that ward off this disruption or channel it into new possibilities of experience.

Attention, it seems, surfaces as a problem whenever “too much” is being asked of individual perception. The utopian potential of such excess should not be underestimated. It also indicates an excess of possibilities – of opportunities for seeing and doing things differently. Nevertheless, we may wonder whether we have not also reached a moment in modern attention culture in which the pair of attention and habit has taken on a significance opposite to that it had in the eighteenth-century texts we read: in which the force that clouds perception is no longer that of habit but that of a permanent state of attentional exception unable to solidify into sustainable routines. Absent the ability to settle into habitual forms, the greatest excess of possibilities is as blunt, repetitive, and seemingly inevitable as the idol fought by eighteenth-century writers under the name of *Gewohnheit*.

One model that can help to further illuminate this problem constellation was developed in the immediate aftermath and on the basis of the eighteenth-century discourse of attention in an emerging anthropology that combined philosophical and medical discourses to examine human knowledge through an inquiry into the nature of the human.⁴⁵⁹ Synthesizing the state of

⁴⁵⁹ The combination of the two discourses is echoed in the title of Ernst Platner’s pioneering *Anthropologie für Aerzte und Weltweise* (1772). On the co-emergence of anthropology and aesthetics in the eighteenth-century, see Borchers, *Die Erzeugung des “ganzen Menschen,”* 60–135.

anthropological knowledge in his *Erfahrungen und Untersuchungen über den Menschen* (1777), the Prussian anthropologist Karl Irwing, for instance, located the specific difference (“unterscheidende Charakter”) between humans and animals in the fact that anything can become an object of attention for the human mind – while the attention of animals only responds to a narrowly defined set of objects.⁴⁶⁰ The variability or openness of perception that emerged, with increasing prominence, as the defining quality of attention from Breitingen to Baumgarten was thus raised into a defining characteristic of the human.

As Baumgarten had taken stock of an earlier discourse on attention, Herder gave a philosophical articulation to this new approach in his project of a negative anthropology that hinged – in ways Herder scholarship has not adequately addressed – on the specific openness of human attention. In his *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache* (1772), Herder argues that all previous accounts the origin of human language – a favorite topic of eighteenth-century speculation – suffered from an inadequate understanding of the difference between animals and humans. He therefore goes on to develop an account of this difference that would become foundational to a tradition of anthropology that answers the question concerning human nature negatively, and sees the *lack* of a fixed nature as the characteristic human trait.

Animals, Herder argues, live in a sphere (*Sphäre, Wirkungskreis*) circumscribed by the instinctual fixation of their attention to a limited set of stimuli in their environment. The rest of

⁴⁶⁰ “Da nun der unterscheidende Charakter der menschlichen Seele darin besteht, dass ... jedwede Idee ein Gegenstand der menschlichen Aufmerksamkeit werden kann. Dagegen aber ... die Thätigkeit der Thierseelen allein durch Gefühle ... gereizt wird, so kann auch der Inbegriff derjenigen Gegenstände, die ihre Aufmerksamkeit auf sich ziehen, nicht anders als ... sehr eingeschränkt seyn”; Irwing, *Erfahrungen und Untersuchungen über den Menschen*, 2:210 (§147).

the world is nothing to them (“die ganze andre Welt [ist] für sie nichts”).⁴⁶¹ This “enclosure” (“auf einerlei eingeschlossen”) of attention is fundamental to Herder’s understanding of animal life. Instincts are, strictly speaking, not the *reason* but the *consequence* of attention’s being affixed to a small number of triggers: Because of their unchallenged prominence in the perceptual field of animals, stimuli to which animals are primed to respond exert an irresistible force on behavior – a pull or tug of attention we call instinct.⁴⁶² The strength or weakness of instincts is therefore inversely proportional to the range of things that can become possible objects of attention: “je zerstreuter ihre [der Tiere] Aufmerksamkeit auf mehrere Gegenstände, ... je größer und vielfältiger ihre Sphäre; desto mehr sehen wir ihre Sinnlichkeit sich verteilen und Schwächen.”⁴⁶³

Humans present the limit case of a being with an attention so scattered and an instinct so blunted that it constitutes, through a qualitative leap, a new *type* of being for whom *anything* can become the focus of perception or action.⁴⁶⁴ For Herder, the distraction characteristic of humans gives rise to the specifically human quality at the bottom of thought and language – a quality he calls “Besonnenheit” or (appropriating a term from the Wolffian discourse on attention) “Reflexion”:

Der Mensch beweiset Reflexion, wenn die Kraft seiner Seele so frei würket, daß sie in dem ganzen Ozean von Empfindungen, der sie durch alle Sinnen durchrauschet, Eine Welle, wenn ich so sagen darf, absondern, sie anhalten, die Aufmerksamkeit auf sie richten, und sich bewußt sein kann, daß sie aufmerke. Er beweiset Reflexion, wenn er aus dem ganzen schwebenden Traum der Bilder, die

⁴⁶¹ Herder, “Über den Ursprung der Sprache,” 713.

⁴⁶² “Und wenn endlich Sinne und Vorstellungen auf Einen Punkt gerichtet sind, was kann anders, als Instinkt daraus werden?”; *ibid.*

⁴⁶³ *Ibid.*, 712.

⁴⁶⁴ The human is characterized by “seine zerstreuten Begierden, ... seine geteilte Aufmerksamkeit, ... seine stumpfer witternden Sinne“ for Herder; *Ibid.*, 714.

seine Sinne vorbeistreichen, sich in ein Moment des Wachens sammeln, auf Einem Bilde freiwillig verweilen, es in helle ruhigere Obacht nehmen, und sich Merkmale absondern kann, daß dies der Gegenstand und kein anderer sei.⁴⁶⁵

Echoing a terminology with which we have become familiar, Herder describes the mechanism at the bottom of human thought and language as a moment of selective attention. More radically than in the other texts we read – except, perhaps, in the Leibnizian reflections from which he borrows the oceanic imagery – Herder emphasizes the priority of an undefined swarm of sensations over the definite objects that emerge from them. Selective attention does not “read” marks off objects but, in a moment of interruption and fixation that arrests the flow of perceptions, constitutes definite objects by means of self-reflexive marking.⁴⁶⁶ The signs of human language, Herder will go on to elaborate, serve as such markers (*Merkworte*) for *artificial fixations* of an inherently fluid human attention. For a naturally distracted being, sign-markings thus shape the surrounding world in a way analogous to how stimuli shape animal environments: they impose salience structures that determine what becomes significant to perception and action and what disappears into an unmarked “rest of the world” that goes for “as good as nothing.”

In and through Herder, the idea of selective attention as it emerged over the course of the eighteenth century thus became critical to a negative anthropology that understood the human as “das noch nicht festgestellte Tier,”⁴⁶⁷ as Nietzsche would famously formulate.

Herder’s foundational text makes the mechanism behind this understanding of the human

⁴⁶⁵ Ibid., 722.

⁴⁶⁶ Following his teacher, the (pre-critical) Kant and Crusius, Herder reinterprets the distinctness of the Leibniz-tradition in terms of self-reflectivity. See, for instance, Herder’s early Herder, “Versuch über das Sein.”

⁴⁶⁷ Nietzsche, *Die Unschuld des Werdens (Nachlass)*, 110.

transparent. The non-fixity of human nature is, for him, derived from the openness of human attention, which is both the defining deficit of humans and their specific gift. An original scatteredness or distraction is the condition for the freedom to affix attention to all possible kinds of features, and thus temporarily stabilize structures of attention – creating, in this way, artificial environments maintained by language, which mediates access to reality for a being that lacks a natural environment; a substitute, as it were, of the stimulus-response loops given to animal perception. More clearly than in many later iterations of similar anthropological theses, which tend to emphasize either the original deprivation of the human *Mängelwesen* or its specific powers and freedoms,⁴⁶⁸ the deficiency and the proficiency ascribed to humans thus grows from a single root. Total distraction, in which *nothing* commands attention and the environment is dissolved into undifferentiated noise, coincides with the first moment of reflection, in which *anything* can be singled out as the focus of attention.

Herder's anthropology of a fundamental distraction indistinguishable from the openness attention draws several of the motifs of the eighteenth-century discourse of attention into a unified theoretical picture, allowing us to revisit the inner coherence of the problem constellation we traced.⁴⁶⁹

⁴⁶⁸ See the opening typology in Blumenberg's "Anthropologische Annäherung an die Aktualität der Rhetorik," 406.

⁴⁶⁹ We need not decide whether to take this openness as a property of human being-in-the-world in general (as Herder suggests) or as a specifically *modern* phenomenon (as suggested earlier). Herder's theory shares with other negative anthropologies the embarrassment of turning a trait that only became central to human self-understanding in modernity – the historical variability of cultures and technologies – as a fundamental characteristic of human beings. The reason is the historical situatedness of the anthropological reflection itself. Once such variability is recognized, it is impossible not to reconstruct previous ages as displaying such historical variability as well. The thesis of a specifically modern and a negative anthropological dimension of attention are thus not necessarily in conflict.

First of all, it allows rearticulating the various resonances that emerged between attention, technology, and technique on the basis of an assumed openness of attention, or the lack of a natural environment. For Herder, drawing the conclusion from eighteenth-century discussions of the malleability of perception, attention becomes the default name for an *intermediary device* that shapes environments by structuring or filtering what can become an object of perception and action. Although – or rather, because – attention is fundamentally undefined, it can be fixed in what we called “sensory techniques” – acquired and embodied habits that temporarily stabilize patterns of perception like Mauss’s “techniques of the body” stabilize behavior. Prosthetic *technologies* accordingly appear as ways of solidifying the openness of perception through built devices rather than acquired behavior. As Baumgarten suggested in his project sketch, medial technologies can be understood as externalized attention – or attention as an already internal technology, as it appeared to Wolff in the after-image of microscopic observation. Both sides of the internal/external boundary are shaped, in this view, by the articulation and disarticulation of the boundary itself – the oscillation between openness and fixation set in motion by the indefinition of attention.

Expanding this picture, we can characterize the practices of attentiveness developed in seventeenth and eighteenth-century science as *deliberately adopted* and *progressively refined* technologies and techniques in this sense. Disciplined forms attention, so the wager of science in the wake of Bacon’s vision, will reveal the true shape of the world once the organon through which we access the world is cleansed from preconceived patterns that obfuscate perception. Conducting methodically artificial mediations between mind and world in the form of observations and experiments, the idea that the right type of “art” reveals nature is

fundamental to this project. The Baconian project of science harnesses the openness of attention for the purpose of acquiring a type of knowledge that will gradually progress until it reveals, so the wager of this project, the true shape of things on the far-side of artificially mediated perception.

Influenced by this ideal of science, the poetics and aesthetics of attention we revisited began to develop a *different* interpretation of the openness of perception. From Brockes to Breitinger and Baumgarten, the various devices that articulate human environments – linguistic, technological, or in the form of sensory techniques – were increasingly explored in their *strangeness*. Scientific techniques of attention also defamiliarized perception, but only as a tool for reconstructing things as they are “behind the veil” of habitual perception. In poetics, defamiliarization increasingly becomes an end in itself. The logic at stake can be described by reference to the dialectic of habit and attention, reformulated before the background of Herder’s anthropology. The moments of heightened attention the poetics of attention sought to create distance perception from everyday concerns and the habitual fixations of attention, thus defamiliarizing a lifeworld structured by habituated attention. In such moments, attention thus unexpectedly encounters itself in its supposed antagonist of habit. The telos of the poetics of attention lies in revealing what seemed like a natural environment as a form of sedimented attention that already shaped the chaos of experience into seemingly self-evident forms that structure a lifeworld. What this enables is perhaps not an experience the chaos beyond attention, but an experience of the constitutive openness of attention and the ongoing process of its articulation.

The anthropological thesis Herder formulated on the basis of the eighteenth-century discourse on attention was immensely influential. Among many others, it informed Jakob von Uexküll's theorization of the species-specific *Umwelt of* animals, conceived – in a terminology that betrays its provenance in the discourse on *Aufmerksamkeit* – as a *Merkwelt* (perceptual universe) organized by the specific *Merkmalsträger* (marks) to which animal perception responds. Uexküll's concept would become a decisive influence on Heidegger's notion of the openness or unconcealedness of a "world" and a range of theoretical discussion on the notion of "the open." This *historical* trajectory of the eighteenth-century discourse on *Aufmerksamkeit* crystallizes the continued *theoretical* relevance of the poetics and aesthetics of attention beyond its historical significance as a "glorious relic,"⁴⁷⁰ as Fred Beiser characterizes early eighteenth-century aesthetics. What remains of critical importance is the idea, formulated forcefully and for the first time in the poetics and aesthetics of attention, that literary texts disclose and maintain the fundamental openness of cultural environments. When Breitingger and Baumgarten discovered "possible worlds" for literature, they were not looking to reveal other *metaphysical universes* but other *perceptual universes*. The aesthetic education of *Aufmerksamkeit* creates what we might call with Uexküll alternative *Merkwelten* – and in doing so, ensures that the triggers of attention that constitute *human* environments do not become fixed like the spheres in which Herder and Uexküll situate animals. Maintaining the openness of attention, in other words, ensures that human environments do not harden into second nature.

⁴⁷⁰ Beiser, *Diotima's Children*, 1.

This basic problem through which the problem of attention in the eighteenth-century constituted the aesthetic field continues to define contemporary discussions of aesthetic theory, even when the origin and context of the problem constellation is not well understood. When Jacques Rancière, for instance, describes the effect of aesthetic art in terms of an intervention into the “distribution of the sensible” (*le partage du sensible*)⁴⁷¹ – or a reconfiguration of the way the collective sensorium parcels out the common world – he simply rephrases the question of attention and its coagulation into artificial environments in different terms. What Rancière and other thinkers like Hannah Arendt uncover in this way is the political dimension of the aesthetics of attention and its assumption that what gets noticed and what gets suppressed, how differences get selected from background noise, and what gets drawn into clarity and plunged into obscurity is not fixed, but essentially open.

William Blake wagered that “if the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, Infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern.”⁴⁷² We may not share Blake’s enthusiasm that the doors of perception can ever be purified, all boundaries shed. But the poetics of attention does suggest that it is possible to carve new chinks into the cavern.

⁴⁷¹ Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 85.

⁴⁷² Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, xxii (plate 14).

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