

How to enter image-space

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In art history, we are concerned with artefacts, some of which are considered to be “works of art” in a more specific sense. We want to know why artefacts look the way they look, what they mean and how. Since many artefacts are—or include—images, we are also interested in questions concerning the making, meanings, and uses of images. My current focus is on the *theory* of images, a field of research located at the common border of art history and philosophy and therefore marginal to both disciplines. This essay is more specifically about pictorial space or “image-space,” as I shall call it.¹ Image-space is a very common and well-known phenomenon. If we are confronted with an unfolded scroll of paper with marks of ink and paint on it (fig. 1), and tell others we see part of a coast with cliffs and trees and houses, bordering the wide expanses of sea and sky, then this is an example of image-space.

But image-space need not be vast and deep. Take this painted page of parchment containing the first word of the gospel according to St. Matthew, *liber* (fig. 2). The initial letter seems to have opened its thighs to give birth to a tendril. Would you agree that the beginnings and ends of this elastic L are fastened to the ornamental frame by means of golden ribbons? And at the many points where these ribbons cross, would you say that one part runs over the other, so that one is above, the other beneath? Would you also say that the bare parchment inside the ornamental frame and around the initial can be seen both as an opaque plane of inscription and as some kind of opening? Then this is another example of image-space, even if it is so shallow

and, in part, indefinite that, looking at the page as a whole, we almost did not recognize it as such.

Given these two examples, one might be tempted to conclude that, whereas image-space may be deep or shallow, the material vehicle that helps us see it will always be flat—flat like an unfolded scroll of paper or like a page of parchment. But this is not the case. Here is a carved piece of cherrywood (fig. 3). Looking at it, one may see a scene: a corpulent man in armor, but without weapons, submissively approaches a group of knights. One of them is made prominent by his headgear and a towering tree rising behind him. The submissive man seems to have come from the valley to the meeting point up here; a long procession of warriors has followed him. Down there in the valley an army crosses the river as if to reach the tent camp at the other side. Still farther back in the distance are a broken bridge and a gate in flames. The huge swirl of smoke issuing from the latter occludes parts of the hilly landscape and rises up as if to join the clouds in the sky. While this image-space contains huge things and is certainly deep and therefore very different from the surface of the piece of wood, this surface itself isn’t flat but actually quite uneven. There are hills and hollows, as it were. For this is, of course, not painting, but sculpture and, more specifically, relief sculpture. So the difference in depth between the image-space and its material basis need not be absolute—it may be a *relative* difference.

And the concept of image-space is even broader than that. The material vehicle doesn’t necessarily include drawn or painted marks or carved hills and hollows; it can be devoid of all that. It can be a perfectly flat and stainless mirror. For it is well known that mirrors allow you to look *through* them, into a space strangely at odds with the flat and reflective and therefore opaque surface of the mirror itself. In this photograph (fig. 4), there is certainly no opening in the wall to the left of this door, and if, on the other side of the wall, there is a real washbasin, we will still not confuse it with the one we see in the mirror. The architect, a philosophically minded person, doesn’t want to *deceive* us here. Instead, he prompts us to think about questions of image theory and, more specifically, the question of image-space.²

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1. In what follows, I will furthermore introduce the terms “image-vehicle” and “image-object.” For a more detailed explanation of this terminology, see W. Pichler and R. Ubl, “Images without Objects and Referents? A Reply to Étienne Jollet’s Review of our *Bildtheorie zur Einführung*,” *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 81 (2018): 418–24.

2. Some of Hermann Czech’s own thoughts concerning mirrors and their uses in architecture may be found in his essay “Über die



Figure 1. Wang Hui, *Clearing Autumn Sky over a Fishing Village*, 1680. Hanging scroll; ink and color on paper. Scroll: 63 3/4 x 20 1/4 in.; painting: 24 1/2 x 15 1/8 in. Honolulu Museum of Art, Purchase, 1955 (2031.1). Photo: Courtesy of the Honolulu Museum of Art. Color version available as an online enhancement.

So what is the nature of image-space? There is reason to reject this question. For the spaces we have seen are, of course, illusory. They aren't really there. And it may therefore be nonsense to describe them as entities of a special kind. It may even be problematic to say we see these illusory spaces and the things they include. Maybe we aren't really seeing, but dreaming. This dreaming, however, if one can call it that, is of a special kind. For we aren't dreaming *alone*, as dreamers usually do, each person dreaming on their own. No, we manage to dream or imagine together. And this is possible because we are dreaming or imagining with our eyes open, and because there *is* something to be seen. There

räumliche Wirkung von Spiegeln," *Werk, Bauen + Wohnen* 71, no. 6 (1984): 20–25.

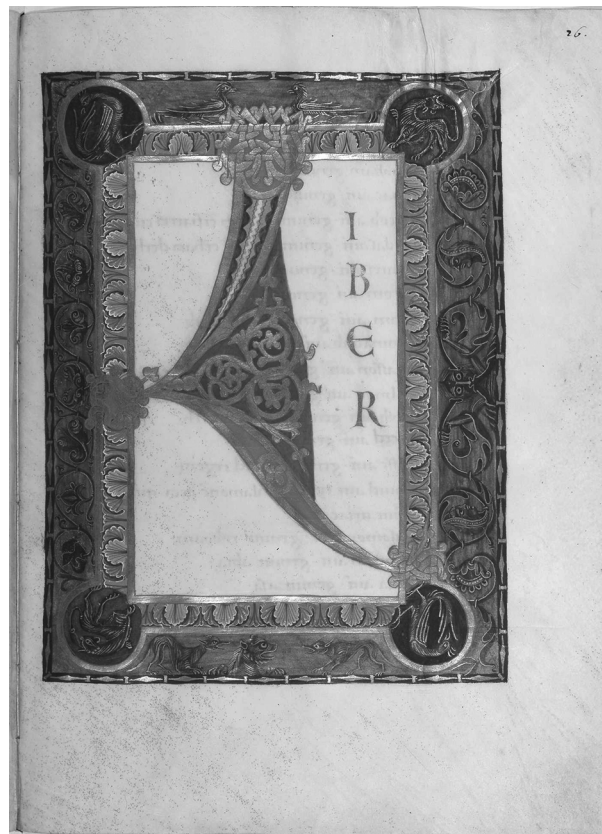


Figure 2. Illuminated initial beginning St. Matthew's Gospel, Gospels of Emperor Otto III, Reichenau, ca. 1000. Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Clm 4453, fol. 26r. Paint on parchment, 13 1/8 x 9 3/8 in. Photo: Courtesy of Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Creative Commons license CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>). Color version available as an online enhancement.

is, for instance, an unfolded scroll of paper with marks of ink and paint on it; there is a painted page of parchment; there is a carved piece of wood; and there is a mirror in a certain kind of setting. There are, to say it in one word, "image-vehicles"—vehicles that guide us and help us imagine things and spaces and help us imagine that we are seeing them. Guiding us, these vehicles make possible a certain kind of objectivity. If, in front of the wooden relief, I would have told you about skyscrapers, you would have said: we can't see any. But it was certainly possible to speak of a man approaching a group of knights, for this relief afforded these things.

Although I was talking about spaces and things not really there, we nevertheless managed to communicate objectively. Talking to you, I uttered sentences that I claim to be true, and I can assume that everybody understands what I tried to do. How has this been

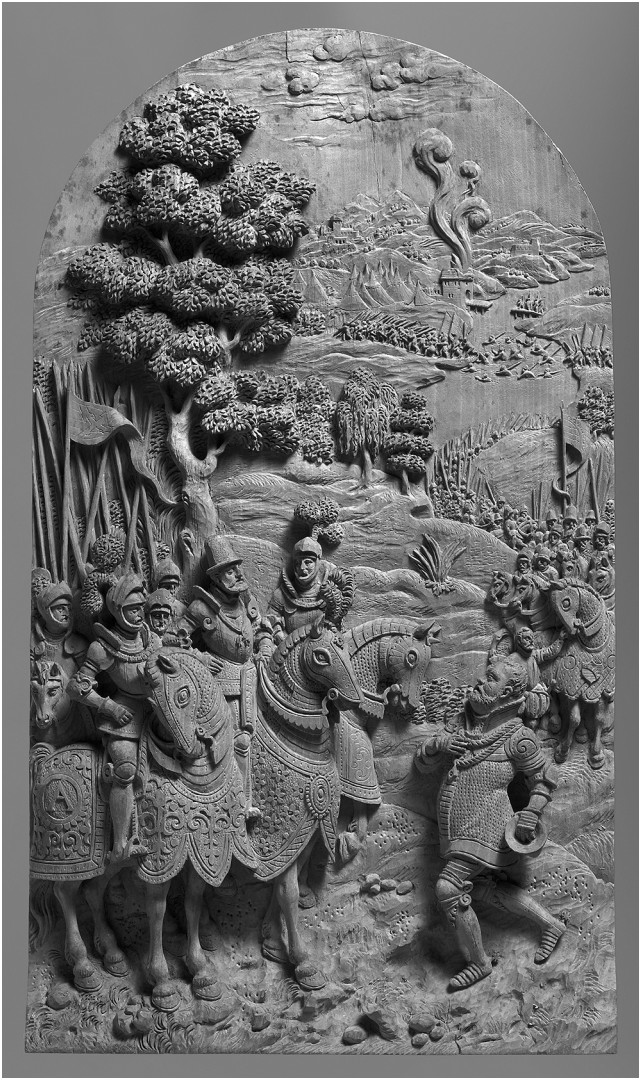


Figure 3. Submission of the elector John Frederick of Saxony to Emperor Charles V after the battle of Mühlberg, from a series of eight representations of the victories of Emperor Charles V, after a print by Dirk Coornhert, Nuremberg, ca. 1570–80. Cherrywood, 10 x 5 3/4 in. Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien, Kunstammer, 3945. Photo: Courtesy of KHM-Museumsverband. Color version available as an online enhancement.

possible? I think some kind of fiction has helped us. For I didn't want to deceive you, and I suppose that neither you nor I mistook painted paper for a landscape, or painted parchment for interlaced bands, and so on. We must have been playing a game of "make-believe," and, more specifically, a perceptual game of make-believe, as the American philosopher Kendall Walton called it in an



Figure 4. Hermann Czech, bathroom at the Restaurant Salzamt, Vienna, 1981–83. Photo: Courtesy of Hermann Czech.

important book on the theory of images.³ The game was a game of make-believe insofar as we behaved as if we were seeing things we only imagined seeing. And it was a perceptual game insofar as perceivable image-vehicles guided our imagination.

The game was, by the way, much more complicated than one might at first think. For although I talked about a scroll of paper and so on, nothing of that kind was really there. There was only a video projector and a reflecting screen. And this is important, because it proves that perceptual games of make-believe aren't just an object of study in the theory of images or in art history; rather, the theory of images and art history, and

3. K. L. Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts* (Cambridge, MA, 1990).

many other scientific disciplines as well, make use of such games of make-believe as parts of their scientific practice.

At this point somebody might protest and say that I overlooked a crucial difference. For it is one thing to imagine a landscape with armies in image-space, and it is quite another thing to use video projection in order to talk about a piece of wood, which is a real thing located in real space and can actually be found in a well-known place in the city of Vienna, Austria. This is quite true and important. In certain games of make-believe, for instance, *scientific* games of make-believe, problematic objects like this “piece of wood” I am pointing out to you here and now (fig. 3) are made to stand in for real things.⁴ But however important and useful this referential function of images may be, it doesn’t turn this image of a piece of wood—let’s call it an image-object—into a real piece of wood. So let’s face it: perceptual games of make-believe are used in scientific practice, even if their scientific use may differ in important respects from other uses in other games of make-believe.

But what about the question of image-space? Shall we say we have already found the solution? Does everybody agree that, strictly speaking, there are no such spaces? And that, if we talk about them, we do so in the context of a game of make-believe of some kind? It seems that there have been and are people, very intelligent people, who thought or think about image-spaces and the things these spaces include in a completely different way. I shall give three examples and then discuss them.

My first example is from Ernst Mach. In his famous book *The Analysis of Sensations*, first published in German in 1886, Mach talked about mirror images: “The reflexion of the tree, the fruit, or the fire in a mirror is visible, but not tangible. . . . The visible is separable from the tangible, from that which may be tasted, etc.”⁵ Mach refuses to make a categorical difference between real objects on the one hand, and image-objects to be found in image-space on the other. Instead of saying that the tree we see through the window is real, while the tree we see when looking into the mirror is an image-

object, he just says that the tree out there can be seen and touched, while the tree in the mirror can only be seen.

However, Mach only talks about mirrors. What about other image-vehicles such as paintings? And what about the image-spaces *they* help us imagine? Could one deal with them the way Mach tried to deal with image-objects seen in the depth of mirrors? Maybe. At least, that is what Marcel Proust tried to do. I am now thinking of certain passages in Proust’s novel *In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower*, first published in 1918. In a place called Balbec, the narrator visits the painter Elstir in his studio and comes across such things as a “splashing wave . . . no longer able to wet” and a jacket no longer able “to clothe anyone.”⁶ It seems he doesn’t think that a wave in the image-space of a landscape painting is an image-wave and therefore nothing to make nonfictional claims about. Instead, he seems to think it is a special *kind* of wave, namely, a wave that doesn’t (or does no longer) wet or drench. The same goes for the jacket that no longer clothes anyone, which Proust’s narrator imagines to be not a lonely jacket, to be sure, but as part of a “suit of white linen” worn by a young man “leaning on the rail of a boat.”⁷ This narrator is like Ernst Mach in that he dissolves the boundary between real objects and image-objects and reinterprets the latter as objects of a special kind. He is also like Mach in that he characterizes these objects as things that can only be seen; the objects he encounters in Elstir’s paintings seem to lack tactile qualities.

Recently, the German philosopher Lambert Wiesing—my third example—made the claim that image-objects in general, no matter whether they occur in paintings, photographs, films, videos, etc., can only be seen, but not felt or smelled. According to Wiesing, it lies in the nature of image-objects that they are “purely visible” beings.⁸ Let’s try to understand why. Looking at a painting like this still life painted by Chardin (fig. 5), one can “see” a basket with strawberries, a glass of water shining in the light, white carnations, a pair of cherries, and a peach, arranged in this and that way. All these things are purely visible beings in Wiesing’s sense. Or, as the art historian Louis Marin wrote about this painting: “no palate will savor the strawberries, no mouth will slake its thirst with the water in the glass, no

4. On this referential function of images, which is much more specific than the loose notion of “referentiality” common in art historical literature, see, e.g., L. Wiesing, *Artifizielle Präsenz: Studien zur Philosophie des Bildes* (Frankfurt, 2005), 37–80; W. Pichler and R. Ubl, *Bildtheorie zur Einführung* (Hamburg, 2014), 43–50 and 59–69; Pichler and Ubl, “Images without Objects and Referents.”

5. E. Mach, *Contributions to the Analysis of Sensations*, trans. C. M. Williams (Chicago, 1897), 41.

6. M. Proust, *In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower*, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff, ed. W. C. Carter (New Haven, CT, 2015), 450.

7. Proust, *In the Shadow*, 450.

8. Wiesing, *Artifizielle Präsenz*; idem, *Sehen lassen: Die Praxis des Zeigens* (Berlin, 2013), 72.



Figure 5. Jean-Siméon Chardin, *Basket with Wild Strawberries*, ca. 1761. Oil on canvas, 15 x 18 in. Private collection, Paris. Photo: Bridgeman Images. Color version available as an online enhancement.

nose will breathe in the perfume of the two flowers.⁹ It also seems impossible to *grab* one of these things—the peach, let’s say.¹⁰ The hand that tries to do it will bump into the pigment-covered canvas, that is, the image-vehicle. And although this collision actually *is* a tactile experience, it doesn’t sufficiently agree with the visual experience in order to be understood as an experience of the same object. For the surface of the painting is flat and a little bit rough, while that of the peach gives the impression of being round and velvety. Furthermore, the tactile experience does not occur in the right place: the hand encounters a resistance *before* it could seize the fruit, which, after all, doesn’t appear on the surface of the image-vehicle, but further back in the depth of image-space. Now, if one does not want to (dis)qualify this space as a pseudo-space, one will have to characterize it as a special kind of space, just as one tried to characterize image-objects as a special kind of object. And although Wiesing himself did not explicitly comment

9. L. Marin, *Sublime Poussin*, trans. C. Porter (Stanford, CA, 1999), 161.

10. Since Wiesing doesn’t explain why this might be the case, I cannot be sure whether the following explanation is perfectly in tune with his theory, although I hope so.

on this, I believe that, from the standpoint of his theory, it would be logical to say that image-space is a space into which one can look, but into which nobody and nothing can enter, not even light. And indeed, standing in the front of the painting, you may do with your pocket lamp whatever you want: the shadows in image-space won’t change.¹¹

It goes without saying that the sentences of Mach and of Proust and the theory of Wiesing are related to very different historical contexts and personal aims. Mach tried to establish a monist philosophy based on *sensibilia*.¹² He wanted to do away with the difference between reality and illusion, which he took to be a metaphysical distinction. Proust may have been influenced by philosophers like Mach, but he was much more interested in words, and in the passages I have

11. Compare Wiesing, *Sehen lassen*, 71: “Die Nachtszene auf einem Bild wird nicht heller, wenn das Bild beleuchtet wird.” The suggested impenetrability of image-space may prompt a tricky question, however. For if it is really impossible to enter image-space, how will one actually *know* that things like the peach in Chardin’s painting are untouchable?

12. See E. C. Banks, *Ernst Mach’s World Elements: A Study in Natural Philosophy* (Dordrecht, 2003).

referred to he is actually speculating about the truth in metaphors.¹³ And as for Wiesing, his aim is to defend and further develop a phenomenological theory of images, building on concepts and arguments received from Edmund Husserl, Hans Jonas, Günther Anders, and others.

These differences notwithstanding, there nevertheless seems to be something like a philosophical method that can be deduced from Mach's and Proust's writings and Wiesing's theory. Whoever thinks about image-objects and image-spaces along the lines of Mach, Proust, or Wiesing will have stopped qualifying them as pseudo-objects or pseudo-spaces. Instead, he or she will accept these objects and spaces and try to do them justice in a benevolent, philosophical way. The method is very much on the side of perceptual phenomena: if Wiesing and his famous forerunners are asked to choose between a perceptual phenomenon on the one hand, and concepts or logic on the other, it seems they side with the former. In their philosophies, perceptual phenomena overrule concepts, not the other way around. Concepts aren't used to make evident the illusory character of would-be perceptions; instead, they are adapted to the perceived phenomena until it becomes possible to concede that these phenomena—such as image-spaces—are real. Proust's narrator even seems to aim at a radical transformation of our concepts of everyday objects. For whether it be a wave that doesn't drench or a jacket that doesn't clothe, these things are almost as strange and fascinating as, say, a sun that never shines or a clock that never tells the time. They seem to be deprived of essential qualities.

So should we conclude that there are at least two ways of thinking about image-spaces (and the objects they include): one that denies them any existence and accepts them only in the context of a fictional mode of speech, and another that, in an attempt to avoid this fictionalization, invents concepts such as the notion of a purely visible object or, more specifically, of a wave that doesn't drench?

I want to use the last part of my talk to give at least a partial answer to this difficult question. Although I marvel at—and spontaneously sympathize with—the method of “conceptual adaptation,” as it may be called, I don't think it is as consistent and flexible as the method

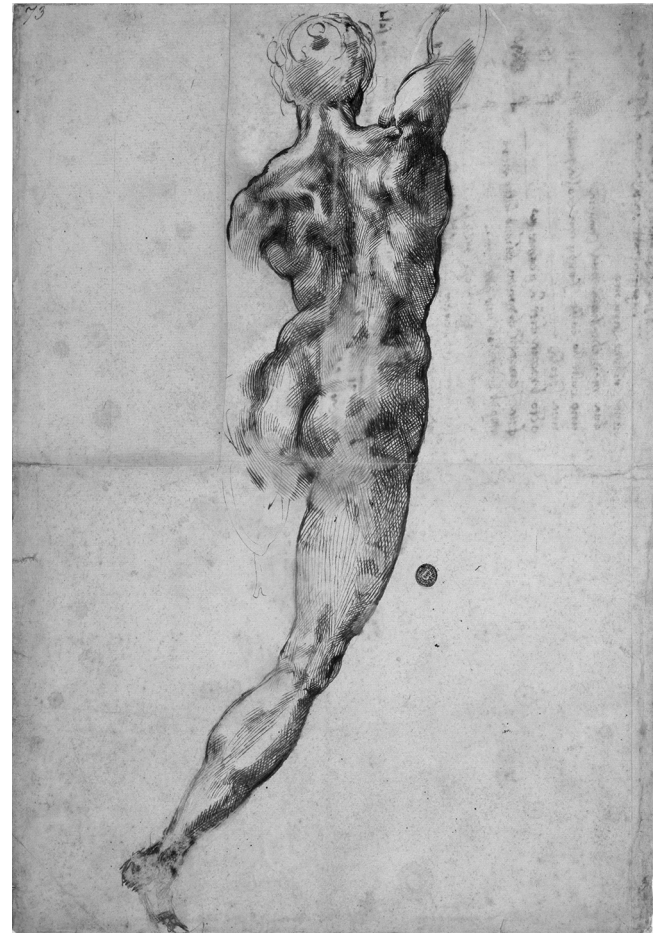


Figure 6. Michelangelo Buonarroti, nude male figure seen from the back, 1503–4. Brown ink on paper, 16 1/8 x 11 1/4 in. Florence, Casa Buonarroti © 2019. Photo: © Photo SCALA, Florence. Color version available as an online enhancement.

of fictionalization. The idea that objects in image-space are, as it were, untouchable and that it is generally impossible to enter image-space may seem quite obvious; yet it is not true in all cases of the phenomenon. “Il caresse ce qu’il fait” (he caresses what he makes), wrote the great French connoisseur Pierre-Jean Mariette about Michelangelo as a draftsman, and, given an example, it is easy to understand what he meant (fig. 6).¹⁴ Although Michelangelo, strictly speaking, can only have touched the surface of the paper, he nevertheless seems to have related to the skin

13. See, e.g., H. Friedrich, *The Structure of Modern Poetry: From the Mid-Nineteenth to the Mid-Twentieth Century*, trans. J. Neugroschel (Evanston, IL, 1974), 62; R. Billermann, *Die “métaphore” bei Marcel Proust* (Munich, 2000), 278–87; K. Yoshikawa, *Proust et l’art pictural* (Paris, 2010), 347–58.

14. P. J. Mariette, *Abecedario*, vol. 1., ed. P. de Chenevières and A. de Montaiglon (Paris, 1851), 223. David Rosand quotes this sentence of Mariette’s in *Drawing Acts: Studies in Graphic Expression and Representation* (Cambridge, 2002), 204.

of the image-body he was drawing in a tactile way. The art historian David Rosand explains it thus: "Moving over the paper, for the duration of its contact the drawing hand remains responsive to the feeling of its own movements. Evoking form from paper, each stroke affirms, even as it defines, the reality of that form. The intent is plastic: to shape the flatness of paper."¹⁵ It follows that image-objects may be touched as well as seen. Moreover, one realizes that the sense of touch may come into play at the level of the image-vehicle as well (the draftsman's hand moving over the paper). All this is contrary to the definition of image-objects as purely visible things, but may very well be accounted for in terms borrowed from—or at least compatible with—Walton's theory: the real tactile experience Michelangelo made in the process of drawing fed into a complex perceptual game of make-believe, integrating both visual and tactile cues; it helped him to imagine that he was touching the image-object and, in one and the same act, defining its surface.

Other artists have created image-spaces that seem to invite beholders to enter and become part of them. Which brings me back to Wang Hui's *Clearing Autumn Sky over a Fishing Village* (fig. 1). Of course I know that for somebody who isn't an expert it would be wise *not* to talk about this painting. For although I can clearly see that Wang Hui uses different kinds of brushwork depending on whether he paints rocks, trees, grass, foliage, or human constructions (ships, houses, a bridge), I can't name the relevant kinds of strokes and don't know whether their great variety and the balance achieved between them are remarkable or not. Likewise I can, of course, see that about half of the whole paper surface is dedicated to the land, the other half to the sky and the sea, and I can appreciate that the coastline is related to a diagonal running from the lower right to the upper left corner of the image vehicle, and that the islands up there take up the horizontality of the roll's bottom line. But I am not sure whether my assumption that these and other compositional relations are specifically expressive of calmness and clarity is valid. I am enthusiastic about the quantity of paper that has never been touched by the artist's brush, and about a painterly magic that lets one region of the blank paper be a clear sky, another region the radiant surface of the calm sea, a third region a sudden turn of the coastline, and that lets other, smaller areas be parts of a lonely path leading along the coast and navigating the folds of

the land. But whether my enthusiasm about *one* white becoming *many* phenomena is appropriate or naive, I don't know. Similarly, it's easy to see that Wang uses the tops of trees and bushes to indicate the other, unseen sides of the cliff and of the island over there, and that this is a powerful means to activate our spatial imagination; but, unfortunately, I don't know anything about the history of this formal device in Chinese landscape painting. The barren trees, to name just one more detail, tell me that it is late in the year. Shall I also imagine it is late in life? And am I supposed to relate this thought to the man who is sitting down there in the heart of the landscape and who seems to be so receptive to the openness of the sky and the sea?

I don't know and therefore won't talk about any of these things. What I wish to bring into play, however, is an old commonplace about Chinese landscape painting—a commonplace that is, nevertheless, of special relevance for my argument. I am referring to the idea that some paintings allow one to dwell in or wander through the landscapes they depict.¹⁶ Wang's painting seems to be a case in point. For isn't it possible imaginatively to take the place of the man in the heart of the landscape and join him in his meditation? And what about the other man who has just entered the scene and is just now crossing the bridge? Isn't he a painted invitation to enter the landscape with him and move along the white path that leads to the huts and, beyond them, up the hill and around the cliff where it finally disappears?¹⁷ Now, if all this is actually the case, then Wang's painting will be another example showing that theories such as the one defended by Wiesing fail to do justice to some kinds of image-space. It might, of course, be objected that whereas one can clearly see this landscape, it is only possible to *imagine* dwelling in or wandering through it. If we accept Walton's theory, however, we will be able to reply that, strictly speaking, one's seeing the landscape is also just imagined. Under this condition, the categorical difference between *really* seeing and *only* imagining falls away and is replaced by other, less fundamental differences—differences that may then be analyzed with detail. Let me just mention one of them: in order to imagine seeing the path, it's enough to let oneself be passively informed by the painted paper. If, however, one wants to imagine

16. See, e.g., R. Goepfer, *Vom Wesen chinesischer Malerei* (Munich, 1962), 179–217; F. Cheng, *Vide et plein: Le langage pictural chinois* (Paris, 1991), 100–105.

17. I am indebted to the analysis of this painting given by Goepfer, *Vom Wesen chinesischer Malerei*, 179.

15. Rosand, *Drawing Acts*, 204.



Figure 7. Inside of an Italian train, fall 2017. Photo: author. Color version available as an online enhancement.

wandering along this coast, one will have to actively follow the path with one's eyes, realize that some parts of it are occluded from sight, wonder how the passages actually given might connect, and so on. One will have to find one's way through the image-landscape and use this activity as a vehicle that helps one imagine wandering. This type of imagination is certainly more demanding than the first one. And insofar as one's imagined walk presupposes one's imagined seeing, it may even be considered imagination of the second order. Nevertheless, it may still be understood as part of one and the same perceptual game of make-believe—a game guided, in this case, by an unfolded scroll of paper with marks of ink and paint on it.

In conclusion, I'll offer a methodological remark. Let's suppose that, concerning images and the ways we talk about them, one prefers fictionalization and rejects the method of "conceptual adaptation" for theoretical reasons. Will this mean that one has to refrain altogether from inventing and using intriguing concepts such as "pure visibility" or "impenetrable space"? It doesn't seem so. Take, for example, this sight that took me by surprise on an Italian train (fig. 7). The use of semitransparent material in the construction of the train compartment led to a kind of superimposition or interpenetration of image-space and real space. Guess which phenomenon caught most of my attention? To the right of the gentleman appeared an immaterial yet clearly visible

being. Wiesing's theory seemed to be confirmed in a surprising way. In any case, I remembered that, following Günther Anders, the German philosopher had characterized image-objects not only as "purely visible" but also as "phantoms." Both terms seemed to be completely appropriate in the given case. And yet I couldn't deny that, taken seriously, they would lead to a dilemma. Should I have made the gentleman over there aware of the untouchable lady on his right? Assuming that this lady was a purely visible being sitting next to him, he too should have been able to see her there. However, considering some simple optical laws, it was easy to understand that this could not possibly be the case. The man could not see what I saw, even if he had paid attention and looked to his right. In order to avoid this contradiction, it seemed advisable to concede that the "phantom" was only an illusion. Which is what I actually did. This concession, however, didn't put an end to my interest in the scene, but paved the way for a perceptual game of make-believe in which I pretended to watch a traveler with a phantom in his company. Under this condition, there was no need to account for the strange presence of an image-object in real space. On the contrary: seen in the context of such a game, even real beings would be infected by fictionalization and become part of a complex image-vehicle. I didn't only use the mirror image, but also the sight of the real compartment and its real inmate to imagine a scene I no longer took for real. And while I entertained the fantasy that the man was accompanied by a phantom, I implicitly made a fictional claim about *him*. The truth of this claim could easily be checked and—in this special case—be confirmed. Someone on my side of the mirror could have said: "You are right, there is really a phantom sitting next to this gentleman! And note how the phantom influences its surroundings: where it has sat down, even the opaque table top starts becoming transparent."

The example shows how powerful the method of fictionalization actually is: it is strong enough to integrate conceptual adaptation and build on it. If one invents or takes up concepts such as the notion of a purely visible being, one does not always do so in order to be able to take certain phenomena for real: sometimes one intends to play with these concepts and puts them into the service of a sophisticated game of make-believe.