

Louis Marin:

Opacity and Transparency in Pictorial Representation

To introduce this talk on opacity and transparency in pictorial representation, let me begin with the little painting by Klee, named *The R Villa*, 1919. (*se ill.*) The capital red letter R inscribed on a landscape-representation seems to annihilate the illusory depth of the picture, especially the depth created by the road or the river. It makes the painting a simple «show». It is written on the transparent plane of representation and through that letter the whole painting seems to become a set of signs, of pictograms or ideograms; the whole painting becomes writing, flattened and identified to the plane of representation as if it were painted on this plane. The plane is no longer transparent; it is opacified at least in the place of the letter. At the same time, there is a reverse tension: the painting by its own representational power seems to convert the letter R from a mere letter into a figure, an almost anthropomorphic figure which is walking along side the road, making a short cut across the fields.

Klee's painting – and we can multiply the examples – displays how a letter introduced into an iconic ensemble constitutes a critical experiment for the icon because it shows what conditions a «representation». The letter, the written sign is an operator of opacity within mimetic representation. To avoid this effect, Dürer, for example, very carefully carved his monogram in a stone or a piece of marble represented as an object in the representation.

Reversely in the same picture by Klee, there is a kind of attraction of the letter by the representation to convert it into a mimetic figure. It ceases to be a capital roman character «R», a conventional transcription of a phoneme, and becomes mimetically transparent, representing a figure which is walking.

This interaction of writing and figuring helps to define the two complementary notions of opacity and transparency of sign and representation whose philosophical characteristics were construed very clearly and powerfully by the 17th century theorists, logicians, grammarians and moralists.

For them, thought as a whole is a sign: «We call 'to conceive' the mere view we have of things that are present in our minds for example when we represent to ourselves a sun, an earth, a tree, a circle, a square, without constructing an intentional judgement about the thought. The form by which we represent these things to ourselves is called an idea». An idea thus is a sign that is a thing which represents another thing. It is through the mediation of signs that we know the external world. But the functioning of signs is paradoxical. Let us take the example of reading: when I read,

I am not aware of the letters, the graphemes; I am just aware of the idea, the signs of which are the letters shaped into words. Nevertheless, I cannot reach the-

se ideas except through those intermediary signs. Reversely, if I pay attention to the letters themselves, very quickly I could not grasp what they represent. The functioning sign is at the same time present and absent, transparent and opaque.

To deepen and develop this first approach and to clarify the notion of representation as elaborated since the Renaissance and in the classical period, let me quote a charming fable on the origins of painting written by Felibien, the «Poussinist» critic and art theorist of the 17th century, as another version of the *Paragone*: It is Painting herself who is speaking after having coloured all the things created by her Father, the God of Gods: «Water deities succeeded so well that you can see how easily they know how to make a picture in one moment. Great rivers try to imitate them but they are not patient enough to complete all that they begin to do. The nymphs of the rivers, lakes and fountains, whose mood is smoother, took so great a pleasure in this occupation that they continuously represent what is presented to them, but they are so whimsical that their pictures cannot be well seen because they always represent things upside down; moreover Zephyrs often amuse themselves by confusing their features and mixing up their colours». Then the God of Love adds: «I asked them to make my portrait. Several Nymphs of the quietest lakes and fountains said that it was their pleasure to do so. But when they had completed my picture, I could not take it from them; in fact, I had no sooner left than they erased what they had made to put something else instead of it.»

As you see, for Felibien, an advocate of design and classicism, painting finds its allegorical paradigm in the reflection of things in the transparent mirror of the waters. Nature itself produces mimetic representations, and painting finds its origin, its condition of intelligibility and beauty in a kind of original reflection of the World in itself. Images at the surface of calm waters are perfect, but ephemeral; their representation is exactly measured by the presence of the things they represent on the side of the lake. Painting gives them a more lasting presence by mimetic duplication. The thing at the very moment it appears, because of painting, becomes a model which immobilizes its fleeting appearance in an object that holds the pose and which a gaze catches and a learned hand transposes on a canvas.

It seems that Felibien, by raising allegorically the problem of the origins of painting in the realm of representation, was fascinated, like Narcissus, by the desire of a picture so transparent to the sensible world that it would be something like a dream of Nature in a mirror, a mirroring fantasy of the mirror. Pictorial representation would then operate a generalized transposition of the world into painted images. This is the dream and the desire of an exchange, a translation or a transposition of things and images through a mimetic logic and economy in which the defects and the excesses in both domains would be compensated by each other. In other words, the desire of images transparent to things is so powerful that it negates a central disturbance of mimesis itself.

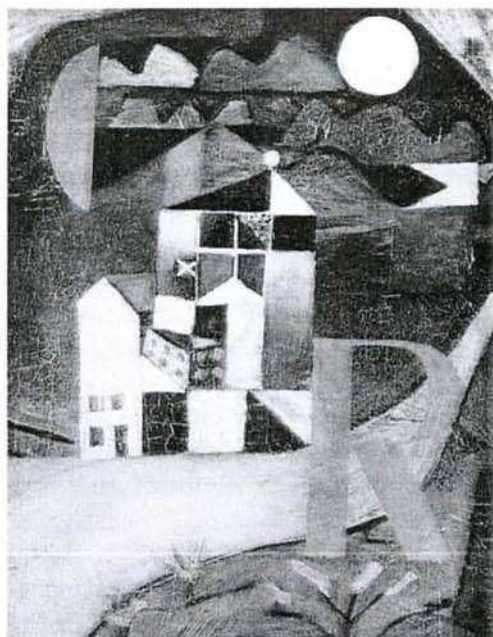
In fact, pictorial representation calls into question at the very place where irresistibly – it seems – its products show its powers. Let me take the example of the beautiful *Still Life*, dated 1627, by Hamen Y Leon (*se ill.*), a Spanish painter, to define the basic propositions of the mimetic logic and economy of pictorial representation, the founding axioms of representational transparency. The first one is

the following: the art of painting produces the duplicate of the thing it chooses as its model, a duplicate so resembling that it is the thing itself which is present on the canvas. But if so, why imitate as Plato asked and Pascal afterhim: «What a vanity is a painting which attracts admiration by the resemblance of things we do not admire in the originals.» Art is useless because it is worthless in itself and by itself. Philostratus wrote in his *Life of Appollonius of Tyana*: «Mimesis is less wise than phantasia.» Why? This is the second axiom of the mimetic organon: Painting does not actually produce duplicates of things: its artefacts are only their images *more or less* looking *like* them. Added to the model, this artefact replaces it while displaying in this varying resemblance, the variety of its resources and effects. The art of mimesis is an art; the art of Painting as mimesis, with all its technique and its science, is made to deceive the eyes by an innocuous magic which makes a picture display things that do not exist. The mysterious pleasure of pictorial mimesis would be achieved in representation in between two contradictory propositions of the same logic: a mimesis that exceeds itself in duplicates and simulacra and a mimesis which problematizes similarities by its figures. To deceive the eyes is not to make a *trompe l'oeil*. Painting deceives the eyes insofar as they admire the painter's art. So the second axiom of the mimetic transparency defines representation as a re-presentation which, through the painting, comes to replace its model, in addition to it.

Representation is more or less resembling: there are differences, dissimilarities in its identity, in its resemblance. As Plato observed, every mimetic representation is less real than its model, but what it loses in being, (ontologically), it recovers pragmatically through the resources of its art, thanks to its aesthetic and emotional effects. In this *Still Life* in which «things» appear to be almost duplicated in their pictorial representation, it seems that through the representation itself, the things acquire a mysterious presence, which is not only that of their «thingness» in the external world, but a mysterious and fragile presence which is marked on the three levels where those things are represented. Their fascinating representation is called into question by a subtle unsteadiness. The plate with its fruits, the other one with the candies and the cakes, the three boxes are ready to fall down from the firm stone table where they are located. They are «virtually» in the act of falling: and that creates an intense sense of world vanity.

It seems to me that a semiology of pictorial representation could have the same task we discern in the *Still Life*, that is to call into question the fantasy of representation as the duplicate of things, a duplicate that could be named univocally or interpreted univocally by words transparent to things. To be at the same time present and absent is a good visual and conceptual definition of a transparent thing, a glass pane through which I look at the landscape beyond. If there are scratches on it, or stains or blotches, I suddenly see the window pane instead of the garden, its lawn and its trees. But, you will say, you do not need a window pane to see the garden, to behold the landscape, to contemplate the real world. You can see it directly without any intermediary, any mediating term. Assuredly; I'll answer nevertheless that, in order to communicate with others, you need signs and representations. Is communication possible without signs?

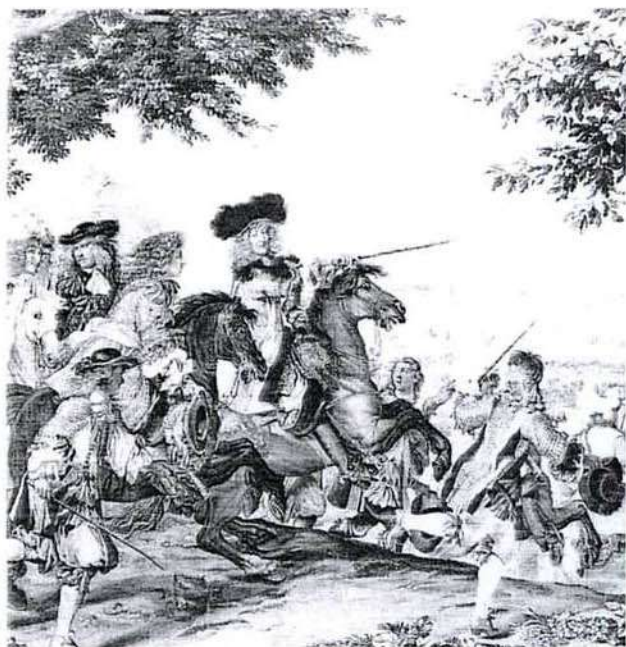
As a representation, a sign stands for something else. It represents; it makes



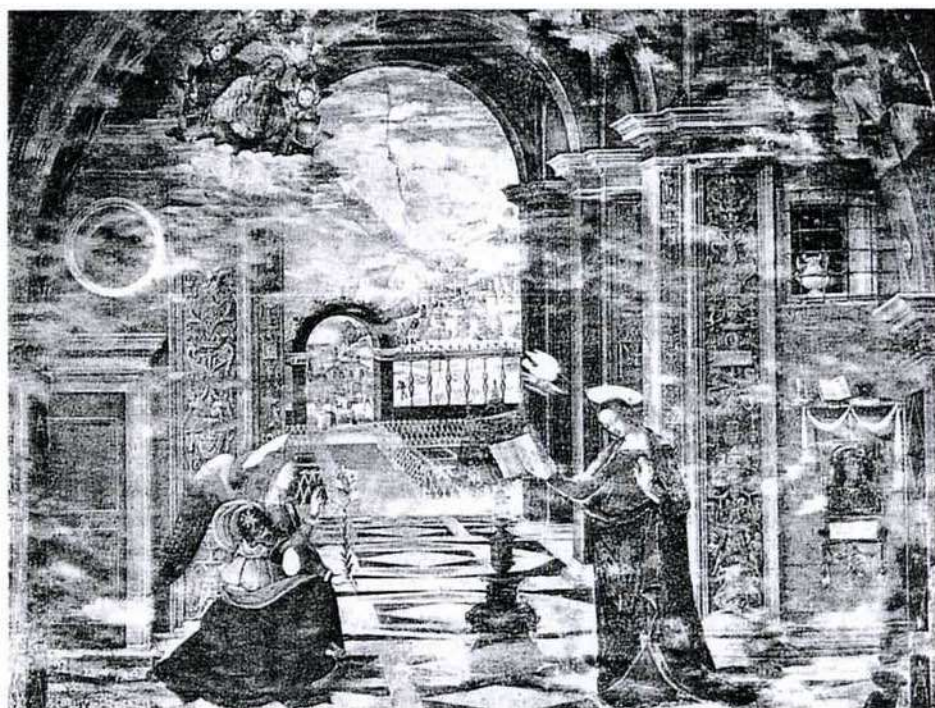
Paul Klee: Villa R, 1919.



Juan van der Hamen y Leon: Stilleben, 1627.



*Charles Le Brun:
Kongens
inntog i Dunkirk.
Billedteppe fra serien
"Kongens historie",
ant. 1670 (beskåret).*



Pinturicchio: Bebudelsen. Chapelle Baglioni, Santa Maria Maggiore, Spello.

present again that «absent» term. It stands for it, that is to say, it is substituted for it in such a way that its presence as a sign is equivalent to the thing which it is substituted for. All representation, as Alberti already defined it for painting, is a kind of miracle which makes an absent friend present through his portrait, and the dead almost alive. Through their faithful image, absent persons are returning, dead ones are coming back to life, but only in terms of signs and images. From that point of view, representation as sign, sign as representation in a way indicates the desire of an actual presence. A sign is a trace of that longing to possess reality and at the same time it is a means to fulfill that desire, to accomplish it, but in an imaginary way, a way, nevertheless, which can be more gratifying than reality itself.

However all signs, even language signs, are things, material things as well as ideal contents; a sign is a voice, a sound, as well as a meaning, a signification, a mental form. The representation's ideal (its philosophical ideality) is to be as transparent as possible in order to permit a kind of univocal communication. But it is possible that the matter of the sign persists in its function of representing something else; it is possible that the material part of the representation-sign cannot be completely erased and blotted out. Then at the cognitive level it becomes apparent and manifest what the transparence of the sign allows to be forgotten or underestimated, the very fact that *any sign presents itself when it represents something else*, that is at the very moment when it fades or wears away as a «signifier» in favor of what it represents. What remains of the transformation of experience into representation is not a mere leftover. It is more than a simple remainder. It is an essential dimension of representation itself. This is the opacity of representation which constitutes the other side of its signifying process.

Moreover it is through that opaque part, it is with it and by it, that the significance of the sign, its semiotic and semantic thread, its cognitive thread is woven into the pathetic and aesthetic fabric, that it is combined and intertwined with the threads of affects and of sensations. It is through the opacity of representation that all its pleasure and «jouissance» effects are prompted, and all its emotional affects, feelings and passions sparked off. A sign is a thing and a representation; the signifying process uses a thing to re-present something else to somebody, according to various and more or less precise rules in order to communicate with him or her.

First of all opacity can come from the thingness of the sign, from its materiality. As a thing, a sign does not present anything. It just presents itself. The Port-Royal logicians give three examples of the combination of a thing and a representation, which constitutes a sign in its signifying efficiency. «Warm ashes,» they write, «conceal as thing what they discover as sign». They present themselves as thing (this is the opacity of the ashes) but the quality of warmth signifies or reveals, concealed beneath the ashes, the glowing embers, in such a way that we can say: «that ashes are signs of fire or represent fire». They indicate, they show that a fire has been burning, sometime earlier or is continuously burning right now, but in a hidden way.

The second example is angels' bodies which conceal as bodies the purely spi-

ritual creatures they are, but at the same time reveal them as such, through certain traits of their bodies.

The third example is the Eucharist in which bread and wine as things hide what they discover as signs, that is the real presence of the flesh and blood of Jesus Christ. These examples, intended by the Port-Royal logicians to illustrate what a sign is as representation, call into question by the same token the transparency of representation by its opacity or by various kinds of opacities, all resulting from this notion of «real presence» and from the desire to recover and possess that real presence by its «representation» in terms of an image, but also in terms of an index, a trace or a symbol. In fact one of the objectives that the Port-Royal logicians pursued in constructing their theory of representation was to prove rationally, through purely linguistic arguments that the Catholic dogma of the «real presence» of Christ in the Host was true: that the sentence «this is my body» – when correctly said, in proper circumstances, by a person who is authorized to pronounce it – operates the change of a piece of bread into the flesh of Jesus and of a cup of wine into the blood of Jesus while the sensible species of bread and wine remain perceptible, concealing beneath their «thingness» that real presence while revealing it as symbols: «an image of a piece of bread which helps us to conceive how Jesus Christ's body is the food of our souls and how the faithful are united». This is the theological, even mystical, dimension of the representation-theory, in which opacity *within* transparency is the trace left by a lost body.

We can discern three types of opacity: the thingness, the material part of the sign subsisting in representation. Pascal notes: «The tone of voice impresses even the wisest». Through that opacity all the effects of seduction, violence and aggression are produced. This could be the «iconic part» of linguistic signs: opacity can lead to all kinds of motivation of the signs. It is what Italian theorists of music in the 17th century, called the «sound of words», which Poussin alluded to in his famous letter «on modes in painting», calculated by the painter in order to convey precise *affetti* in the beholder's souls, making the painting, while representing a myth or a story, a living body exerting real effects on the spectators' body and mind.

Let us take here the example of a tapestry of the *History of the King* by Le Brun «The King's entrance into Dunkirk» (*se ill.*). The king addresses us by his gaze directed toward us; he shows us the city he is going to conquer, but at the same time he is represented as giving an order to his soldiers; the gesture of his arm is ambiguous. Moreover, we may observe that the peasant on the right with an intense emotional expression on his face, is our delegate, our proxy within the painting, displaying our own astonishment and admiration as Louis XIV's beholders.

A sign presents itself while representing something else: this is what I use to call its subject-effect. We have to pay attention to the reflexive form of the sentence: a sign presents itself; here the sign «refers» to itself; it shows as a whole, like the warm ashes or the angels' bodies, that it is not only a thing, ashes, bodies, but also a sign (of fire, of angels), that is a representation. The opacity of representation, the selfpresentation of a sign as a sign concerns more precisely the «conditions» of a representation, everything through which a representation has

been constructed, made possible and actual, conditions which can be marked or inscribed in one way or another *within* representation, designating it as representation like for example the frame or the shape of the *tavola*.

In linguistic terms the enunciation inscribes itself within the *énoncé*; the representational process displays itself within what is represented, as a particular figure or a trait of composition or a part of the setting, etc... the self-presentation of the sign appears to be the vehicle, the means or the instrument of a subject addressing itself to another subject. Representation presents itself as intentional. Of course, it cannot be reduced to the conscious intention of an *ego* contenting itself with translating in the work a theme, a programme, or the instructions of a commission. Here we have to do with the artistic practice linked to all the techniques and usages of painting, etc... and this is why the «signified» cannot be exhausted by the idea or the thing that the sign represents and by the creating subject's intention to produce its representation: the self-presentation of representation, its opacity entails an intentional dimension that is not «thetic» as Husserl said, but through which the work of art makes assign to a subject - the spectator. In that sense, through its opacity, a work of art is objectively a subject.

As Bourdieu writes: «That 'objective' intention, the opaque self-presentation can not be found by a positivist historiography because it escapes by definition the artist's consciousness as well as that of the people participating in the same culture. Because the intention does not need to be expressed by somebody to express itself, it can express itself without expressing an individual and conscious expressing will».

And Panofsky adds: «An intention cannot be determined in an absolute way. Firstly because intentions cannot be *per se* defined with scientific precision. Secondly, because the intentions of men producing an object, whatever it might be, are conditioned by the norms of their time and milieu. And finally, because our manner of evaluating those intentions is inevitably influenced by our own attitude, an attitude which in its turn depends on our personal experiences as well as our historical context.»

Such self-presentation of representation can exert influence to modify and affect representation itself and its construction by introducing in it an element which does not belong to the *énoncé* - for example the story the picture represents - but to its enunciation; the narration thus becomes expressed by a figure which breaks the homogeneity of the narrative representation by an heterogeneity between two levels of the painting. However such a break can be dissimulated by a represented figure which plays two roles and performs two functions, the first one in the «story», the second one in the very process of narrating the story, of conceiving and producing it. In the Pinturricchio's *Annunciation* in Capella Baglioni at Spello (*se ill.*), there is represented, in the Virgin's bedroom, a portrait of a man in its frame, hung on the wall with a cartouche on which a name is written «*Pinturricchius pictor*»; it is the iconic and nominal (linguistic) signature of the author of the frescoes, the painter. It is a very significant example of a mode of opacity in a pictorial representation. The represented portrait is at the same time a part of the setting of Maria's bedroom with a vase of flowers, books, etc. but it is also the image (and the name) of the one who conceived and



Giorgione: Stormen, ant. 1505.



Philippe de Champaigne: Memento Mori.

realised the whole painting, a signature as we said, but one which balanced the image of God the Father in his andorla who, in the story, at this very moment sends the Holy Ghost to the Virgin and makes her, the mother of Jesus; God is the Father of the Word in the Virgin's womb and the painter is the father of the painting which represents that conception.

Another example of such an opacification of pictorial representation is another *Annunciation* by B. Bonfigli, a Siennese painter of the end of the 14th century. The painting represents the coming of the Angel heralding the birth of Jesus to the Virgin at the very moment when she conceives beneath the shadow of the Holy Ghost. The story is narrated by St. Luke at the beginning of his Gospel. In the painting, between the Angel and the Virgin, in the intermediary space, between the figures of the narrative actors on the stage of the representation, the painter has located the storyteller, St. Luke himself leaning with his back against an ox, his animal attribute which allows us to recognize him and to name him. St. Luke is represented as he is going to write the story on the roll which will become the codex, the Holy book, a book placed open on his right thigh. The roll is still blank; St. Luke has not yet written anything. But could he have done so since the event he is to narrate and write is going to happen on the representation-stage? It seems, after a more careful glance at the painting, that the Angel, while addressing the Virgin «Ave Maria»..., dictates to St. Luke the words he is uttering, operating thus, while displaying it, a short circuit between the historical scene, that of the event and the narrative scene, the one which is produced by the narrating act. If we now remember that St. Luke is the patron saint of the painters and among them of the painter who paints the picture representing the *Annunciation*, it appears clearly that St. Luke is in the painting, in the representation, not only the «proxy» of the enunciator, but a double «enunciator»: the figure of the narrator, of the story teller of a narrative in the process of being written and also the figure of the painter who gives us the story to be seen. However, in the panel by Bonfigli, St. Luke took part in the narrative stage of the narrative he is going to write. He is the third actor of the *Annunciation*. But in so doing, he interrupts the narrative consistency of the representation, he definitely opacifies by a heterogeneous figure its transparent homogeneity.

There is somehow a fantasmatic theory of the mimetic representation which has been constructed on the basis of its «transitive dimension» (to represent something), of its transparency, while forgetting its reflexive dimension, its opacity and the modalities of its opacity - its self-presentation.

It is with the various modalities of opacity that we meet the model of analysis that Panofsky has proposed: «to describe works belonging to the plastic arts and to interpret their content» (1932). We have to read again this difficult text where we find an extremely modern notion of meaning as the ensemble of complex transformations between the various hierarchical levels of our process of knowing a work of art. The work of art will reveal different meanings according to the interpretative grid applied to it: the most immediate significations remain partial and therefore misleading as long as they escape the significations of the superior level which encompass and transfigure them. First the primary level of meaning is constituted on the basis of our existential experience, the phenome-

nal, primary or natural meaning conveyed by forms, things and expressions. Then the secondary level of meaning is organised; it cannot be deciphered except through literary knowledge, the meaning of the «signifieds» we study equipped with the concepts defining the stylistic features of the work and interpreting it. It is within this secondary level that Panofsky distinguished the *subject* of the work, secondary conventional themes expressed by images, allegories, stories requiring an iconographical deciphering and the intrinsic meaning which cannot be grasped unless we «consider iconographical significations as cultural symbols, as the cultural expression of a nation, a period, a group; unless we refer the intrinsic meaning of the work to the greatest number possible of documents historically related to this work».

Opacity of representation, phenomenal meaning, preiconographical level: with these three notions, it seems to me that it is not only the scope and significance of Panofsky's model which are at stake, but those of art history and theory today. In his article of 1932, Panofsky indicates the gap between a «purely formal» description and an «object-description», and underlines the difficulties of a «purely formal» descriptive language: «A truly purely formal description might prohibit the use of terms, like «stone», «man», «rocks», simply because pictorial representation is so transparent, so immediately transitive that to refuse words to name the represented objects makes the descriptive discourse fall down into a kind of meaningless chaos.» If said in these «terms», the work of art would no longer say anything. How to describe, how to say, how to know what we see when in the background of Giotto's *Tempestà* (see ill.), we are looking at this strange yellow paint flowing between two gray blue stains, to which the name «lightning» has been too quickly given. Panofsky's text is here questioned by what seemed the most simple thing, the formal level of vision, a level which is a problem in its very existence and, by the same token, in its phenomenology. «Every description will convert the signification of the purely formal elements of representation and even before having begun, it will make of them symbols of something which is represented. The description will abandon the purely formal sphere to reach the level of meaning». Here we observe in Panofsky's model, the process by which the opacity of painting, its brush strokes and pencil traces, its pigment drippings and flows, its coloured stains etc. are occulted as such: it is at the third level, the iconological one, the level of the symbolic forms, that the purely sensible forms, resulting from the relationships of the eye to the world, excluded as such from the descriptive level because meaningless, are becoming «documents of a homogeneous meaning of a world-vision». As we said, every superior level conditions the status of the inferior one. Finally for Panofsky, representation only exists and its transparency. The «symbolic» precedes and articulates the «real». It makes it real. In the yellow flow of the *Tempestà* against a blue gray background in which we have seen «a plurivocal formal datum», a painting signifier, an opaque element, Panofsky asks us to read «lightning» that is to say something re-presented, a conceptual content, without any ambiguity. Every visible form already has an interpretative consequence. Nevertheless in 1932, such a conversion of visual perception into a significant system questioned art theory and problematized the theoretical foundations of art history. In other

words, it opened in art history and theory a domain for theory and history, the domain of the opacities of the pictorial representation. As you have already understood, opacity does not mean the part of painting qua painting which cannot be «said», its ineffable level; it does not mean the part of painting which could not be said except by a poetic attempt of a beholder who would write a poem in front of a painting. It means the various ways in which pictorial representation presents itself while representing something else, the various modes of its self-presentation: these modes and ways need to be precisely theorized; they deserve that a history takes into account their variations, transformations and changes.

I'll conclude with *A Memento Mori* attributed to Champaigne (*se ill.*). The painting appears to be completely legible, a legibility which is proportioned to its pregnant visibility. On a stone slab, three objects are pictured; on the left, a crystal vase with a tulip, a skull in the center, a sandglass on the right. The painting is not only the exact pictorial representation of these three objects, but it is also the representation of the list of the three words that name them. We can complete the list verbally with predicates naming the qualities of the three objects, colors, sizes, etc. It seems at the end that we have exactly described the whole picture. Now what can we say about the background, the dark background which makes the three objects so powerfully «present» in their pictorial representation as a series or a list? It is just a dark background. What does this dark background represent? Nothing. «Nothing» names something which cannot be named. But if this background does not represent anything, it presents itself as nothing: it presents itself as not representing something. And it is this pure self-presentation that allows the whole painting to represent the three objects with such force. In other words, we observe here a cleavage between opacity and transparency. Opacity, self-presentation is severed from its transitivity, its transparency. And maybe this is the profound meaning of the picture that is revealed beyond iconography because it gives way to a level which is below the pre- iconographical level. Is that unnamable background, the background of the three objects that are represented in the painting, to be seen and read? Or is it the background of the canvas itself, the background that bears the represented background as that uniformly black surface against which the three figures are located? Probably both. The syncopation of opacity and transparency converts itself there, in the site of the work, into the ambiguous fusion of the background and the surface, of the canvas and the representation, a hysterical conversion, we may say, of the pictorial representation.

In order to account for opacity and transparency of the pictorial representation, I attempted to construct some concepts (or categories) like support-background, surface-plane, edge-frame, etc. which articulate the various modes of opacity within transparency and the various modalities of the relationships which connect opacity and transparency, that is the modalities of the forces and their effects at work within the representational apparatus: overlapping, mapping, occultation, fusion, syncopation, conversion, substitution, ambivalence. . . A new art history and a new art theory have to take into account the field of these relations between opacity and transparency and their various modalities.