

Mieke Boon en Peter Henk Steenhuis. 2009. *Filosofie van het Kijken – Kunst in ander Perspectief*. Rotterdam, Lemniscaat (256 pages) ISBN 9789-0477-0028-9.

## PHILOSOPHY OF LOOKING

### Philosophical background of this book: Epistemological responsibility

This book – *Philosophy of Looking* – takes a specific approach to the notion of *epistemological responsibility*. In a narrow view epistemological responsibility means the responsibility of informing oneself well before making judgments. In this book it is considered somewhat broader as adopting the attitude of,

- i. trying to understand how we form judgments, and
- ii. examining presuppositions, (hidden) ideas and images (which partly originate from the tradition we have been raised in) that, often implicitly, guide the formation of our judgments.

Preliminarily, this book aims at clearing up a specific philosophical obstacle to this notion of epistemological responsibility, to wit, a *metaphysical stance* in accounting for the character of aesthetic, ethical and epistemic judgments. This metaphysical stance entices a well-accepted dichotomy between objectivity and (scientific) realism on the one hand, and subjectivity and relativism on the other. These competing positions both draw on a Platonist idea that without a foundation in the metaphysical realm subjectivism and relativism seem to be the only alternatives. Furthermore, this metaphysical stance easily leads to an unfruitful dichotomy between *reason* and *feeling* as the proper guidance to our judgements (e.g., as it is found in the opposition between the Enlightenment and Romanticist traditions).

As an alternative, an *epistemological stance* is taken that could overcome the dichotomy between objectivists (realist) and subjectivists (relativist) accounts of the formation of judgments and knowledge. By means of in-depth analyses of perceiving works of art, it is shown how aesthetics, ethics and knowledge are closely related in this epistemic activity. The chapters of this book illustrate how the *activity* of forming judgments can be examined from a variety of philosophical perspectives (both in the Anglo-Saxon and Continental tradition).

Perception of art has been taken as a vehicle for developing these basic philosophical ideas and as illustrations of how philosophy can play a role in examining presuppositions that guide our judgments. This philosophical approach to the perception of art may be considered productive because (a) analyzing the activity of perceiving art makes very concrete how we could examine our perceptions and judgments from diverse philosophical perspectives, and (b) perception of art is generally considered to be unselfish, which affords an open-minded attitude (and more or less avoiding the influence of particular interests) towards exploring our own judgments.

This book does not explicitly present this take on epistemological responsibility (i.e., taking responsibility for ones own judgments) as a philosophical argument. Instead, it is presented as the activity of ‘doing philosophy’. This book shows in very concrete examples how philosophy can be adopted as an *activity of exploring* our immediate, ‘spontaneous’ perceiving, feeling, reasoning, and judging. Thereby it introduces a richer conception of epistemological responsibility that surpasses typical difficulties of understanding the character of our judgments from a metaphysical stance. It is my hope to have made accessible this difficult topic beyond the philosophical community.

## **Preface (draft English translation of Voorwoord)**

Visitors to museums spend an average of nine seconds looking at an art work. They come in, glance at a painting, have a quick look at the explanatory text and move on. Occasionally you see a person, or more often a couple, taking more time with a painting. It's a pleasing sight. They stand at a distance, they look, they point, they nod, they look again. One of them asks a question and the other answers it. Other visitors glance in their direction, a little envious that they themselves aren't prepared to spend so much time on one work. Sometimes they listen to what is being said, for just as long as it's not impolite to do so.

This book was written for those other visitors.

Everyone would agree that nine seconds is not enough time to do justice to an artwork. But if you want to spend more time on it, how should you do that? Can you learn how to look? You certainly can, as the discussions about art that we've been having over the last four years show. Just as those who know how to play chess can get excited about a beautiful position, so – and to an even greater extent – can those who have learnt how to look be moved by a painting.

Learning to look, that's what this book is about. At colour, at composition, at light and shadow, at layers of paint and fine lines. That isn't enough however. No matter how much you know, it's still possible to stare at a painting and remain unmoved. You need more if it's going to touch you. You need to immerse yourself in a work and, just as important, allow it to immerse itself in you and your own manner of observation. By so doing, a painting that initially does little for you can take on a deeper meaning.

By referring to works by various masters, some well-known and others less so – from Rembrandt van Rijn to his almost forgotten contemporary Judith Leyster – we hope to show how with an eye for detail and asking certain specific questions, you can find many more ways of looking. We will investigate the process of looking, how our manner of looking affects our experience.

A lot more happens when we look at something than we are normally aware of. Are we as objective about the world as we think we are? Most of us would readily admit that we aren't. But do we understand what consequences that has? Consequences for what we see, how we think and make judgments, how we experience images?

Many of the questions in this book are about looking at images, about what there is to see in them and how we can discover that. We are helped in this by the history of philosophy which expresses ideas about the culture we grew up in, a culture which in turn influences the way in which we look at and experience things. This is the intention behind a philosophy of looking: if we perceive ourselves more clearly, we shall perceive paintings more clearly, and vice versa.

Looking at art is itself an art – or at least a craft, something that can be learnt. You can practice ‘the ability to express that which lives or stirs in the heart and soul, in a form that awakes a consciousness of beauty,’ as the dictionary defines art.

The reader will notice that we haven’t attempted to provide examples from all historical periods. That is because we are not attempting to lay down principles along art-historical lines, but rather along philosophical ones. Consequently we jump from century to century: from a contemporary ‘water piece’ by Olafur Eliasson to a fourteenth-century crucifixion, from a serene milkmaid by Johannes Vermeer to a confrontational nude by Lucien Freud.

Most of the art works in this book can be found in the permanent collections of Dutch museums. We have deliberately avoided choosing works from the established canon. We want to show for example that paintings from the early nineteenth century, by Louis Moritz perhaps or Wouter Johannes van Troostwijk, are good enough to encourage the viewer to look at them for more than nine seconds.

‘Looking at how we look’ can be viewed from a variety of philosophical perspectives: philosophy of perception, religion and metaphysics, epistemology, ethics and anthropology, the Enlightenment and Romanticism, gender and modern abstraction – perspectives which form the basis of the book’s structure. We hope to provide you with an arsenal of questions by which you can bring art works to life, questions which will help you to make contact with them. It will teach you how to look, how to make more considered judgments. To look reflectively, at art, at yourself, and at the world around you.

Enschede/Amsterdam, November 2008

Mieke Boon, philosopher at the University of Twente

Peter Henk Steenhuis, philosophy editor of *Trouw*