



# A Reading for Watching

*Translation of: Het Lezen is de vijand van het kijken*

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Amsterdam  
2003

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## A reading for watching

When I read, I just begin at the top left and finish the page at the bottom right. Then I'm finished. I don't need a sense of direction. I follow the trail of the text. The route is fixed, so there is no need for me to think about it. I connect myself to an infusion of someone else's thoughts and time passes of its own accord. It has made me lazy. For an image, I have to sit down and wait until I see something. Sit still, often even stand. To look at art, for example, you stand. I often don't know where I am supposed to start looking or what I am supposed to look for. I shift from one leg to the other. These legs want to walk, walk on, in a line, follow a route. But have I already seen everything? This is something I have to decide for myself. Time presses. My own thoughts are on itching for an opportunity to disturb my concentration. This still-life reminds me of the shopping I still have to do. Before I know it, I am writing out a list, and then I have forgotten to look. I try to experience the work without words. But my back hurts. Looking is such fuss, requires such patience, such looking. Poking away with that needle, again and again. Searching for an entrance. Gnawing uncertainty. And finally, making the decision that it's enough. Walk on.

In my world, text prevails completely. I am somebody for whom it is impossible to eat a peanut-butter sandwich without reading the label on the jar – when there is doubtless far more to be seen in the rest of the kitchen. Taking the plate with me, I go sit in front of the television. I am now looking at the very symbol of the concept of 'visual culture'. That television seems to be serving up images, but something is not right. The fabled Dutch policy of subtitling everything, leaving sound tracks in the original language, is a poignant example. That permanent stream of letters at the bottom of the screen makes it hard for me to watch television. The typography stomps shamelessly right through the visual information. I might even miss a tiny fragment of the text! In between bites, in the end, I have read more than I have seen. The worst are the programs with talking heads – and of course, subtitles. Sometimes I try to ignore the letters and the mouth. It is hard to do. To the left and the right of the talking head, with a bit of luck, there are lots of things to see: landscapes, weather conditions, ugly furniture. All of that has meaning. But if I concentrate, consciously, I hear and see only text. The background, the props and the framework of television, are something I systematically look right past. At best, it is attractive or ugly, but beyond that I can give it no significance. That only succeeds when images of about ten years old or more are

repeatedly shown. Everything that had at first been so revoltingly ordinary has by then become bizarre, and falls out of tune. Only in its datedness does the background take on some meaning. Only then do I succeed in looking, in seeing more than one thing at a time.

Camera work for television has a lot to do with language. Everything is at the behest of a story. The editing forces me to believe in that single tale. I have little chance to see a hidden man standing off in the wings. All that zooming in is another good example. As a result, the image becomes almost as linear as the text. I have no choice about what I pay attention to, as most of the background has been cut away. The man behind the camera has hidden himself as well. 'Zoom in', 'zoom out', I call to him from behind my sandwich. But he does not listen. Almost never do I have two subjects that I can watch at the same time. What remains is as simplistic as any given word you might like to choose. In the worst case, they zoom in on a person who is talking, a face, a screen-filling mouth regurgitating text...

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**Long-tailed Tit**, *Aegithalos caudatus*, length 12-14 cm

*D:* Schwanzmeise

*NL:* Staartmees

*F:* Mésange à longue queue

Because of a broken leg a couple of years ago, I could not go for walks. Since I couldn't get around, I watched whatever happened to pass me by. I was often lying next to a window, so this proved to be mostly birds and airplanes. The birds had my preference, so I watched the birds. This is a recognized activity, an official hobby. It's called birdwatching. (Watching airplanes is, by the way, also a hobby. It is called plane spotting). This birdwatching business turned out to have certain rules. What this amounts to is seeing a bird, which is difficult enough, and then knowing what species it is. That is the sport. It seems simple, but in many circumstances it is nigh on impossible. For the beginner, a lot of time and rest is an advantage. This is one case where the invalid has an advantage over the fit and healthy. The hobby can be practiced anywhere. A scarcity of birds, after all, is also an observation.

When the cast came off my leg, I embarked in earnest. My preference was for the bird-rich environment and the bird-rich moment. The countryside, forests and heaths, springtime. early in the morning. One location can better bear the burden of good health than another. In the books and brochures, I read which places I should visit at which times. When I finally got there, I no longer had to walk, but just sit back and watch. I used my brand-new, expensive-as-hell binoculars to zoom in and zoom out. At last, I am holding the camera in my own hands.



I never see what the guidebooks promise. Only very slowly do I make any progress at all. At home, I study bird books and listen to cassette tapes. I see my first Long-tailed Tits, my first Black Woodpecker, my first Short-toed Treecreeper. When at last I can trek again, I join a birdwatching association and go a-wandering with those with experience. They are solitary men, of middle age.

People who practice this sport of observation are very enthusiastic. Now that I was sojourning with these image-hungry folk, I could immediately recognize them by the way they move. Forward motion is a hesitant affair, rather like a chick pecking for grubs. One tries to be invisible, but in so doing attracts all the more attention. One walks a little, stands perfectly still again. One feigns indifference to hide the discomfort that goes along with any preoccupation not generally shared by all. When I perceive such behaviour, I think of three possible environments: a street with prostitutes, a place where gays congregate for sex, or an area frequented by birds. Only the heavy binoculars around the necks of the birdwatchers clarify which of the above I am dealing with. Initially, it took tremendous effort for me to act this way. I would sooner keep the binoculars in my jacket. But then I just looked pregnant. In the company of experienced bird-lovers, it came somewhat easier. I join in the group behaviour.

I let myself be led around as though on a guided tour of a television set. This is something quite different from watching television. Here, the conditions for watching are unknown. The subject can pop up from any angle. Every direction is potentially interesting. I don't have enough eyes. It is also an unfamiliar rhythm for looking – sitting and waiting, walking and tracking. No talking. You never see what is illustrated in the catalogue. And should the promise of the guide be fulfilled, the little beast looks completely different than the one in the picture. Against the light and moulting, its adolescent plumage or camouflage keep setting me off on the wrong foot. It is very humiliating to have it explained to me – yet again – how I am supposed to be using my eyes. Just look. Capture the image on the retina. Let it quietly flow to the brain.

Visual Culture. The image cult amongst birdwatchers is a revelation. Here, seeing is a virtue. Missing an image is a disgrace. In the beginning, it was

happening to me constantly. I walked with the men through 'the field' (in this world, 'nature' is referred to as 'the field') and I saw nothing. What flies overhead, what sits on a branch – I had to have it all pointed out to me. It's not that their eyes are better than mine.... Finally, I too discover that tiny black spot in the third tree behind that crooked little gate. The bird men say it is a Redwing. But how they see that is a mystery. I want to be able to do that too, but I do not know how to go about it. How do you learn to look? Just look, say the men. Just go into the field a lot and don't expect too much. I follow their advice. After a time, in fact, it does begin to get a little better. One day I see a tiny cloud in the corner of my eye and I know a swarm of Redwings had passed by. How I know that, I have no idea... But I notice that this lightning-quick seeing and knowing produces a special kind of enjoyment, a satisfaction. It has something addictive about it.

As I sit for a quarter of an hour at the edge of a heath, I involuntarily take a kind of inventory. Behind me in the woods I hear a Woodlark. A Stonechat sits in a bare row of shrubs off to the right. Pipits, Curlews, a preying Falcon in the distance... Boys, I gottcha! The landscape has been opened up, revealed – by me. Split open, in different territories. I can speak the language of the birds.

The birdwatching association where I am undergoing my initiation meets each month. The ongoing business of the club is discussed and then a knowledgeable birdwatcher gives a talk, with a box full of slides. The goodies are there, inside that box. These are not some easy image snack. Days on end, sweating in hides, months of gruelling through an area, years of research have produced this collection of slides now being dished up for us. The projector purrs. The chairman turns off the lights. The first slide is of a Bearded Vulture. Gasps of envious rapture from the unhappy souls who never succeeded in seeing this rare bird in the field, approving mumbles from those privileged enough to have had the creature in their sights. Names of locations are mentioned. These slides were taken in Greece, where large birds of prey are still abundant. But what is the point of seeing a flying fortress like this if you don't even know what a Black Vulture or a Bearded Vulture is...

This evening's expert is very familiar with that inhospitable natural environment. Those willing to pay for it can take trips with him. But right now, he provides us with a quick course in recognizing large birds of prey: 'The relationship between wingspread and body length is critical. Colour is deceptive. It is better to observe the angle of the wing in relation to the body. The width of the tail is also an indication, but don't forget to take the wind into account. When flying into the wind, all birds spread their tails more when they fly with the wind. That is because of the aerodynamics...' When he shows the next slide, he is silent. We are being tested like a class

of school children. Whoever knows is free to tell us. Golden Eagle or Imperial Eagle? Of course, his best observations were not captured on film. He tells us about these and makes the whole room green with envy. In our club, such triumphs of the retina can be rehashed over and again, for evenings on end. Visual cornucopia. Paradise. The objective here is pure pleasure in looking. Every detail is important and intently tasted, in much the same way as gourmets indulge in their own subject of food. The difference between a Short-toed Treecreeper and the Common Treecreeper is just a couple of tiny feathers. The Icelandic Black-tailed Godwit: a little more red on the breast. Visual knowledge is a subtle, slow-growing thing.

After that, I return to the visual desert. I visit exhibitions, shops, internet sites and friends. I watch television, I buy a sweater. There are lots of images in our culture, but there is no culture in the image.

That obsessive hunger for images, that image-gobbling of the birdwatchers – I come across it nowhere else. Here is a test. Ask yourself what the most remarkable thing is that you have seen today. And why is it remarkable? Try sometime to see something that you would normally just walk past and not notice. Keep that up for a week. The result is astonishing. Try to carry on a conversation about it with someone – for more than five minutes. Exit visual culture.

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**Television,** *Telesio vulgaris*, 17 inch

*D:* Fernsehen

*NL:* Televisie

*F:* Television

‘We live in a visual culture! Just look at MTV, look at advertising!’ People have decided that visual culture is found in MTV, advertising and the new media. These are the perpetual examples. The consumption of images comprises looking at pictures on television, in magazines and on the internet. But what in fact is actually happening with those pictures and has our way of looking at them really developed so much in the last ten or twenty years? Have we become better at it? Has the visual image taken on a more complex, more subtle or substantial meaning? Has seeing, has looking, or has the image acquired more status, more respect?

The perception that we live in a visual culture is usually a veiled complaint. ‘Kids don’t read any more... internet and computer games are all that can hold their attention... as long as there are pictures...’ The average number of hours that our children read each week is carefully measured and the plummeting figures are published with due alarm. The conclusion is that, ‘Our children no longer have the patience to read.’ But the amount of



time and energy that is or is not being devoted to the visual image does not interest the statisticians, as if the visual candy did not require patience. As if the artificial colours of printing ink and the digital flavourings of the internet make it all effortlessly slide down the gullet. Concentration is not a requisite. This way, saying that we live in a visual culture bears witness to great contempt for the visual image. If we really lived in a visual culture, looking would be taken seriously, as an activity that, at the very least, requires time. A skill you can develop. It would be a golden age for artists. Newspapers would be bursting with articles about the visual arts, the one more challenging than the other. People would not only visit the museums but purchase a lot of art and, more importantly, talk about it. But I see none of this.

I ask myself if a visual culture is even possible in a country where there is virtually no illiteracy. And I mean illiteracy in reading, in comprehending text. Image illiteracy is everywhere. So much so, that it is practically undetectable. There should be courses at in the local community centres, as there are for reading. Because, to experience the shortcoming, a start would have to be made towards image literacy, a recognition of the problem. Lay on the development grants!

For years, I was unaware of the existence of this illiteracy. I watched television without realizing that I was actually sitting there reading. It was not until I found myself in a land where I turned out to be a total illiterate. It was pure coincidence. The places where visual culture is truly lush and thriving remain hidden, invisible, out of earshot, packed away in the unglamorous corners of our culture.

As I watch the birds, learning slowly, gradually opening my eyes, I detect certain idiosyncrasies about looking. Before the visual information reaches the brain, there has already been a lot of filtering out. But the filter itself is

invisible. It is possible for me to live for years on end amongst visible objects without my ever having registered their presence. I had never seen the birds in my surroundings, let alone the relationship between wing length and wingspan, the width of the tail. Of course, the rays of light they reflected reached my eyes, but that had absolutely no consequences for my overall perception of reality. Perceiving something land on your retina is only the beginning. Selecting and processing that data is something that happens unnoticed, unspoken. Only when I learned to see completely new things was I able to catch a little of this process off its guard. I could capture a glimpse of the filter.

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**Little Grebe**, *Tachybaptus ruficollis*, lengte 25-29 cm

*D*: Zwergtaucher

*NL*: Dodaars

*F*: Grebe a cou noir

When I was twelve or so, I bicycled along the Amstel River with a birdwatcher. It was a route I had already biked scores of times. 'Look! A Little Grebe!' He pointed. I looked and saw a little black duck with white on its side. For years, that was my Little Grebe. It was one of the few birds I thought I could recognize. I loved that Little Grebe. But the real Little Grebe, a dumpy, unsightly miniature of the Great Crested Grebe, I had missed, probably because he had just ducked underwater. The black duckling was a Tufted Duck, a small duck that winters in the Netherlands. My first real Little Grebe was on a sunny but cold day in the Dommel river valley, near Eindhoven. He poked out from the shadow of an overhanging branch. He had the same shape as an ordinary Crested Grebe, but was a few sizes smaller and somewhat rounder. At first, this unspectacular little creature made little impression on me. But the next time I saw one, along the River Waal, that Little Grebe now brought back the images of the walk along the Dommel. The Amstel, the Dommel and the Waal now all had a common link. Like pictures we flip through, they emerged from behind the Little Grebe. Every time I saw another one, the mixture of blossoming images grew thicker and richer. The shabby little Grebe grows ever more beautiful. The emergence of beauty – captured.

For an image to register, you first have to see it, to learn to see. Once that has happened, it is in your system. It is the opening of the filter. Seeing once is seeing again. I now catch the Little Grebe in the corner of my eye. Slowly, the number of bird species able to poke a hole in that filter is growing. Once I had seen my first Long-tailed Tit, I see them everywhere. On the other hand, it is very difficult to discover something new. In a meadow, I quickly see all the Lapwings. I know them. But the common Sandpiper dribbling along a puddle is something that has to be pointed out





to me. The next time, I find the Sandpiper myself. I recognize that dribbling along a muddy bank. For me, the muddy banks have changed and I no longer bypass the Sandpiper. But now I am probably missing something else.

This knowledge can also turn against me. A bird I expect to see is a bird I see, even if he is not there at all. I just mistake another species for the one I am expecting. It is very difficult to make the switch when there is suddenly a Greenshank scratching in that mud. In etology, the field that studies animal behaviour, there is a term for it: imprinting. A well-known example is the imprinting of the image of parents. Konrad Lorenz made delightful films of rows of ducks, chickens or geese trotting along behind him. He stayed with the eggs when they hatched. He was the first living creature the chicks saw, and they continued to follow him everywhere. The imprinting happened the moment they pecked their way out of their shell. The real mother, the adult duck, hen or goose was no longer of any interest. She could never again wipe that image of Lorenz out of the little brains of her offspring, no matter how many delicious morsels she offered them. Young animals imprint the image of their parents very securely. They recognize them from amongst thousands of others. A mistake is not easy to correct. Visual fixation.

The way a bird seeks its food can also be a form of imprinting. A bird aims for a certain prey. That image is already on his tongue. This means he sees it quicker and better. It works with me as well. I find it easier to look for a bunch of keys I recognize. The better I know it, the easier I search. Obsessional looking leads to strong imprinting. I see the keys everywhere – bunches and bunches of ghost keys. It happens with birds, too. If there is an overabundance of a certain kind of grub, it is easier to find them. Other types of prey are disregarded. When a new insect takes over the woods, the birds have to make an effort to make the switch.

Apparently, looking takes a lot of energy. The brain, together with the eyes, does its absolute best to recognize as much as it can with a minimum of means. The brain is very economic with its images. Not a ray of light too many is let in. The filter is very delicately adjusted. The things that I do not

know are the things that I do not see. The things that I do know are things I see with as little information as possible.

Imprinting. I compare my own way of looking with that of my subject. I look in the same manner as the birds I look at. The bird takes his place behind me, flies into my head and lets me look through his eyes. At him. But I only succeed in this with the birds whose names I know. With the Great Tit, I go in search of bright, green-coloured caterpillars. But I cannot measure up to the nameless specks. I now see them, but I do not yet see what they are doing. As soon as I know that there is a Goshawk in flight, I rise up in the air with him. I know what he is looking for up there. We explore our surroundings in search of potential prey, a nesting site, places to rest. That word, that name is the glue that binds all those times that I have seen a Goshawk, all the stories I have heard about him. Here, language is a friend to looking. Things can be seen thanks to their name.

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**Brent Goose**, *Branta bernicla*, wingspan 110-120cm

*D:* Ringelgans

*NL:* Rotgans

*F:* Bernache cravant

The names of birds have a beauty all their own. Roller, Black-throated Diver, Great Bustard, Night Heron, Jacksnipe... With each sighting, the name and the image weld more firmly together. You must know the names of your birds in Latin and in English, as well as Dutch. Mumble those names at the moment of the visual catch. Buteo Buteo, Spoonbill, Common Stonechat. (This is also helpful during nature films on the BBC). Some names do nothing for me at first. In winter, Brent Geese and Graylag Geese populate the fields in huge flocks. If something is wrong, they take flight. Each take-off burns a pound of grass per goose. It is expensive grass-energy. The grass, sown and cultivated to fill our fridges with milk, is squandered on the spectacle of the cloud of geese. Flying milk. Why should I want to keep them separate – the Brent Goose, Graylag Goose, Bean Goose, Barnacle Goose? Why go to all that trouble to learn to distinguish the subtle difference in tint in the front of the wing, the darkness of the neck?

On one of those evenings at the birdwatchers' club, a researcher specialized in Dutch Geese came to tell his tale. A goose expert. I heard him tell how he crawled next to a drunken Russian pilot in a small single-engine airplane to see how our Brent Geese raise their babies – deep in Siberia. Every day he sat there, in his shanty of a hide. He was plagued by mosquitoes, with nothing to eat but salmon, salmon, and more salmon. It sounded impressive, tough. His Brent Geese were given names. Hansel and

Gretel, Jut and Jul. Very funny, and also very significant. Back in Holland, he continued to follow the same species. In the winter, they come again to gobble up our grass. Sure enough, Jut and Jul land right in front of the eyes of our researcher. Of all the thousands, it just had to be these two. In the interest of science, and of my own joy in watching geese, he had weighed the geese, banded them and counted their young, and he was clearly moved when he told us the story.

I take a winter bike trip along the River Waal. When the Brent Geese fly overhead, I now see salmon, salmon, and more salmon, clouds of hungry mosquitoes, drunken Russian pilots and bitter loneliness. It is tough and strong, and it is funny, too.

The Graylap Geese breed around the corner from me. They are here all year long. I have seen their summer brood digging around near the village of Holysloot. It is very homely, in the old-fashioned sense, and humorous too. I still find the winter Geese difficult to distinguish from each other. The difference is hardly noticeable. The flocks are big and the meadows wide. But I can distinguish the Brent Geese well, also by the way they fly. When a frightened swarm of Geese calms down, milk or salmon land with them in the pasture. I make the distinction. The creation of the meaning of image – captured.

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**Common Buzzard**, *Buteo buteo*, wingspan 113-128 cm

*D:* Mäusebussard

*NL:* Buizerd

*F:* Buze variable

By most birdwatchers, the buzzard is seen as a cowardly predator. He sits lazily on a post, waiting for his prey to wander past. He just sits until a mouse or a vole meanders along and then quietly drops down to snatch it. This is quite unlike the Goshawk or the Sparrow Hawk. They hunt other, smaller birds, pursuing them in flight and grabbing them out of the air with a big cloud of feathers and a penetrating, terrifying shriek. Etymologically, Buzzard comes from screamer. It refers to their own scream, and that is why I love them.

After a bit of tracking down on my part, that masterful screech finally produces the image of the beast – a pilot negotiating circles, like a sailplane. They are mostly over woods. Small groups of Buzzards dive, one after the other, while their screeching quickly betrays their whereabouts. There are a lot of Buzzards in the Netherlands. They are out there, flying over a small forest or sitting perched on a lookout. A bird of prey along the highway or on a streetlamp is a Buzzard. The one that hangs, preying above

the roadside shoulder is a Kestrel. Recognizing birds is not always so difficult.

The Buzzard has changed my landscape. I cannot take a train anywhere without knowing how many I have seen. Sitting on a pole with their fat bodies. But they are not so big. I do not scan the meadows looking for them. The image just creeps unnoticed into my thoughts: Amsterdam to Utrecht = 4x Buzzard.

There have to be more things in the landscape that I fail to see because I do not know what to call them. Perhaps there is something to be observed in and around the ditches, something that I have missed, or something to do with the barns. If all the barns were reduced or enlarged by 50% during the night, if their numbers were halved or doubled, would I see that? I torture my eyes on the trip back, but I do not discover the unseen things. Looking is difficult. The power of selection of the brain is great, and it works outside my awareness.

How wonderful it is that all that selection has already been made. In certain places in the bird-rich landscape, the view has been pre-arranged. People have built a little house, a hide. From the camera obscura of the observation hut, it is clear what should be seen. The photograph has already been made. The creature, like a kind of developer solution, just has to fly into view. In order to know where these 'cameras' are to be found, you have to hang around with the birdwatchers for a while, then you will hear where they are. It is certainly not the idea that just anybody walks in. There is a hide by an unnamed lake near Amsterdam, which is intentionally kept secret. You only find out about it by word of mouth. The nature group that installed the hide even announced this fact on a tidy little sign. I had discovered the hide by accident, and that gave me a great sense of satisfaction. Later, I heard from several people that this hut enjoyed a measure of popularity because the Ospreys came there regularly. The next time I went there, I spoke to a birdwatcher about it, and with merciless precision, he pointed out the branch that the Osprey sat on. For us, the lake was empty. A couple of Grebes that I could have seen in the canal in the middle of town and two equally unspectacular Mute Swans floated prettily past in the silence. The setting sun with a train in the distance was pretty, too. I never did see the Osprey there, but I presume that sometime or other I will be in luck. Every observation hut in every birdwatching location has its own favourites. The mumbling, bearded birdwatchers who are welcome here have together made up their minds. Certain species are expected at certain locations: Gaddwall, Widgeons or Teals. This is where they belong. Like a bunch of keys in a left jacket pocket.

But there are also the unexpected species, the gold doubloons and the diamonds. Common Rosefinch, Temminck's Stint or the Penduline Tit's nest. The rarities or newcomers to a location. Whoever discovers one possesses a jewel and it is advantageous to keep it quiet. But that happy retina cannot keep its mouth shut. The announcement of the exception to the rule spreads quickly and swarms of bird-lovers go to seek it out, all in that same little wood, that same small pasture. The news sounds like the comforting rattle of a bunch of keys at the bottom of a full bag of groceries. 'Yes, I am here. I just need to be ferreted up to the surface.' Patience is now the only condition for success. A gold doubloon is transformed into a key. It has remained the same bird, in the same little wood. But he has become a little less beautiful, all without his looking any different at all.

Here, the philosophy of the birdwatcher begins to play its role. In *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, the philosopher Arturo Danto conducts an experiment in thinking that could be of great significance to the birdwatcher. Danto imagines a number of identical paintings of monochromatic red squares. The paintings are indistinguishable from one another. They all have the same format, the same colour, the same texture. He manages to make it plausible, however, that they do in fact differ, that they are completely different paintings, that they come from different periods and are in different styles. And that they have different monetary values. The first painting represents the Jews crossing the Red Sea. It is a religious painting. The Jews pass through and the Egyptians were drowned. The sea is calm again. At the end of his life, Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher, claimed that this painting represented his state of mind. Everything that he had experienced in his life had joined together into this single colour, this one mood.

It is conceivable that a psychologically sensitive portrait painter, upon reading this description, paints a painting and entitles it 'Inside Kierkegaard'. This is then the second monochromatic, red, square canvas, in this case a portrait. But it is also possible to imagine a painting that is entirely removed from all this narrative, for example, a geometric, minimalist painting with the title: 'Red Square', or a metaphysical painting: 'Nirvana'. Yet another possibility is a still life, painted by a dubious follower of Matisse: *The Red Tablecloth*.

The final painting is an unfinished work by Giorgione. It never got any further than this first layer of red lead primer. Actually, it is not a work of art at all, but it is of interest in terms of art history. And then we imagine a canvas painted in red lead primer that has no pretence to art whatsoever. It is just a thing, painted over with red paint.

What is it that makes one thing a work of art and the other just a thing? What makes that one painting a good painting and the other worthless? This problem became relevant for Danto when Duchamp put a urinal in a museum, and it only became more so with the stacks of Brillo boxes that Andy Warhol rocket-launched into High Art. What is the substantive difference between the urinal in the museum and the same thing in a wholesale warehouse? Danto asked what turned an ordinary object in a shop into a work of art. He sought his answer in the intention of the artist and the context in which the work was shown. A certain amount of knowledge, which does not have to be apparent in the work itself, is indispensable in order to put it in the right context. Whatever is intended to be presented as A-R-T is therefore art. The place where that happens and the period in which it happens are crucial. And whoever does this in an intriguing way makes good art.

With some surprise, Danto concluded that in the visual arts, two identical objects could have two different meanings. Indeed, they could fall into two different ontological categories. The one is a work of art, while the other is a piece of industrial porcelain. This is a completely different species.

In my opinion, this difference is not just reserved for art, but it applies to every kind of image. If only someone looks at it with enough intensity.

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**Common Crane,** *Grus grus*, wingspan 200-230 cm

*D:* Kranich

*NL:* Kraanvogel

*F:* Grue cendrée

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**Demoiselle Crane,** *Anthropoides virgo*, wingspan 165-185 cm

*D:* Jungfernkranich

*NL:* Jufferkraanvogel

*F:* Grue demoiselle

In the eastern regions of the Netherlands, September brings a palpable buzz of excited expectation amongst the birdwatchers. This is the season when it is possible to see or hear small groups of Cranes flying overhead. But you have to be very alert and keep your ears tuned. I never did succeed. Cranes like to travel at night. During the two years I was living in Eindhoven, each September, I slept with the window open so I would not miss that mysterious trumpeting. But I heard nothing. I spoke to a birdwatcher who worked in the tallest building in the Philips industrial complex. He told exciting tales about the fantastic view he had of the migrating Cranes from his workroom. It was, however, poor compensation

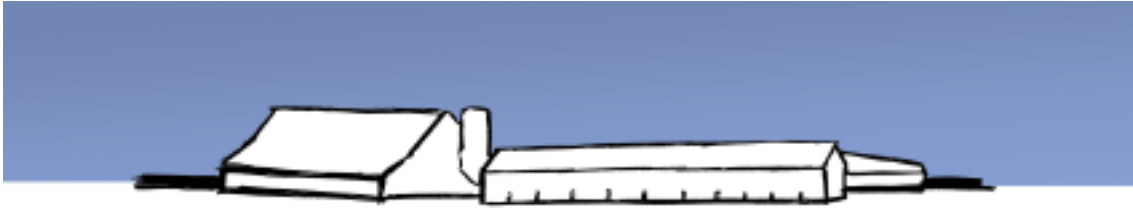
for a man with a forty-hour a week job. But this year, he has so far not seen any Cranes. A Crane-sighting telephone circuit has been organized. One of the more fortunate of the Eindhoven birdwatchers, whose job at DAF Motors vanished with the company's ultimate bankruptcy, has plenty of time to wander through the nature reserves. One day, he sees a Demoiselle Crane in the Strabrecht heath. This is most exceptional, for this bird is far scarcer than the ordinary Crane. There is great excitement in the birdwatchers' working group. The Philips employees try to get a day off. But this time, a few days later, it has to be concluded that the sighting was of an exotic, privately owned bird that had escaped captivity. Fiddlesticks. The birdwatchers who had undertaken the trek across the heath felt like fools. It is no longer of any significance whatsoever to have seen the bird. It is an infection of the precious retina.

For the birdwatcher, the concept of beauty is every bit as senseless as it is within the visual arts. Pretty birds are kept in aviaries.

The two Demoiselle Cranes, the one imagined to be wild and the escaped tame one, are every bit as identical as the paintings selected by Danto. There are, in fact, no differences in intent underlying the different meanings. With no intended meaning whatsoever, it flew the Demoiselle Crane. It had escaped its man-made home with no intended meaning underlying its act. But just like the paintings, it underwent a complete change of form – with no alteration of its outward appearance.

I wonder if that Demoiselle Crane, without really wanting to, might really have an intended meaning of its own. The intention lies with us, we who make the distinction between tame and wild specimens. What it seems to be about is that the image produced by the sighting of a bird has as little connection to humanity and human intent as possible. This is the reason we hike out in the field. The wilder and more unspoilt the area the better. But the preference is strictly reserved for people. These are the same people who domesticated the Demoiselle Crane, and who later let it escape. And who made its appearance worthless to the birdwatcher.

Sometimes I ask myself to what extent birdwatching is in fact an experience of nature. What am I actually doing when I wander through a nature reserve laden with my binoculars? What am I looking for? The beauty of the image of the bird seems to be an intrinsic one. It seems to lie outside myself, and this is precisely what makes it so valuable. But I have imagined that beauty, and yet I did not create that nature. In the end, I am not the one who decides what it is that I get to see. Every time, I have to wait and see what is going to happen to fly in. This is something quite different from watching television, where, having read the guide, I know what I will be seeing. Programmes are broadcast with the intent of being



watched, and at a predetermined time, so that I can easily find them. But while I watch, I can adopt the attitude of the birdwatcher in the field, hoping for an unexpected observation that no one else has seen before. Then there are two possibilities. Either the gem has been hidden away in the programme by the director, or it can have a coincidental meaning, one that I have given it. I will never know for sure.

Here, I stumble back against the fundamental difference between word and image. Every word has been sent into the world with an intended, human meaning. A word without intended meaning does not exist. It is an exclamation, or a noise that happens to sound like a word (Peewiiiiit, Peewiiiiit, Cuckooooo, Cuckooooo). In the case of images, it is all rather more complex. The images seem to fall into two extremes. There are those that have been sent into the world with a specific intention, such as traffic signs, MTV video clips, the modernist design of a Rietveld chair... These are consciously created bearers of meaning. Then there are the images that pass by, entirely free of any burden of intended significance (flying) and whose value is determined exclusively by the viewer. In between the two extremes are the wondrous mixtures of the two, such as buildings, rubbish heaps, a piece of plastic that has found its way into a Coot's nest, with the logo from an expensive department store still just discernable. What percent of intended meaning is in an image like this and what percent is nature? How much intention and how much coincidence? Where is the boundary between meaning that has been inserted in advance and meaning that is applied afterwards?

The beauty of image is the uncertainty, the incompleteness. I never know what I see. I never know when or if I have finished looking. Visual language is a language I never entirely master. When I was still reading too much, it made me irritable. I felt shut out, had grown unaccustomed to this incomprehensibility. It is then that reading is the arch-enemy of looking. As a peanut-butter jar reader, I had no interest in images. They didn't have enough head or tail attached.

If I hear three sentences spoken simultaneously, they are no longer comprehensible. Then language has become noise. If I see three images



simultaneously – a chair, a painting and a vase with flowers, it remains image. No problem. Language is a line. Image is a plane. Language is the route. Image is the map.

Try to experience landscape without drawing out a route. That is visual culture. The plethora of guidebooks and predetermined walking routes is also an excrescence of the culture of language, of visual illiteracy.

You can run aground in a text, lose your way. You can never lose your way in an image. For me, looking will never again be allowed to be overwhelmed by mastery of language, for the simultaneity of various images and the simultaneity of different meanings in a single image would be strangled by the linear structure of the language.

The amusing thing is that in order to see images, I still have to make use of language: an image is only visible if I have a name and a story to associate with it. Whether I enjoy that image or am repulsed by it is determined by that name and that story. Neither the name nor the story is absolute. Every time I see an image, the story that lurks behind the name is adapted and the meaning altered. This applies not only to the various kinds of birds, but it applies to everything around me. I only see what I have learned to see, and what I see changes every time I see it. My vocabulary is limited, but it does change all the time. The question is, of course, how aware of it I am. My capacity to comprehend is simply too limited to let all that visual information sink in. It is too much. Image is always there and is omnipresent. It comes from outside us. Unstoppable, rampant and in humungous quantities.

Seeing much could be a virtue. Seeing more could be an achievement. For this, I have joined in with the birdwatchers, with people always looking for a way to see more. Always afraid that someone has beaten us to it. A seeing competition.

Every year in Holland and Dutch-speaking Belgium, a National Dictation is held, which the person with the fewest spelling mistakes wins. It is time for a National Image contest...