

Michael Baxandall

Art and Visual Attention



Born 1933 in Cardiff, UK. Studied literature at the Universities of Cambridge and Pavia (Italy), and art history at the University of München and the Warburg Institute, University of London. 1973 — 88, Reader, then Professor in the History of the Classical Tradition at the Warburg Institute. Since 1985, Professor of the History of Art, University of California at Berkeley. Books: *Giotto and the Orators* (1971), *Painting and Experience in 15th-Century Italy* (1972), *The Limewood Sculptors of Renaissance Germany* (1980), *Patterns of Intention* (1985). — Address: Department of History, University of California, Berkeley, CA 94720, USA

At the beginning of the year I arrived with the intention of working on three topics. First, my colleague Svetlana Alpers and I wanted to complete a book we had in rough draft on the eighteenth-century painter Tiepolo. Second, developing out of this, I wanted to read and think about the disintegration in the later eighteenth century of the European sense of the moral and social value of pure virtuosity in a craft. Third, I wanted to do heavy reading for a long-term project on visual attention, in which modern and eighteenth-century conceptions are set in contrast; the eighteenth-century reading had mainly been done, but the modern had not. This third project was the most active because it was continuous with a book I had finished in that previous summer on shadows and our perception of shadow — one of the problems of shadows being that we do not usually attend to them, as shadows.

Partly because I was coming from just finishing a book, I intended to spend my year at the Wissenschaftskolleg reading rather than writing; never having had a sabbatical year before, I did not realise how difficult it is to spend a long time in sustained intake, without organising the product in the mind by writing about it. In fact, it turned out I had lost both the skill and the self-confidence to do nothing but autonomous study: I could no longer order new knowledge and my thoughts about it without drafting texts as I went along, and the result was that I wrote more than I had intended during the year. Initially this took the deviant hobby form of resuming occasional work on a novel I have been desultorily writing for some years. That was triggered by political events in the autumn that

happened to have a resonance with the novel's mood. But a computer crash soon signalled that this was not the thing.

Instead, I wrote a rather compacted paper out of the first phase of my new reading on visual attention, a paper called "Fixation and Distraction", which I now realise is the first third of the book on attention that has shaped itself during the year. The paper deals with the implications, for our perception of paintings and other complex things, of a set of quite primitive facts about the earliest stages of vision — the anatomy and motor dispositions of the eye, pre-processing of optical stimulations by retinal cells, the dialectic between purposeful and involuntary fixation, the different competences of central and peripheral vision, and the early integration of successive fixations into a first representation of a scene.

This work was enabled by the resourcefulness of the Kolleg Librarians — the fact that one need hardly say this does not mean one should not say it — and also by the presence of the two scientific groups, the evolutionary biological group and the chaos people. They would not appreciate this, but one of my preoccupations during the year was how far a non-scientist like myself can and, almost more important, cannot have access for his own purposes to the product of the scientific discourses in areas that concern him: in my case, the visual cognitive sciences. I learned from the Kolleg scientists about the differences between and within individual sciences — I shall never talk about "science" again — and about where my interests, assumptions and procedures are compatible and incompatible with theirs. I also got more direct input: James Griesemer and Eörs Szathmáry, in particular, gave me ideas and readings that fundamentally changed my thinking about attention and what I could do about it.

The writing about my second project — on the lost sense of the social morality of craft virtuosity — took a different form. Svetlana Alpers and I had agreed not to turn to our Tiepolo book until May, in case it expanded itself again and consumed too much of the year. When we did so, my remaining writing responsibility was to do a conclusion to the book. This turned out as an account of Tiepolo as what the Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci called an "organic intellectual": that is, someone who articulates the consciousness of a newly hegemonic class. Tiepolo appears as a pictorial intellectual who gives pictorial expression to the consciousness and intellectual procedures of a class we call the "provincial technicians". It is best to admit that the emphasis of this account is, again, coloured by the complicated political atmosphere of the year and by a couple of re-visits to eastern Europe. In any event, some of the second project is now folded into the book on Tiepolo. Rather to our surprise, after years of on-and-off work, this book was finished by mid-July.