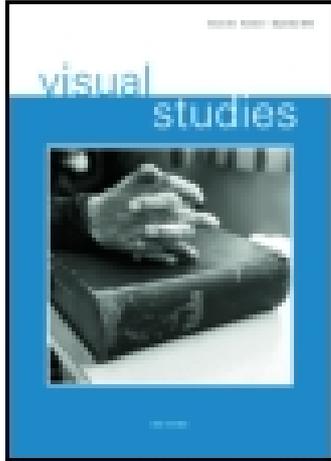


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Tim Ingold

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Ways of mind-walking: reading, writing, painting

TIM INGOLD

What is the difference between walking on the ground, in the landscapes of 'real life', and walking in the imagination, as in reading, writing, painting or listening to music? What does it mean to describe these various practices of walking as either visual or non-visual? In this article, the author approaches these questions through a comparison of answers gleaned from four sources: the monastic practices of early medieval Europe; the painting tradition of the Yolngu, an Aboriginal people of northeast Arnhem Land, Australia; the writings of the great pioneer of modern abstract art, Wassily Kandinsky; and a treatise by the tenth-century Chinese landscape painter Ching Hao. He concludes that the terrains of the imagination and the physical environment, far from existing on distinct ontological levels, run into one another to the extent of being barely distinguishable. Both, however, are inhabited by forms that give outward, sensible shape to an inner generative impulse that is life itself.

QUESTIONS OF WALKING AND SEEING

In her history of walking, *Wanderlust*, Rebecca Solnit compares writing to path-making, and reading to travelling. 'To write,' she suggests, 'is to carve a new path through the terrain of the imagination . . . To read is to travel through that terrain with the author as guide' (Solnit 2001, 72). Clearly, both carving paths and guided travel entail the exercise of eyesight. As they proceed on their way, both the path-breaker and the traveller must watch their step and look where they are going, the former to lay the trail, the latter to keep their footing while monitoring features of the terrain as they are pointed out. But what of the writer and reader? If Solnit's analogy holds, then writing and reading, too, should be visual practices. The inquiry that follows, and which is still far from complete, is prompted in part by my puzzlement concerning the inclination of many visual anthropologists, and indeed students of visual culture more generally, to describe the written text as a *non-visual* medium, by contrast to the medium of the image. To cite just two examples: in his introduction to visual methods in social research, Marcus Banks assures his

novice readers that the materials of visual research are images of various kinds that are made to be looked at, and that it is precisely in looking at these images that people engage in visual practices (Banks 2001). Irit Rogoff, to the contrary, maintains that the study of 'visual culture' is by no means limited to images, but also encompasses sounds, spatial delineations, and much else besides. Yet in the same breath, she equates what is specifically *visual* in visual culture with the concern with images. To the extent that visual culture studies encompass more than images, they go beyond vision itself (Rogoff 2002, 24).

For these authors, it seems, vision has nothing to do with eyesight and everything to do with the perusal of images. Thus: no images, no vision. What goes on, then, when we walk? In watching our step, we train our eyes on the ground, not on a virtual simulation of the earth's surface based on optical information already relayed to the eyes. In looking where we are going, we scan the horizons of the world around us, and not their imagistic or pictorial representations. Indeed, a pedestrian overly engrossed in the perusal of images is most likely to trip or go astray. Are we to conclude that walking, to the extent that it does *not* depend on the enrolment of images, is not really a visual practice after all? Or is some distinction to be made between the observational acuity of eyesight in watching and looking, and the interpretative visuality of seeing? It might be suggested, for example, that the pedestrian certainly watches and looks, but only *sees* when the results of this watching and looking, somehow fixed in the forms of images, are subjected to a subsequent process of interpretation. This seems to be what James Elkins has in mind when he argues that we are all blind to a degree – even when our eyesight is functioning perfectly – because so much of what passes before our eyes yields up no images that can be called to mind. What is not fixed as a 'final image', Elkins claims, we have simply failed to see (Elkins 1996, 203–24). The cautious pedestrian looks left, right and left again before crossing the road, but having no recollection of what they looked like, he did not see the cars that would otherwise have run him down!

Tim Ingold is Professor of Social Anthropology and Head of the School of Social Science at the University of Aberdeen. He has carried out ethnographic fieldwork among Saami and Finnish people in Lapland, and has written extensively on comparative questions of environment, technology and social organisation in the circumpolar North, as well as on evolutionary theory in anthropology, biology and history, the role of animals in human society, and issues in human ecology. His more recent research deals with aspects of skill and environmental perception. He is currently writing and teaching on the comparative anthropology of the line, and on issues on the interface between anthropology, archaeology, art and architecture.

Once we return from walking to reading, further questions arise. For Solnit, readers and writers walk in the terrain of the imagination. What is the difference, then, between the watching and the looking that go on as one walks, respectively, in the terrain of the imagination and in that of real life? Can these terrains even be distinguished at all? If, on the one hand, and as Elkins has it, the imagination 'is a place inhabited by images' (1996, 224), then perhaps reading and writing engage with images in a way that walking normally does not. But in that case, it seems all the more peculiar that students of visual culture should oppose reading and writing to practices that are properly visual. On the other hand, the letters and words inscribed on the page of a manuscript have just as much of a material presence as do footprints and tracks impressed on the ground, and both prompt the question of the relation between the observation of marks and traces inscribed or impressed in surfaces in the world and the imagining that is carried on, as it were, on the hither side of eyesight, 'in the mind'. Reading and writing surely involve the exercise of both eye and mind, and the same must be true of walking. Is it possible, then, to find a way of describing the imaginative activity that goes on as one walks, reads or writes, without having to suppose that it involves the perusal of images? Perhaps it is the very notion of the image that has to be rethought, away from the idea that images represent, on another plane, the forms of things in the world to the idea that they are place-holders for these things, which travellers watch out for, and from which they take their direction. Could it be that images do not stand for things, but rather help you find them?

These general questions can of course be asked of the imaginative work not only of walking, writing and reading but also of such activities as drawing and painting and of the ways of seeing they entail on the part of viewers. Should the drawing or painting be understood as a final image to be inspected and interpreted, as is conventional in studies of visual culture, or should we rather think of it as a node in a matrix of trails to be followed by observant eyes? Are drawings or paintings *of* things in the world, or are they *like* things in the world, in the sense that we have to find our ways through and among them, inhabiting them as we do the world itself? I do not pretend that there are final, correct answers to any of these questions. To an anthropologist like myself, however, the way to approach such intractable problems is through a comparative analysis of the answers that people of radically different provenance have come up with. In what follows I shall explore four such sources. The first lies in the Christian monastic practices of early medieval Europe, the second

in the painting tradition of the Yolngu, an Aboriginal people of northeast Arnhem Land, Australia, the third in the work of the great pioneer of modern abstract art, Wassily Kandinsky, and the fourth in a treatise by the tenth-century Chinese landscape painter Ching Hao. I am the first to admit that my choice of these sources is an accident of circumstances wholly unconnected with the writing of this article. But more often than not, the serendipitous juxtapositions thrown up by such accidents, rather than examples carefully selected to prove a point, yield the most unexpected and fertile insights.

I had been reading about medieval monasticism because of an interest in the crafts of writing and masonry, and had been especially enthralled by the two great books of Mary Carruthers: *The Book of Memory* and *The Craft of Thought* (Carruthers 1990, 1998). This put me in mind of my much earlier reading on Australian Aboriginal art, at a time when I was principally interested in how the differences between ontologies of animism and totemism were reflected in ways of depicting (Ingold 2000, 111-31). The monks of medieval Europe were neither animists nor totemists, yet it struck me that in the way they enrolled both manuscripts and landscapes in their perambulatory meditations on the presence of God, there were great similarities with Australian Aboriginal meditations on the Dreaming, which likewise enrol both landscapes and paintings in similarly ambulatory endeavours. These meditations are grounded in a fundamental division between 'inside' and 'outside' forms of knowledge, a division that is also prominent in Kandinsky's reflections on the nature of art. A recent opportunity to visit a major exhibition of Kandinsky's paintings at the Pompidou Centre in Paris revived my interest in his art, which I had always loved without ever asking myself why. Hoping for some insight into the matter, I purchased a book on Kandinsky by the French philosopher Michel Henry, on sale at the exhibition (Henry 2009), and read it alongside the two-volume collection of Kandinsky's own writings (Kandinsky 1982). These writings include his most famous essay, *Point and Line to Plane*, which I had previously read while researching for my own book on the history of the line (Ingold 2007). But now I found more inspiration in his earlier essay, *On the Spiritual in Art*.

Through my work on lines I had become interested in the graphic arts of ancient China, and on a visit to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York a couple of years ago, I happened to pick up a book of texts by Chinese painter-critics from the Han through to the

Ch'ing dynasties, originally compiled by the Swedish sinologist Osvald Sirén. Ever since I bought it, the book had lain unopened on my shelf, until I chanced to come across it one day and it literally fell open at the pages devoted to Ching Hao, whose *Notes on Brush-work* are reproduced as Appendix IV of the book (Sirén 2005, 234-8). And it was an observation by Ching Hao, in these notes, that held the key to the grail I was looking for, around which all four sources seemed to converge. This is that the mental and the material, or the terrains of the imagination and the physical environment, run into one another to the extent of being barely distinguishable. They are like countries whose borders are thrown wide open to two-way traffic which, in passing from one country to the other, has to cross no ontological barrier. Such free passage is an offence to modern thought, which insists that what it calls 'figments' of the imagination can have no truck with the world of our corporeal existence. What links medieval monasticism, Australian Aboriginal Dreaming, Kandinsky's spiritualism and Ching Hao's painterly aesthetic, to the contrary, is the premise that the phenomenal world itself, to use Carruthers' term, is 'figmented' (Carruthers 1998, 187). Whether encountered through a written text, a painting or drawing, or a walk in the landscape, or interchangeably in all these ways, every figment has as good a right to exist as any other. This is not all, however, for our sources converge on a still more fundamental insight – namely, that these figments are but outward, sensible forms that give shape to the inner generative impulse that is life itself.

WALKING THROUGH THE SCRIPTURES

There is nothing new in Solnit's idea of reading and writing as modalities of travel. This is precisely what the monastic practitioners of medieval times thought they were doing. They regarded themselves as wayfarers, travelling in their minds from place to place, and composing their thoughts as they went along by drawing on, or 'pulling in', ideas lodged in places previously visited. The word in Latin for this drawing on or pulling was *tractare*, from which is derived the English 'treatise', in the sense of a written composition. And the flow of the thinking mind, as it proceeded along the trails of the written text, was known as its *ductus*. Like water in an aqueduct, thought flows from a source towards a goal. But while the flow is irreversible (the current cannot be contrived to run backwards), it is by no means uniform. It is rather divided – literally punctuated, by pricking the surface of the parchment – into passages of different mood and colour. In a treatise entitled *On Affliction and*

Reading, the twelfth-century Benedictine Peter of Celle advises readers of the scriptures to proceed as though walking through a landscape, and draws attention to significant sites along the way, the events that happened there, and the vistas they afford, almost as though he were presenting a guidebook. One's mood, he tells us, should always be responsive to these events and panoramas: now light-stepped and joyous; now more ponderous, with a heavy and grieving heart. Thus the reader, 'seeing' his reading as he 'walks' through it, 'is constantly in motion, all senses continually in play, slowing down and speeding up, like a craftsman using his various instruments' (Carruthers 1998, 109-10).

But if one could walk through the scripture as a landscape, so conversely, as typically in the liturgical procession or pilgrimage, one could walk through a landscape as scripture. In this, the physical activity, according to Carruthers, 'exactly mirrors the mental activity in which the participants were engaged' (1998, 44). For the wayfarer in the landscape, as in the scriptural text, particular sites marked by recognisable features would serve as place-holders for biblical characters and stories (for the characters, in effect, *were* their stories). By visiting these sites one would recall the stories and meet the characters as though they were alive and present, harnessing their wisdom and powers to the task of crafting one's own thought and experience, and of giving it sense and direction. Not only were text and landscape ontologically equivalent in this regard, so too were both to buildings, which were also designed and constructed, quite deliberately, as instruments of meditation (Carruthers 1998, 254-61). In the building, every stair, arch or cloister – like every feature of the landscape or every word of text – offered a depository for thought. The controlled, manual movements – the *ductus* – of the scribe as he paints letters or figures on the page have their precise counterparts in the purposeful movement through a devotional building expressly designed to channel and focus the restless churning of the human mind (Carruthers 1998, 258). The building, however, need not have been built, and many medieval buildings were not, existing only as plans, diagrams or architectural *picturae* that, in themselves, laid down routes and trails for meditative composition. Far from taking in the entire picture at a glance, as we moderns are inclined to do, the viewer was required to move around in it – to perform a 'mnemotechnical perambulation about the picture space' (Carruthers 1998, 251, 354 fn. 77) – just as one would move around in an actual building.

The architectural picture was an instance of what medieval thinkers took to be a map (*mappa*). Crucially,

however, the map was arrived at not by any process of observation and measurement, but through a visionary experience of revelation. Rather than surveying the opaque, outer surfaces of the world, the visionary – in whose eyes these surfaces were rendered transparent – would see *into* it, whereupon was revealed to his mind an inner reality of which the world's outward, visible forms were but appearances. One rendering of this all-encompassing vision was the *mappamundi*, or world-map. Far from being the crude effort at cartographic representation that we take it for today, the *mappamundi* was a model *for* (not *of*) the phenomenal world, the purpose of which was not so much descriptive as prescriptive: to establish a foundational template for the ordered disposition of figurative elements – images, if you will – that marked out places along ways of thought, and that could be actualised just as well in the forms of depictions, landscape features or the components of buildings as they could in words. Conventionally, the capacity of words to evoke images has been known as *ekphrasis*, a term derived from the rhetoric of classical Greece. But as Carruthers shows, for medieval rhetoricians, buildings and landscapes as well as texts could summon up the structures for inventive meditation: they, too, offered varieties of *ekphrasis* (Carruthers 1998, 222-3). How, then, did they do this? For an answer, we can turn to the writings of Richart de Fournival, canon of Amiens cathedral in the mid-thirteenth century and author of a popular bestiary, *Li Bestiaires d'Amours*.

In the preface to this work, Richart explained that knowledge can enter the human soul by way of two gates, of sight and hearing, through each of which passes a road. These roads were *painture* and *parole*, painting and speech. With more than seventy drawings of animals, Richart's bestiary was a compendium of words and pictures. But the distinctions, on the one hand, between painting and speech, and on the other, between picturing and writing, are not congruent. Rather, they crosscut. When writing was read aloud, as it often was in the Middle Ages, it was apprehended acoustically in the sounds of speech: the task of the readers and audiences was then to listen to the 'voices of the pages' (Carruthers 1990, 169-70). These voices entered the mind along the road of *parole*, through the gate of hearing. However the letters of writing only exist because they have been painted (or drawn) on the page. Indeed, as Carruthers notes (1990, 225), the scribe who wrote out the letters was often identified as the 'painter' of the manuscript. And when writing was read in silence it would enter the mind along the other road, of *painture*, through the gate of sight. Moreover, written words, even if read aloud as

parole, paint pictures in the listener's mind – pictures that, according to Richart, are seen with the mind's eye. Thus writing both paints and is painted, and both speaks and is spoken. Conversely, pictures are painted on the page just as letters are and, entering through the gate of sight, they paint themselves in the minds of viewer-readers. But pictures also speak and are spoken, they have *parole*. In many texts their speech is actually written out, in the form of scrolls shown issuing from a figure's mouth, rather as in contemporary cartoons (Carruthers 1990, 229-30).

Medieval writers, in short, did not subscribe to the modern ontological distinction between words and pictures, or between text and image (Carruthers 1998, 212-13). In their manuscripts, pictures and words were strictly equivalent and even interchangeable. Pictures were no more 'visual' than words; words no less so than pictures. Both were accessed through the twin gates of sight and hearing, along the roads of painting and speech. There was nothing incongruous, then, about the juxtaposition, on the pages of the bestiary, of what look to us like fanciful depictions alongside a miscellany of allegorical stories in which the depicted creatures feature in a variety of morally charged situations. Medieval bestiaries, as Willene Clark has stressed, have to be understood 'as spiritual literature, not as degraded natural history' (Clark 2006, 7). The scenes and stories they presented furnished the mind with images that provided sense and direction to currents of experience. To these scenes and stories, moreover, were added sightings of the creatures themselves, and observations of their behaviour, in contexts of everyday life such as agriculture and hunting. 'The animal' was, in effect, a node or knot in a skein of interwoven depictions, stories, sightings and observations, no one of which was ontologically prior to any other, and all of which – taken together – opened up pathways to the experience of God. Thus the traveller in the landscape, meeting with 'real life' creatures on his way, encountered them through the gates of sight and hearing just as he would on the pages of the bestiary, where they figured in writing and depiction. How, then, does reading differ from walking in the landscape? Not at all. To walk is to journey in the mind as much as on the land: it is a deeply meditative practice. And to read is to journey on the page as much as in the mind. Far from being rigidly partitioned, there is constant traffic between these terrains, respectively mental and material, through the gateways of the senses.

WALKING THROUGH THE DREAMING

Let me turn, now, to the Yolngu of northeast Arnhem Land. The Yolngu have no tradition of writing as such,

but they do paint, primarily on the surfaces of bark, but also on human bodies. Their ethnographer, Howard Morphy, distinguishes between two kinds – or rather levels – of painting, respectively ‘figurative’ and ‘geometric’ (Morphy 1991, 150). Figurative painting is unmistakably iconic, including forms that are readily recognisable as human beings, animals of various sorts, equipment such as spears and digging sticks, and surface features such as trees and rocks. The painting invariably tells a story of how ancestral beings, in the era of world formation known as the Dreaming, made their way from place to place, creating the country as they went along, and peopling it with the clans that would inhabit each respective place. One would ‘read’ the painting as a story, moving around the picture space as the events of the narrative unfold. Indeed, Yolngu people would inhabit their paintings much as the monastic practitioners of medieval Europe would inhabit the scriptures, walking in their minds the original, creative walk of the ancestors and, in so doing, bringing it forward into the present so as to give sense and direction to their own lives (Morphy 1991, 114). Similarly, just as in the case of the medieval text, painting was a way of walking and walking a way of painting. Travelling from place to place, one finds in each place, and recalls to memory, particular ancestral beings and their stories (and as with biblical characters, the ancestral beings *are* their stories).

There is a difference, however. One can turn the pages of a manuscript and read something new on each page. Likewise, every Yolngu figurative painting exists as one of a set, telling in its own way some aspect of the story connected with the country, and the novice, as he is introduced to one painting after another in the set, draws on what he has learned from each in ‘reading’ the next (Morphy 1991, 217). But if the set of paintings were compared to a book, then it would be one whose leaves, as they are superimposed, fold in upon one another. As they do, the figurative diacritica that mark each character as appropriate to a particular reading are absorbed into an underlying generative schema or template from which all are ultimately derived. Paintings of the kind that Morphy calls ‘geometric’ depict this template. Thus the geometric painting is like a book, the pages of which have folded or melded into one. Such a painting can be pondered again and again, and read differently each time. The designation ‘geometric’ is appropriate for paintings of this kind, in so far as to the untutored eye they appear abstract, as devoid of significant content as a mathematical design. What could be more abstract, for example, than an oblong shape with a straight line down the middle? Yet initiated Yolngu would ask: what could be more dense? It can be read in so many ways. In one

reading, the oblong is the boulders the kangaroo hopped over when it was chased by the ancestral woman Ganydjälala into rocky country; in another it is the body of the kangaroo itself (with the dividing line as the backbone); and in yet another – referring to the kangaroo’s invention of stone spearheads – it is the blocks of stone, split asunder down the mid-line, from which fragments were struck in the manufacture of spears (Morphy 1991, 191-3, 207).

Thus, in the motif of the divided oblong, land, animal and artefact are forged into a unity that resembles none of them but underwrites them all. It is not that the motif has too little content. It has rather too much – more, at least, than can be grasped all at once. For this reason, the novice who would enrol the paintings in his meditative quest for ancestral knowledge and wisdom has to undergo a lengthy induction, starting from the relatively superficial, *outside* knowledge enshrined in the figurative paintings, and gradually working his way down towards the more fundamental, *inside* knowledge of the kind that is concentrated in the geometric art. For Yolngu people, everything has an inside and an outside, though these are relative terms, since what is on the inside of more superficial forms remains on the outside of things that are more deep-seated (Morphy 1991, 78-80). The progressive infolding of outward appearances into inner necessities, in the course of a novice’s induction, concentrates the powers of multiple readings of the phenomenal world into a unitary attention that strains ever deeper, striving to know a reality more real than that which can be gleaned from the surface of things. It is a progression that condenses, into geometric forms, knowledge that is revealed only piecemeal, one slice at a time, in the figurative depictions. In essence, inside knowledge consists in an understanding of the underlying unity and coherence of different orders of experience. That unity lies in the Dreaming. The paradox of Yolngu art, as Morphy shows, is that while on the one hand, the significance of figurative designs is relatively transparent, whereas that of geometric designs is obscure, on the other hand the geometric designs render transparent the fundamental ordering of things that is obscured, in figurative painting, by its exclusive concentration on one thing rather than another (Morphy 1991, 296).

Morphy’s analysis of Yolngu art is somewhat hamstrung by his unwavering commitment to a Saussurian semiotics according to which paintings are systems of signs whose meanings lie in the minds of knowledgeable elders as a set of shared understandings or ‘intersubjective cultural structures’ (Morphy 1991,

143-4, 292). These meanings, Morphy repeatedly insists, are *encoded* in the paintings, which serve primarily as vehicles for the transmission of ancestral knowledge from elders to novices, thereby ensuring its reproduction across generations. The effect of this logic, however, is to turn the relation between art and its meaning inside out. It is to say that meaning, rather than being immanent in the art, is something external that has been implanted into it and that can – by a reverse process of decoding – be extracted from it. Yet the Yolngu themselves, by Morphy's own account, are saying the very opposite – namely, that paintings do not encode but reveal. So far as they are concerned, he admits, paintings *are* the beings of the ancestral past, brought forward and disclosed in the present (Morphy 1991, 102, 292). Everything stems from this past, just as every surface form arises from what is already there on the inside. Yet painting is only one of many ways in which ancestral beings can reveal themselves, or make their presence felt. Consider, for example, the crocodile ancestor, who was burned when his bark hut caught fire and dived into the sea to quench the flames. Still burning beneath the waves, the fire scarred the crocodile's back with scales. In painting, he is revealed in the patterns of diamonds distinctive to the designs of the clans that have sprung from him. He may reveal himself in similar patterns of ripples on the surface of the water. But he – that is, his story – may just as well show up in the scaly pattern on the back of the living crocodile (Morphy 1991, 176-7).

Indeed, there is a remarkable parallel between the ways in which the Dreaming is rendered manifest to Yolngu initiates through paintings, stories and experiences of living creatures, and the ways in which the hand of God was similarly revealed to the readers of medieval bestiaries. The archetypal beings of their world, too, showed up as clusters of depictions, narratives and direct observations. In Yolngu as in medieval monastic lore, the being *is* the entwining of its manifestations, which together reveal its inner essence, and the appearance of the living animal as a creature of nature is just one of these manifestations, ontologically equivalent to its figurative depictions and the stories that are told about it. Moreover, this equivalence, as we have already seen, extends to the relations between paintings and landscape. In earlier work, I took exception to Morphy's characterisation of the painting as a *map* of the landscape (Morphy 1991, 221-5). While there is certainly a correspondence between the form of the painting and the morphology of the landscape, I argued, 'it would not be right to suppose that the one *represents* the other. Rather, both landscape and painting exist on the same ontological level, as alternative ways in which an

underlying ancestral order is revealed to human experience' (Ingold 2000, 118). In hindsight, however, and in the light of what we have learned of medieval monastic practice, I would be prepared to accept that Yolngu paintings are maps, but only on condition that the map is understood in its original, pre-cartographic sense – that is, as an instrument for revealing the inner reality of the world, and not as a representation of its outer surface. For the Yolngu, as Morphy acknowledges, both the landscape as it is outwardly observed and the corresponding figurative paintings have their source in the same basic template (Morphy 1991, 237). As a depiction of this template, the geometric painting is the precise counterpart of the medieval *mappamundi* and serves the same purpose – namely, to summon up the themes of meditative recollection. Far from reflecting, on the level of mind, an objectively given reality, and thus reinforcing the division between the mental and the material, both the geometric painting and the *mappa* offer a place where mind and world can merge in forging an inner experience of the unity of life. The same, as I shall now show, can be said of the nominally 'abstract' paintings of Wassily Kandinsky.

WALKING THROUGH AN EXHIBITION

Introducing his essay *On the Spiritual in Art*, Kandinsky presents a captivating parody of pictures at an exhibition:

Imagine a large, very large, small or medium-sized building, divided up into various rooms. All the walls of the rooms are hung with small, large, and medium-sized canvases. Often several thousand canvases. On them, by means of the application of paint, pieces of 'nature' are portrayed: animals in light and shadow, standing at the edge of the water, drinking the water, lying in the grass, next to them a crucifixion of Christ, portrayed by a painter who does not believe in Christ, flowers, human forms sitting, standing, walking, often naked, many naked women (often seen in foreshortening from behind), apples, and silver dishes, a portrait of Privy Counsellor So-and-so, the evening sun, a woman in pink, flying ducks, a portrait of Baroness X, flying geese, a woman in white, calves in shadow dappled with bright yellow sunlight, a portrait of His Excellency Y, a woman in green. All this is carefully printed in a book; names of the artists, titles of the pictures. People holding these books in their hands go from canvas to canvas, leaf through and read the names. And then they leave, just as rich or poor as when they came in,

immediately absorbed again by their own interests, which have nothing whatever to do with art. Why ever did they go? (Kandinsky 1982, 129-30)

They go, presumably, to see the paintings, and so that they can say that they have seen them. They think that artists are people who paint things, anything. And they suppose that once they have ascertained what a painting is *of*, and perhaps the intention of the artist in painting it, then they have seen it. They might perhaps admire the facility with which the subject matter has been rendered by the artist, or even seek to place the work in a social, cultural or historical context. Yet, having accomplished all this, Kandinsky is telling us, they are no closer to experiencing the work of art as a *painting* than they were at the outset (see Henry 2009, 73-4).

To discover what Kandinsky meant by painting, let me turn to another example of an imaginary exhibition. In this case the pictures, including watercolours and drawings, really existed, although most have now been lost. They were produced by the Russian artist and architect Victor Hartmann. It was after Hartmann's premature death in 1873 that his close friend, the composer Modest Mussorgsky, wrote his celebrated suite of pieces for piano, *Pictures at an Exhibition*. Each of the ten pieces refers to one of Hartmann's pictures, which Mussorgsky imagined hanging in a gallery. They are linked by intervening *promenades* that walk the listener musically from picture to picture. Now, for Kandinsky, the music of Mussorgsky spoke directly to what painting really is. It appeals not to outward appearances, whether real or imaginary, but to an inner life – to emotion, feeling and the pulsations of the soul. Consider the piece in the suite entitled 'The Old Castle'. This piece does not pretend to depict the castle in sound – it is not programme music, for which Kandinsky had nothing but contempt (1982, 155). It seeks rather to evoke a feeling comparable to what one might experience in the presence of an ancient ruin set in the landscape. With its slow, monotonous pulse in the lower register of the keyboard, the music of 'The Old Castle' conveys an aura that is grey, heavy and brooding. So too, we may suppose, did Hartmann's painting of the same name. Though ostensibly the painting was *of* the castle, it resonated internally with precisely the same aura as that evoked in the music. But what the composer achieves by means of rhythm and tone, the painter achieves with form and colour. Comparing the painter with the composer-pianist, Kandinsky declares that for the former, '[c]olour is the keyboard. The eye is the hammer. The soul is the piano with its many strings. The

artist is the hand that purposefully sets the soul vibrating by means of this or that key' (Kandinsky 1982, 160).

In 1928, Kandinsky staged Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* at the Friedrich Theatre in Dessau, transforming the ten 'pictures' into sixteen scenes combining music, stage movement, lighting and decoration. His aim in doing so was to render the forms and colours, as he put it, 'that swam before my eyes in listening to the music' (Kandinsky 1982, 750). 'The Old Castle', for example, began in pitch darkness save for three long stripes, which vanish to give way to a large red patch on the right, then a green patch on the left. As the light fades towards the end, only the three original stripes remain visible, and these in turn disappear, quite suddenly, with the final *forte* of the piece. The staging, on Kandinsky's insistence, was unequivocally 'abstract'. This is not to say, however, that it was devoid of content. Quite to the contrary, by 'abstraction', Kandinsky meant the removal from the work of art of all those figurative elements that otherwise imprison it or conceal its true nature from us, and that are incidental to its existence *as* art, so as to release it into the fullness of being. In music, this means removing any sounds that could be construed as imitative or programmatic; in painting, it means casting aside the illusion that to see a painting is to see what it is a painting *of*. If anything is empty of content, it is the image that serves only to represent an external object but that lacks any life of its own. Such an image depends for its existence on the world of objects. But painting, properly speaking, does not. Nor does music. Together, they open the mind to inner truths that are ontologically prior to the outward forms of things. By a principle that Kandinsky called 'inner necessity' (1982, 160), these truths – the 'abstract content' of the work of art – directly touch the soul and set it in motion. This principle corresponds, of course, to what Yolngu people call the Dreaming, and to what medieval monastic thinkers saw as the hand of God.

Like Yolngu painters, Kandinsky continually stressed the distinction between the inside and the outside, between the internal and external aspects of things. He began his essay *Point and Line to Plane* with the enunciation: 'Every phenomenon can be experienced in two ways . . . External – Internal'. One can look at it as if through a pane, or one can plunge into it, become an active part of it, and 'experience its pulsation with all our senses' (Kandinsky 1982, 532). This is the difference between the experience of visitors to the exhibition satirised in Kandinsky's opening parody, who look at one canvas after another but are moved by none, and that of the viewer-listener whose *promenade* is evoked in

Mussorgsky's music. This person, who could have been Mussorgsky himself, is profoundly moved by what he sees. The *promenade* sections of the music render in sound his changing moods as he goes from canvas to canvas: now confident, now hesitant, now mournful, now quivering with anticipation, and finally exultant. He is moved precisely because what he sees are not paintings of things, or images in the modern sense, but things that are painted. And he inhabits these things as he inhabits the world, by moving through and among them, and by participating with his entire being in the generative movement of their formation – that is, in what Michel Henry, in his commentary on Kandinsky's writings, calls 'the becoming of our life' (Henry 2009, 83). Indeed, our walk through the exhibition, as we listen to Mussorgsky's *Pictures*, is not unlike a monastic walk through the scriptures. It relives the history of our feelings, as Henry continues, in 'the eternal movement in the passage from Suffering to Joy' (2009, 122). Recall the advice of Peter of Celle, that readers should be ever responsive in mood to the vistas opened up by letters, words and pictures. On the page of a manuscript, as we have already seen, even the painted letter could be understood as a thing in its own right, with both internal and external aspects. In his commentary on the theory of elements that Kandinsky proposed in his *Point and Line to Plane*, Henry explains why (2009, 34-5).

Take any letter of the alphabet – let us say an 'o'. Ordinarily, the letter designates a phoneme, and serves its purpose in allowing us to distinguish, in both speech and writing, between one word and another. That, we say, is what letters are *for*, and very useful they are too. But what if we set this practical purpose to one side and concentrate our attention on the letter in itself? There it is, a thing with a life of its own, proudly painted on the page. All at once it stands out as a form, one that we had scarcely noticed before, so accustomed had we been to the practicalities of its everyday use. And as a form, it evokes a certain affective tonality, comparable to that evoked by a tonal pattern in music. It has, then, an external and an internal aspect: the pictorial form, which can be seen, and the affective tonality, which can only be inwardly felt. As this example shows, and as Henry points out, the 'external' can be understood in two, quite different senses. On the one hand, it refers to the externality of the world of objects, including tools, letters and words in their ordinary uses. The 'o' to which we are accustomed is external in this sense. On the other hand, it refers to the externality of an element as pure pictorial form, abstracted from any cognitive or practical meaning. Set aside from its regular business in working with words, the 'o' on the page is still visible. It has the

essential qualities of form and colour. Relative to ordinary use, it is internal, but relative to the affect it evokes, it is external. Kandinsky was aware of the ambiguity, and attempted to deal with it through the rather clumsy device of distinguishing between elements and 'elements' (Kandinsky 1982, 548; Henry 2009, 36). The 'element' is simply an object or an image in a world of objects and images. The element, on the other hand, is a visible form that vibrates with inner life. For example, the point, or *punctus*, so long as it functions as the familiar full stop of punctuation, is an 'element'. But the point that stands on its own, 'wrenched free from its habitual state and . . . emancipated from the tyranny of the practical-purposive', has a life of its own, an inner tension, and it is in this capacity – as an element – that it enters the world of painting (Kandinsky 1982, 541-2).

Though cumbersome, this distinction between 'element' and element should not be hard for us to grasp. For it corresponds quite precisely to that between figurative and geometric elements in Morphy's analysis of Yolngu art. Let me clinch the argument with one more example. In 1935, Kandinsky published a charming little essay, of less than a page in length, entitled 'Line and Fish' (Kandinsky 1982, 774-5). In one sense, he tells us, there is no essential difference between a line and a fish. Evidently, what he had in mind was not just any kind of line. He is not, for instance, thinking of the figurative line that would merely imitate or mark the contour of an object (Henry 2009, 53). The sort of line he has in mind embodies the force of its production; it lives and grows. So, of course, does the fish. Their equivalence lies in the fact that they are both living beings, animated by forces internal to them that find expression in trajectories of movement. Thus, the fish may be observed as a line streaking through the water, and the line as a moving point which could assume the guise of a fish. Nevertheless, despite this equivalence, Kandinsky acknowledges that in a more fundamental sense, fish and line are quite different. For the fish, *as a fish*, is a creature of the phenomenal world and depends on this world to exist. It needs an environment. It can swim, but only in a river; it can be cooked and eaten, but only in the kitchen and off a plate. The line, by contrast, lacks the capacities to swim, eat and be eaten. But then, it does not need them. The capacities that are critical to the existence of the fish are superfluous to the existence of the line. And it is for precisely this reason that the line can serve as an abstract element in art, whereas the fish cannot. The fish is destined to remain an 'element' in the outside world of organisms and their environments. 'That is why,' Kandinsky confessed, 'I like the line better than the fish – at least in my painting' (1982, 775).

WALKING THROUGH THE WOODS

Returning, at length, to our original question of the relation between the terrains of the imagination and of 'real life', we can draw two conclusions. First, we must dispense, once and for all, with the convention that the imagination consists in the power to produce images, or to represent things in their absence. It is not, as Henry puts it, about giving us 'decoys to contemplate' (2009, 108). For even if they existed only as pictures in the mind, such decoys would belong – together with the missing things they stand for – in the same outside world of appearances, of 'elements', of programme music, of the figurative. Rather – and this is our second conclusion – we must recognise in the power of the imagination the creative impulse of life itself in continually bringing forth the forms we encounter, whether in art, through reading, writing or painting, or in nature, through walking in the landscape. Remember: the line does not *represent* the fish. But the fish-in-the-water can be understood as but one of many possible emanations of line, of which others would include the words and pictures painted or inscribed upon the surfaces of paper, bark or canvas. Does this not then mean, asks Henry rhetorically, that ultimately, '*the structure of art and the structure of the world are the same?*' (2009, 134, emphasis in original). Turning finally to our last source, the *Notes on Brush-work* of Ching Hao, we find this question answered resoundingly in the affirmative.

One day, Ching Hao recounts, he was walking in the T'ai-hang Mountains when he came upon an opening between two steep cliffs which afforded passage into a place overgrown with old pine trees. One tree stood above the rest, rising to the sky like a dragon, while others were bent around it, their roots coiling and winding in the moss and crumbling stones. The next day, he returned with his brushes to paint the scene. The following spring, as he walked among the cliffs, he chanced to meet an old man, who asked him what he had been doing. Ching Hao explained that he had been painting, but taking his interlocutor for an 'uncouth rustic', he did not expect much by way of a reply. He was therefore taken aback when the ancient challenged him on his knowledge of painting. There are six essentials of painting, said he – namely, spirit, resonance, thoughts, motif, brush and ink. To this, Ching Hao remarked: 'Painting is to make beautiful things, and the important point is to obtain their true likeness, is it not?' The old man answered, 'It is not'. He went on:

Painting is to paint, to estimate the shapes of things and really obtain them, to estimate the beauty of things and reach it, to estimate the reality of things and grasp it. One should not take outward beauty for reality; he who does not understand this mystery, will not obtain the truth, even though his pictures may contain likeness.

What, then, asked Ching Hao, is likeness and what is truth? 'Likeness,' responded the old man, 'can be obtained by shapes without spirit, but when truth is revealed, spirit and substance are both fully expressed' (Sirén 2005, 234-5). I believe that not only the monks of medieval Europe but also the Yolngu elders of northeast Arnhem Land would have agreed with this old man. So, indeed, would have Wassily Kandinsky. And so, on reflection, do I.

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