

OBSERVING A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH

Pedro M. S. Alves

Centre of Philosophy – Department of Philosophy
Faculty of Letters – University of Lisbon

1. Queries

Observing is not so simple a performance as it may seem at first glance.

Is it an activity? Is it a passive stance? Or is it, rather, something in-between?

Is it sense-conferring? Or is it the other way around, where “pure” observation would be a kind of sheer registration without interpretation?

Does it have an unbreakable relationship with interest and attention? Or can we conceive it as a performance which could also be accomplished in a disinterested or inattentive manner?

And what is the motivational basis for adopting it? Is it purely aesthetical, or are there other grounds for it, namely a theoretical interest, or even a kind of self-forgetting, neither aesthetical nor theoretical, which would be a source of pleasure for the ego? And what egoic satisfaction could observing achieve?

Still, what turns out to be the surrounding world as simply observed? Is there a world proper to observation – a kind of “spectacle” (even though not always “spectacular”) world? And is it a world of things or rather a world of seemings?

Further, is the world as observed a matter for belief? Or is it a world wholly dependent on the observing subject, a spectacle of its own, something like a suite of images? And what characterizes subjective life inasmuch as it confines itself to an observing life?

In a word: how can we describe the intentional life of the *ego of observation*, and what can we say about its correlate: the world turned into an

observed world?

2. Observing what and for what?

We have something like a common understanding of observation, which correlates it with its supposed immediate aims.

Usually, or so it seems, we observe in order to know or in order to enjoy.

We adopt, for instance, an observational stance in order to “see” what is going on around us, or when we embark in sophisticated scientific empirical inquiries, where observation ties a close link with apparatus and other technological devices. The place *par excellence* for such refined theoretical observation in our western culture was created by the invention of the laboratory. There, in the lab, we are not simply taking notice of what happens – rather, we are producing and controlling what can happen. The old link between seeing and knowing, coming from the ancient sense of *theoreo*, meaning to attend or to see, is now almost completely overcome. In the age of the lab, knowing always includes interference, and what we get is the result of such an intruding and constructive process. Quantum physics has shown how deep this interference goes, and how naïve the ancient conception of knowledge was, when it thought of knowledge as simply seeing of “what is”. However, as a theoretical stance, observation is always instrumental because observation helps or supports cognizance, but it is never identical to it. In contrast, as an aesthetical attitude, observing is a self-contained, self-finalized performance, because the enjoyment one gets through observation is wholly exhausted by the relationship with the beautiful. Here, in the aesthetical attitude, observation needs no complementary intellectual procedures, as it is the case in the theoretical stance. In the common understanding, we say that we observe *because* there are existing things around us that are worth noting, or *because* there are beautiful things that touch us. Things are the mover that moves our attitude, as the desirable moves desire. Things invite us, so to speak, to adopt an observing stance to them because they are beautiful or worth knowing, or even both.

However, we do not have a clear understanding of what observing is by itself, as a stance we can take when doing one thing or other. We even do not know if observation is a single attitude, which, so to speak, could then be “applied” to the accomplishment of several and not correlated aims, such as cognizance, enjoyment, or others. The first question is not, thus, “what are we observing for?”, but “*what is to observe?*”

When it limits itself to observing, conscious life assumes the form of an

inspecting eye. This is a sound metaphor: the observing ego is something like an eye that looks around, inspects, and remarks what detaches itself from a scene that is prepared in front of him. In order to adopt this metaphor, we do not need to be committed to the idea that this eye does not transform the world around it. There is certainly a correlated rearrangement of the surrounding world when it turns into a simply observed world. And this does not hinder observation; quite the contrary, it makes apparent its most intimate intricacies. So, even when we acknowledge this – and my bet is that we *must* acknowledge this as essential to observation – the metaphor still holds. The observing-I is wholly connected with the idea of an observing-eye.

What is, then, the sense of such I coming to grips with the surrounding world in the form of an inspecting eye?

3. *Concupiscentia oculorum*: the indiscreet eye

The ego which takes an observing stance is an ego that retreats itself from the world. This retirement is not absence. It is another kind of presence, precisely, the presence which first brings about an observed-world for an observing-I. Thus, retreat does not mean here departure. And the presence that this retreat creates is characterized by a step-back maintaining the surrounding world as a theme, while cancelling the vital relationship with it.

I say: “vital relationship”, and not “practical relationship”. The reason is that the second expression is too narrow for an accurate description. Indeed, it is not simply a question of not acting; of an abstention from actively altering the surrounding world. Actually, at its limit, action is not incompatible with the observing stance. We can quite well imagine ourselves actively immersed in the world, and at the same time adopting an observing attitude on ourselves and on the world in which we act. It is a rare event. But who has never suddenly observed him or herself while acting, in a bewildering scission of one’s own self? In a broader sense, we can talk and suddenly observe ourselves talking, feel and observe us feeling, and so on. Phenomenology has enthroned this fortuitous scission of our life into a method: the method of transcendental reflection. Reflecting is not remembering. The latter goes to the past. The former is the systematic endeavor to catch ourselves in the very accomplishment of our actual life. As Eugen Fink puts it in a famous article, the theory of phenomenological reduction is committed to the assumption of a triple I: the mundane I, which is wholly immersed in the world as a part of it, the transcendental I that originally constitutes the world, and the phenomenological I, which observes the deeds of the transcendental I and

describes them in the position of the *unbeteiligter Zuschauer*, of the impartial onlooker.

The common feature to this kind of observation of the surrounding world and of our engagement in it is that it is always done in the I-form. It is my world, my life, my action that I see. I do not break my engagement. The world I observe is a world for me, a world that displays itself from my point of view, and, mostly, a world that concerns me. The vital self-insertion is not broken. The world-sense has always to do with myself. However, cancelling the vital relationship would amount to a seeing that does not include my own life in the observed world. As if there was a spectacle and an onlooker, which would be the pure consciousness of it without relativizing the scene to its point of view. This is the paramount form of observing: the cancelation of the vital connection to the world and the self-constitution of the ego as simple awareness of the things and events *as* observed. In a word: an I that is no more than an eye. Inasmuch as he observes something that is disconnected from its own life, he is what I call an "indiscreet I".

Two features are worth noting.

Firstly, pure observing is never a cold, impassible stance. There is a delight, and even an enchantment proper to it. Observing, purely observing, is a delicious attitude, which finds its own fulfillment in the very accomplishment of itself. Pure observing is neither triggered by the curiosity of knowing, nor by the aesthetical enjoyment of the beautiful. It is beyond both of them. We assume the attitude of a pure observer not for the sake of something, but because there is a unique kind of pleasure immanent to it: the pleasure of living as a pure onlooker that is not vitally concerned with the world he sees. There is here something close to a liberation from all concerns and cares that underlie our vital insertion in the world. The life of the ego is now a kind of overflight that exhausts itself in being the consciousness of what stands before him. This is a weird locus to live, indeed. But it is a delightful liberation from the ponderous seriousness of our engagement in the world.

Secondly, pure observing displays a curious blend of passivity and activity. On the one hand, the looker neither participates, as we pointed out above, nor creates what he sees. He simply acknowledges what is before him. On the other hand, however, the surrounding world *as observed* is not equal to the sheer existence of things around us. The bare existence of something does not turn it into an observed *object*. Acquaintance with things in the world is done by means of their involvement in our vital aims. This thing is recognized as proper to such or such an end, this other thing is taken as good or bad, useful or useless, and so on. Things that exist are encountered

in the horizon of our life. In order to bring them to observed objects, the surrounding world must be converted into a scene or a stage, i.e., into a pure spectacle where things are considered not as they are, but rather as they look. The correlate of observing is not the existing thing, but its appearing. And this capability to convert the world of things into a world of appearances is the hidden activity of observation. The world turned into a spectacle is not independent from the eye that traverses it. So, pure observation constitutes by itself a new dimension never seen before: an appearing-world that exists by the very attitude of observing it.

4. Seeing images

Let us pay attention to what we do when we stare at an image. In fact, seeing an image contains all the elements of pure observation I referred above.

Everyday language is sensitive to an important fact when it describes the apprehension of an image (I'm not referring to what is called a "mental image", but to images detaching from the perceptual field). As a matter of fact, common understanding describes image-apprehension as an act of *seeing*. We say: "I see an image in front of me – it shows a horse and a man". Actually, discerning an image has more to do with perception than imagination, and this relationship is not due to the simple fact that the image appears within the perceptive field. We use such a linguistic description because images are given as public objects in outer intuition, which are accessible to everyone. The horse and the man I see are not phantoms in my mind – they are objects that show themselves in the intersubjective, common world. They are not illusions or private experiences. Indeed, I can always share my opinions and experiences about them with my fellowmen.

Another important fact that transpires in common understanding is that "seeing an image" requires some learning and a particular cognitive ability. Although we see images in the same plane in which we see things, seeing an image, while based on perception, is not an act of simple perception, but has a more complex structure. In certain early stages of infant development, the child does not recognise that the face appearing in the mirror is his own. The same kind of cognitive inability occurs in certain animal species. Aggressive behaviour towards the animal's own mirror image or another animal's image, for instance in fishes, as if they were a rival or an invader, shows that, although images appear in the perceptive field and are rightly categorized, they are not recognized *as* images. It takes a special aptitude to understand them as images and not as appearances of actual things.

How, then, is an image *seen*? The first part of the answer is that there is a threefold intentional direction, whose respective objects are not only apprehended differently but establish very specific relations between themselves. Seeing an image entails, firstly, the perceptive discrimination of an object in the surrounding world, like a block of marble, a picture hanging on the wall, a piece of coloured paper, etc. – all this is a ongoing perceptive apprehension, which posits its object as real and present. At the same time, there is, over and above the perception and using, in full or in part, the same sensitive contents, the apprehension of an object-image: on the block of marble, we see the bust of Napoleon; on the coloured paper, the photograph of our friend John – here is a second element that, arising out of the perception and from the same sensory contents, no longer constitutes its object as a reality, no longer posits it as existing, in interaction with the other objects in the perceptive field, but makes it appear as non-real, as a pure appearance devoid of the weight of the thesis of being. While present, what appears is a pure phenomenon of unreality, because *what* appears there is not John, nor Napoleon, but only their “image”. Thirdly, there is the subject or the original of the image, which is, strictly speaking, what we are primarily directed at when we see an image, be the original of the image a thing in whose existence we believe, like Napoleon or John, be it a character from a fictional world, like Athens or Zeus.

Nevertheless, in order to see an image only the first two elements are essential. There must be a perceptual object apprehended as real, and then a figurative object apprehended as non-real, while present in the surrounding world. As the image appears, it conceals the perceptual object, which turns itself in a mere support that is not thematically seen. However, there is no need of the third element. The image can appear as the image of something real, for instance, of John. In this case, the image points back to the perceptive world, where we can encounter a real person such as John. Though, the image can also lack this reference. What shows itself in the image – for instance a horse, a man, and its surroundings – can be taken as a sheer image-world, with no reference-back to the actual world. In such a case, we have in front of us a scene completely closed in itself. While present, it does not share the spatiality and temporality of the real world. I call it the “image-world”.

The second part of the answer I am sketching is that this image-world displays all the elements of pure observing I stressed before.

Firstly, it is a world for me, but a world without me. In fact, I see the image-world, but I cannot insert my own life there. The here and now of the image-world do not belong to my perceptual orientation. While seen by me,

what I see is not a possible part or a possible surrounding of my own world. Because of that, the scene I observe has neither impact nor connection with my proper life. I am not there, in the image-world. It does not organize itself from my present and from my location, and from what I can reach when progressing from them. In a word, I am not a subject in the image-world. And this is not a deficiency of the image-world. Rather, it is the essential feature of it: precisely what I called above the cancelling of any vital relation.

Secondly, to use the phenomenological jargon, figurative consciousness is certainly a sensible intuitive act. However, there is a clear separating line between perception, recollection, or expectation, on the one hand, and figurative consciousness, on the other. As everyone knows, Husserl's mature analyses amount to separate perception from recollection and expectation as a separation between presenting acts (*Gegenwärtigungen*) and presentifying acts (*Vergegenwärtigungen*), and to oppose them as a whole to figurative consciousness (*Bildbewusstsein*). Husserl's focus is on the way of givenness of objects: bodily present in perception; self-given, while not as present, in recollection and expectation; indirectly given through something else in image-consciousness. In order to account for the differences, my proposal has to do with a new principle of organisation of the phenomenological doctrine of intuitive, sensible acts. Instead of classifying them by the type of givenness of their object, I propose to look first to the type of act from the standpoint of the mode of its egoic accomplishment. There are acts that are self-positing, and there are acts that are self-excluding. I call self-excluding acts those in which the co-representation of the ego as the centre of the experience is not contained in the givenness of the objects. The most immediate case is precisely figurative consciousness. In fact, the image is both an entrance and a barrier: it is only constituted in a seeing, but leaves the ego as a pure ego of observation at its outdoors. As I said, the ego does not belong to the image-world. In contrast, presentifying self-positing acts are all reproductive acts which are based on (i) a *split* between the ego that accomplishes the act of reproduction and the ego that is the subject of the reproduced act, and (ii) a *synthesis of identification* between the reproducing and the reproduced ego. So, every recollection has the form of a *self*-recollection: when I remember something, I remember my former perception of it. And the same holds for expectation: when I foresee something, I produce a possible future perception in which my ego is the reference point of the expected surrounding world – I see *myself* in the future.

Only this division of acts into their modes of egoic accomplishment enables us to clarify the phenomenological description of the forms of givenness. It is therefore apparent that a figurative consciousness and a consciousness

that reproduces another consciousness cannot but constitute non-original givenesses of their respective intentional objects, i.e., presentifications (*Vergegenwärtigungen*), in opposition to perception. But with an important distinction: all self-positing presentifications will, *for that very reason*, be direct givenesses of their object, i.e., self-presentations (*Selbstdarstellungen*) which put its object as real or possible real; in opposition, self-excluding presentifications will, *for that very reason*, be givenesses of their object not as indirectly present (disregarding for now the case of photographs), as Husserl stressed, but rather as directly present and non-real, i.e., as not belonging to my experienced perceptual world. The ego's absence as organizing reference-point of the image-world is the reason why it appears as directly present, but, while present, as unreal: the seen we see cannot be inserted in the perceptual world.

Thirdly, the image-world has no depth or back-side, and exhausts itself in its appearance. Regarding perception, the ego is a center of exploration. It can revolve, see other sides, progress in the inspection of things, revealing always new aspects. However, the image-world is only what it shows and nothing more. There is no real object behind what appears, which we could take as a theme for a closer inspection. Thus, the image-world is no more than its sensible look: what appears is what it is. There is nothing besides what shows itself. In this respect, the image-world is a world entirely fitted to our sensible openness to things. The ego is there convoked as a simple onlooker which takes the image-world from the unique perspective that it allows.

5. Anonymous life

The point which is for me the most crucial will now be easy to understand: the life of the ego as observer is an anonymous life in the form of self-forgetfulness. This form is already present in image seeing. Nevertheless, it was fully developed in certain performing arts such as theatre, and its supreme stage is, I believe, film. By watching movies, the self-forgetfulness of observing reaches its extreme stage as a self-decentred life, as a hetero-life. There, the *onlooker* turns itself into an "*in looker*", so to speak.

Let me briefly summarize. Figurative consciousness constituted over a presenting act involves an *ego of observation*. And this in two converging senses. Firstly, there is only image to the extent that it is seen *as* image. Otherwise it is dissolved in the underlying perceptive object. Secondly, the *ego* that observes *is not within* the world of the image, but is, so to speak, in the stalls as pure spectator. The world of the image is as though "geared" to the

observer. But what is important is that the orientation *to* an observer, which is essential to the object-image, at the same time *excludes* the observer from the world of the image. The world of the image is precisely a world without the life of the observer who constitutes it.

Therefore, typically, the world of the image is experienced by the ego in the form of self-forgetfulness. The observation that opens the world of the image may involve, and does involve most of the time, emotional elements, as when, for example, we are touched by a poignant image, such as the Passion of Christ, or by the sublime creation of Adam in the Sistine Chapel, or any other scene. For the ego all this is, however, an experience in a somewhat impersonal form. The feelings that are really experienced by him are not experienced *as his owns*: the terror he feels is the terror *of* the situation that he sees, the sadness he feels is the sadness *of* the scene that he witnesses and of the character that is before him, etc. Feelings have, here, an almost intersubjective and public dimension: the terror that assaults us in the observation of certain scenes is collectively experienced as inherent to the scene being represented, for example, on the cinema screen. Movies and theatre methodically exploit this capability of the ego to have an impersonal life. Here, egoic life is only the place where the world of the image is opened. For this reason, egoic life unfolds under the remarkable form of *anonymity*. To further delve into the world of the image, to become absorbed in it is, for the ego, to break the thematic relationship with itself and live in the form of self-forgetfulness.

But there is an even more interesting aspect in cinema. The observer tends to link with one or several characters. This is an emphatic connection, which as a remarkable property. It is not a question of simple reproducing the life of an alter-ego. This is the normal form of empathy, which supposes that the ego is living in the I-form. Here, as the ego lives in anonymity, the empathic reproduction amounts to a self-decentred life. The ego lives in the position of the character he adheres to. In so doing, he obtains not only a kind of new life, but also a kind of virtual body, which is invested in the scenes he follows vividly. As a consequence, as I said, the anonymous onlooker turns itself into an "in looker" which has, *as* observer, something like a hetero-life. He lives in the position not of the alter-ego, but in the position of an altered-self.

This mode of life subsequently permits the whole work of restoring the thematic self-consciousness on a higher and richer plane, resulting from the integration of this set of experiences that the ego has assimilated in his anonymous life. As a consequence, the experience of self-decentring enables the incorporation into the ego of experiences it would never have access to, if it only lived in the self-centring of the first-person, or in the social-form of the "we".

This enrichment of the self is, in my opinion, the most interesting feature of cinema, and the reason for its universal success as a form of art.

ABSTRACT

I sketch an analysis of observing as a particular attitude one can take regarding the surrounding world. I stress some particular features of observation, like the cancelling of the vital engagement in the world, and the delight that pure observation involves. Then I move to a description of figurative consciousness and its image-world. In the final part, I try to show how watching movies displays a new type of observation, based on the empathic connection with the characters, the emergence of a virtual body, and a self-decentered life, where the ego is not an onlooker, but something like an "in-looker".