Language and the Scientific Imagination
The 11th International Conference of ISSEI
Language Centre, University of Helsinki (Finland)
28 July – 2 August 2008

Delightful Visibility and its Limits. Joseph Addison on "The Pleasures of the Imagination"

It is undoubtedly his close connection to Cartesianism[1] which leads the French philosopher Nicolas Malebranche at the end of the 17th century to pay little attention to the relevance of the imagination for the realm of the visible. His programme of rationalism with its ambition to marginalize the human faculty of creating images by assigning it to a worthless sense perception renders it almost impossible to recognize the constitutive function of this faculty for visuality in general.

A few decades later, however, things change with the emergence of empiricism and the publication of John Locke's *Essay concerning Human Understanding*, especially with regard to the differentiation between primary and secondary qualities.[2] According to this distinction, qualities like colours, sounds and tastes are not part of the material object itself but constructed in the process of perception. In contrast to primary qualities like extension and figure, which belong directly to the material object, secondary qualities like colours, sounds and tastes emerge from the imagination, proving it to be an important part of perception in general. Concerning these particular notions, it was Locke who gave Joseph Addison the cue for his *Essay on the Pleasures of the Imagination*.[3] As unmistakably announced in the title of his essay, Addison undertakes nothing less than a counter-programme to Malebranche's devaluation of the imagination, turning towards the delights affiliated with this faculty and at the same time attempting to establish a theoretical approach. Unlike other

discourses on the imagination[4], he does not attempt to defend or justify a ‚lesser' human faculty. Rather, his goal is to assign a place to the human ability to create images within aesthetic theory.[5] It is significant and should be regarded as groundbreaking[6] for subsequent theoretical approaches—not least for Romantic poetics—that Addison conceptualizes the imaginative faculty as a decidedly visual operation, premised on Locke's theorem of the two kinds of qualities.

His *Essay on the Pleasures of the Imagination* appeared in the summer of 1712 in *The Spectator*, which he edited together with his friend Richard Steele. Addison begins by immediately emphasizing the sense of sight as the finest of all: "Our sight is the most perfect and most delightful of all our senses. It fills the mind with the largest variety of ideas, converses with its objects at the greatest distance, and continues the longest in action without being tired or satiated with its proper enjoyments."[7] Based on empirical premises, it is sight which most excellently provides the mind with a great variety of ideas. Therefore it is first and foremost this sense which carries out the preliminary work for the imagination in supplying it with material:

> It is this sense which furnishes the imagination with its ideas; so that by the pleasures of the imagination, or fancy, (which I shall use promiscuously), I here mean such as arise from visible objects, either when we have them actually in our view, or when we call up their ideas into our minds by paintings, statues, descriptions, or any the like occasion. We cannot, indeed, have a single image in the fancy that did not make its first entrance through the sight; but we have the power of

> retaining, altering, and compounding those images, which we have once received, into all the varieties of picture and vision that are most agreeable to the imagination; for by this faculty a man in a dungeon is capable of entertaining himself with scenes and landscapes more beautiful than any that can be found in the whole compass of nature.[8]

Opening his considerations thus, preceded only by an enumeration of common definitions of the imagination, Addison unequivocally signals his aim to ascribe positive attributes to the imaginary process. Rather than belabouring the adverse effects of a frail faculty, he argues that the imagination has the potential to excel nature. All at once it is conceivable that the absence of real objects no longer leads inevitably to the delusional presence of imaginary simulacra; in fact, this absence clears the way for an aesthetic experience which lies beyond what nature has to offer. Consequently, the visible world marks only the point of departure from which mental visibility is rendered possible, evolving from the retaining, altering and compounding of visual data and hence resulting in delight. In spite of this dependence on an initial input of material, mental sight proves to be the more powerful. And Addison leaves no doubt that imagination is indeed a way of seeing:

> I must therefore desire him [the reader] to remember, that by the pleasures of the imagination, I mean only such pleasures as arise originally from sight, and that I divide these pleasures into two kinds my design being first of all to discourse of those primary pleasures of

> the imagination, which entirely proceed from such objects as are before our eyes; and in the next place to speak of those secondary pleasures of the imagination which flow from the ideas of visible objects, when the objects are not actually before the eye, but are called up into our memories, or formed into agreeable visions of things that are either absent or fictitious.[9]

Because imagination is fundamentally involved in perception, thereby rendering sight without imagination completely impossible, Addison feels obliged to distinguish between two forms of pleasure concerning sight. The primary and secondary pleasures of the imagination arise from visual qualities to the same extent and only differ from one another with regard to the presence and reality of their objects. The first pleasure of the act of visual perception is therefore already a pleasure of the imagination, for colours are—in terms of Locke[10]—images deriving from our mind and not from the outside world: "It is but opening the eye, and the scene enters. The colours paint themselves on the fancy, with very little attention of thought or application of mind in the beholder."[11] According to Addison the second pleasure of the absent or fictitious visual ideas is not simply a pale variety of the first; it is a much greater pleasure as it can dispose ideas without restriction: "The pleasures of these secondary views of the imagination are of a wider and more universal nature than those it has when joined with sight[.]"[12] Addison discovers the principle of this secondary pleasure in an old acquaintance in the occidental theory of images, the concept of similarity[13]: "Here, therefore, we must inquire after a new principle of pleasure, which is nothing else but the action of the mind, which compares the ideas

that arise from words, with the ideas that arise from the objects themselves[.]"[14] With the relation of similarity, he can link the mental visibility with that of the outside world and gains an explanation that—as he is convinced—can hardly be surpassed. Ultimately the pleasure derived from the secondary view of the imagination is the incentive for the pursuit of knowledge and truth.[15]

A different context of explanation, however, moves him again closer to Malebranche and the concept of animal spirits, albeit with a turn towards a positive evaluation: "Delightful scenes, whether in nature, painting, or poetry, have a kindly influence on the body, as well as the mind, and not only serve to clear and brighten the imagination, but are able to disperse grief and melancholy, and to set the animal spirits in pleasing and agreeable motions."[16] Not only the mind is enlivened in its pursuit of truth, but also the body profits from an active imagination by setting the animal spirits into an agreeable movement. For Malebranche, in the first place there is the danger that the animal spirits flow habitually through the same channels in the brain, always producing the same ideas. Addison, while using the same metaphors, comes to a completely different scenario. He interprets the relation between the movement of the animal spirits and the 'traces' in the brain in a rather optimistic manner; in light of the principle of association[17] he sees a potential in the violent freedom of these movements:

> The set of ideas, which we received from such a prospect or garden, having entered the mind at the same time, have a set of traces belonging to them in the brain, bordering very near upon one another; when,

> therefore, any one of these ideas arises in the imagination, and consequently dispatches a flow of animal spirits to its proper trace, these spirits, in the violence of their motion, run not only into the trace to which they were more particularly directed, but into several of those that lie about it: by this means they awaken other ideas of the same set, which immediately determine a new dispatch of spirits that in the same manner open other neighbouring traces, till at last the whole set of them is blown up, and the whole prospect or garden flourishes in the imagination.[18]

Addison gives a physical fundament to the explosive unfolding of a complex imaginary scenario by correlating the facility of the movement of the animal spirits to a subversive imagination, which is not only capable of surpassing nature but also of perfecting the reality of art.[19] The imaginative activity of the mind is destined to compensate for deficiencies of nature and presents itself as a remedy for natural defects. The poet in particular as the bearer of a strong imagination is specified as the medium for the self-contained practice of the imagination: "But this is certain, that a noble writer should be born with this faculty in its full strength and vigor, so as to be able to receive lively ideas from outward objects, to retain them long, and to range them together, upon occasion, in such figures and representations as are most likely to hit the fancy of the reader."[20] His art consists primarily in modelling the acquired material with great independence from reality in order to provide aesthetic pleasure for others. This, of course, requires a minimum of imaginative power on the part of the recipient, and Addison knows that the ability to discriminate and to associate ideas

is not always fully at the reader's disposal. The beauties of mental imagery are reserved for the warm and energetic imagination.[21] Having no mastery of the basic imaginative operations means that one is hardly capable of perceiving or experiencing beauty: "A man who is deficient in either of these respects, though he may receive the general notion of a description, can never see distinctly all its particular beauties[.]"[22] Since seeing and imagination are tightly connected, such a person's ability of visual perception is limited at even the most basic level, rendering it impossible for him to discriminate the diversity of colours and forms and to perceive their interaction in a pleasing way: "[A] person with a weak sight may have the confused prospect of a place that lies before him, without entering into its several parts, or discerning the variety of its colours in their full glory and perfection."[23] Out of this question of the individual disposition to a strong or weak imagination, Addison finally develops an early version of the Kantian concept of disinterested pleasure[24]. He ascribes to the imaginatively talented the ability to refrain from the inferior pleasure of possessing something in order to arrive at the more satisfactory delight at the mere sight of it: "A man of polite imagination is let into a great many pleasures, that the vulgar are not capable of receiving. He can converse with a picture, and find an agreeable companion in a statue. He meets with a secret refreshment in a description, and often feels a greater satisfaction in the prospect of fields and meadows, than another does in the possession."[25] The virtuality of imagined things allows a "secret refreshment," and while dealing with the content of the imagination the chance arises to surpass all the perceptions that are all-too bound to reality simply by their subjective visibility.

In contrast to modern two-fold aesthetics[26] Addison projects a three-fold version and operates – in addition to the categories of the sublime and the beautiful – with the

third category of the uncommon or new: “I shall first consider those pleasures of the imagination which arise from the actual view and survey of outward objects; and these, I think, all proceed from the sight of what is *great*, *uncommon*, or *beautiful*.”[27]

This third domain adopts the eminent aesthetic function to direct the body as well as the mind out of their habitual channels and to vitalize them by diversifying their ideas:

> Everything that is *new* or *uncommon* raises a pleasure in the imagination, because it fills the soul with an agreeable surprise, gratifies its curiosity, and gives it an idea of which it was not before possessed. [It] contributes a little to vary human life, and to divert our minds for a while with the strangeness of its appearance: it serves us for a kind of refreshment, […].[28]

Nevertheless, it is ultimately the category of the beautiful which not only offers most directly aesthetic pleasure, but also forms the capstone for the other two registers of delightful visibility: “But there is nothing that makes its way more directly to the soul than *beauty*, which immediately diffuses a secret satisfaction and complacency through the imagination, and gives a finishing to anything that is great or uncommon.”[29] By this means even unpleasant effects of the uncommon are integrated: “It is this [the beautiful new] that bestows charms on a monster, and makes even the imperfections of nature please us.”[30] In other words, following Addison, aesthetics of the ugly and of horror[31] become imaginable under the aegis of the

beautiful. However, it is not only the finalizing by the beautiful, but also the safe distance which renders the horror of the imagination agreeable:

> When we look on such hideous objects, we are not a little pleased to think we are in no danger of them. We consider them, at the same time, as dreadful and harmless; so that the more frightful appearance they make, the greater is the pleasure we receive from the sense of our own safety.[32]

It is remarkable that at this point in his argumentation the potential of innovation fully unfolds at the same time that the limits of the concept manifest clearly in the form of an ambivalence with far-reaching consequences. Indeed, the imagination turns out to be an equally effective medium for negative emotions and their intensification when the safe distance is no longer given: "We have now discovered the several originals of those pleasures that gratify the fancy; and here, perhaps, it would not be very difficult to cast under their proper heads those contrary objects, which are apt to fill it with distaste and terror; for the imagination is as liable to pain as pleasure."[33] In order to explain the imagination's cultivation of both unpleasant feelings and states of anxiety Addison once again refers to the concept of animal spirits. According to this notion the loss of control over the unpleasant contents of the imagination corresponds to physical damage, so that the fatal confusion of those contents is understood as the disorder of ideas in the brain:

> When the brain is hurt by any accident, or the mind disordered by dreams or sickness, the fancy is overrun with wild dismal ideas, and terrified with a thousand hideous monsters of its own framing. […] There is not a sight in Nature so mortifying as that of a distracted person, when his imagination is troubled, and his whole soul disordered and confused.[34]

The ambivalence of the imagination finally presents itself as a deficiency in this faculty and a constraint on what it is capable of achieving. In comparison with the understanding, the imagination has only a limited capacity and quickly reaches a maximum of processible content: "I think it [this subject] may show us the proper limits, as well as the defectiveness, of our imagination; how it is confined to a very small quantity of space, and immediately stopped in its operations, when it endeavors to take in anything that is very great, or very little."[35] The ability to think the infinite is not at the disposal of the imagination; in fact, the never-ending abundance of matter is an overwhelming abyss for this faculty in light of the narrow spectrum of matter that can be grasped imaginatively. "The understanding, indeed, opens an infinite space on every side of us, but the imagination, after a few faint efforts, is immediately at a stand, and finds herself swallowed up in the immensity of the void that surrounds it."[36] In spite of the imagination's deficiencies vis-à-vis the understanding, Addison insists on the importance of the imaginative faculty, especially since a productive cooperation can be experienced at any time in the context of aesthetic perception:

> [W]e are able to see something like colour and shape in a notion, and to discover a scheme of thoughts traced out upon matter. And here the mind receives a great deal of satisfaction, and has two of its faculties gratified at the same time, while the fancy is busy in copying after the understanding, and transcribing ideas out of the intellectual world into the material.[37]

The cooperation of "fancy" and "understanding" figures as a double satisfaction, behind which the possible hierarchy of faculties[38] recedes into the background, for, to some extent, it is in the interaction of the two that the aesthetic experience becomes possible in the first place.

It would seem that the concept of an imaginative core in all aesthetic perceptions and objects is an important attainment of the early Enlightenment in establishing the significance of the faculty of the imagination. The panegyric on the pleasures, all of which are rooted in the human ability to create images, and the development of a theoretical fundament must be considered an eminent achievement for the time, a clean break from Cartesianism's devaluation of this part of human ability.

Accordingly, the influence of these thoughts should not be underestimated; it extends throughout the 18th century from Bodmer/Breitinger, Baumgarten, Lessing and Kant to Romanticism. Addison's "influential treatment"[39] consists especially in his emphasis on the visual adjustment of the imagination, the exposing of mental visibility at the very centre of all aesthetic experience. But even his assigning of a certain amount of power to this faculty is haunted by the reservation that the

imagination is always subject to unpredictable ambivalence. On the one hand, poets in their world of images are certainly offered the magnificent opportunity to make the invisible accessible to the reader: "[I]n the survey of any object we have only so much of it painted on the imagination as comes in at the eye; but in its description the poet gives us as free a view of it as he pleases, and discovers to us several parts that either we did not attend to, or that lay out of our sight when we first beheld it."[40] But on the other hand the imagination is also susceptible to abuse: "We have already seen the influence that one man has over the fancy of another, and with what ease he conveys into it a variety of imagery[.]"[41] In conclusion, the productivity of the imagination proves to be double-edged. Nevertheless, despite its inherent ambivalence, Addison clearly allows a benevolent perspective to dominate.

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[1] Cf. Gabriele Dürbeck, *Einbildungskraft und Aufklärung. Perspektiven der Philosophie, Anthropologie und Ästhetik um1750* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1998), 86.

[2] Cf. John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1987), Book II, Chapter VIII, §, 949 .

[3] Cf. Joseph Addison and Richard Steele, *The Spectator*, 4 Vols., ed. by Gregory Smith (London: Dent, 1958), Vol. III, 284.

[4] Cf. Barbara Ränsch-Trill, *Phantasie. Welterkenntnis und Welterschaffung. Zur philosophischen Theorie der Einbildungskraft* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1996), 16.

[5] Cf. Dürbeck, *Einbildungskraft und Aufklärung*, 72.

[6] Cf. James Engell, *The Creative Imagination. Enlightenment to Romanticism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 33 et seq.

[7] Addison, *The Spectator*, 276.

[8] Ibid., 276 et seq.

[9] Ibid., 277.

[10] Cf. Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Book II, Chapter VIII, § 9, 49.

[11] Addison, *The Spectator*, 277 et seq.

[12] Ibid., 296.

[13] Cf. Paul Smith and Carolyn Wilde, *A Companion to Art Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 22 et seq.

[14] Addison, *The Spectator*, 296 et seq.

[15] Cf. ibid., 291 et seq., q. v. Dürbeck, *Einbilundungskraft und Aufklärung*, 74.

[16] Ibid., 278.

[17] Cf. Martin Kallich, *The Association of Ideas and Critical Theory in Eighteenth Century England* (The Hague: Mouton, 1970), 45-51.

[18] Addison, *The Spectator*, 294.

[19] Cf. ibid., 298 et seq.

[20] Ibid., 294.

[21] Cf. ibid., 293.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Cf. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1987), Part I, Division I, Book I, § 5, 52.

[25] Addison, *The Spectator*, 278.

[26] Cf. Carsten Zelle, *Die doppelte Ästhetik der Moderne. Revisionen des Schönen von Boileau bis Nietzsche* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1995), 124 et seq.

[27] Addison, *The Spectator*, 279.

[28] Ibid., 280.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Cf. Carsten Zelle, *Angenehmes Grauen. Literaturhistorische Beiträge zur Ästhetik des Schrecklichen im achtzehnten Jahrhundert* (Hamburg: Meiner, 1987), 103-109.

[32] Addison, *The Spectator*, 297 et seq.

[33] Ibid., 306.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Ibid., 303 et seq.

[36] Ibid., 304.

[37] Ibid., 304 et seq.

[38] For the relevance of this concept in the early Enlightenment cf. Martin Fitzpatrick, *The Enlightenment World* (London: Routledge, 2004), 350 et seq.

[39] Engell, *The Creative Imagination*, 36.

[40] Addison, *The Spectator*, 292.

[41] Ibid., 306.