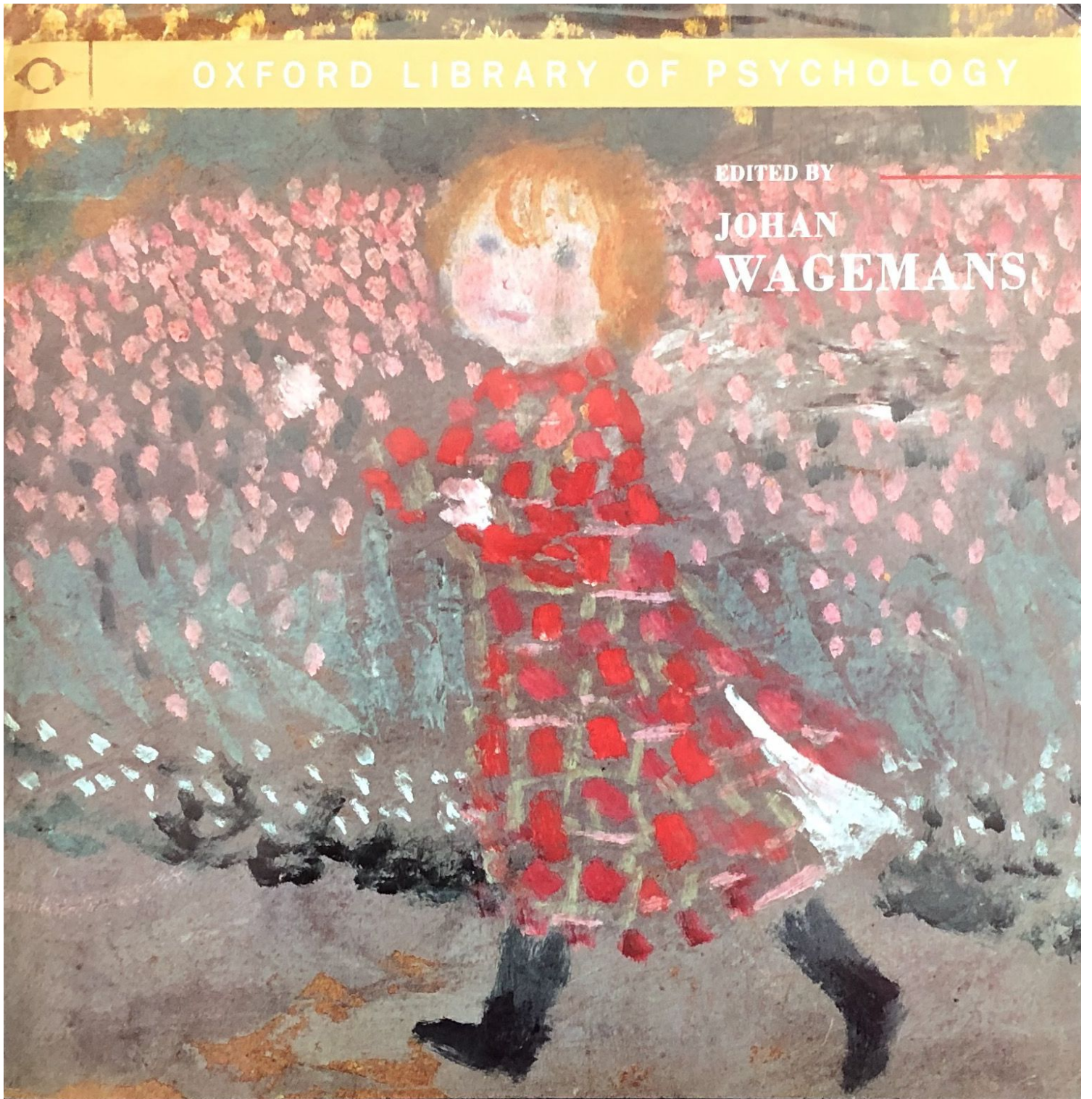


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≡ The Oxford Handbook of
**PERCEPTUAL
ORGANIZATION**

whether microgenesis arrives at some fixed point after prolonged looking. Such fixed points appear to occur in one of the following three cases:

a more or less uniform image;

a highly structured image, that is statistically uniform even in its small parts;

a 'classical' scene.

In the first case one sees nothing remarkable, whereas it is evident that this will never change, for want of structure. The blue sky is an instance, so are many modern minimalist paintings⁸³. In the second case microgenesis 'gives up' in face of complexity. The image is summarized as 'texture'. The film grain in the sky of a 1950s monochrome photograph is an example⁸⁴. One doesn't even try to 'see anything' in such a sky, although the texture is noted. The third case is that of the nineteenth-century still life, landscape, or genre painting. One simply sees what is there, and that is it. The proviso here is that images are rarely exhausted at one ontic level. The genre scene may well offer interesting 'mystery' in the background, in the rendering of structure and so forth. After all, no painter is going to paint all the individual leaves of grass, yet the image of a meadow can hardly be painted a uniform (dead) green.

These three categories serve for a first parceling of the space of images, a bit like the distinction between the oceans and continents of the globe. Of course, the boundaries cannot be sharp. Given any image, it is always possible to construct a huge number of images that are essentially look-alikes. Thus, an image is not like a point, but like an *open environment*⁸⁵ in image space. Such open environments will be different for a glance, a good look, or under scrutiny. Under a glance the environment of look-alikes may well have a complicated structure, since the observer is likely to 'miss' parts that would be easily 'got' at another glance.

Perhaps more interesting are the images for which microgenesis fails to immediately arrive at a (single) fixed point. One may distinguish (at least)

spontaneous jumps from one fixed point to another;

spontaneous fluctuations between a limited number of fixed points;

endless, chaotic fluctuations of visual presentation.

In the first case the observer notices that visual awareness suddenly changes, whereas it is hard to regain the previous presentation. An example is the well known 'Dalmatian dog' picture⁸⁶. At first blush it looks like a pattern of blotches. Once you've seen the dog, it will stubbornly stay. In the second case the presentations jump back and forth between a number of fairly obvious presentations. A well-known case is Jastrow's duck-rabbit:⁸⁷ you never see anything like a 'duck-rabbit', but either a duck or a rabbit. Moreover, these presentations spontaneously flip. The third case is perhaps the most interesting, both from an artistic and a scientific perspective. It is the case famously described by Leonardo da Vinci, in which the observer never stops to 'hallucinate' in the

⁸³ On 'minimal art' see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Minimalism#Minimal_art.2C_minimalism_in_visual_art.

⁸⁴ On film grain see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Film_grain and http://grubbasoftware.com/filmlibrary_trixpan.html. Famous for its artistic use of film grain was the German *Twen* magazine (1951–1971): [http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Twen_\(Zeitschrift\)](http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Twen_(Zeitschrift)).

⁸⁵ On open environments see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neighbourhood_\(mathematics\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neighbourhood_(mathematics)).

⁸⁶ The Dalmatian dog picture can be seen at <http://psylux.psych.tu-dresden.de/i1/kaw/diverses%20Material/www.illusionworks.com/html/camouflage.html>.

⁸⁷ Jastrow's duck-rabbit can be seen at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Duck-Rabbit_illusion.jpg.



Fig. 43.15 (a) Rapid East by Suzanne Unrein, Courtesy of the artist (b) Robert Pepperell, Succulus (2005) Oil on panel, 123 x 123 cm. Notice how Unrein paints in a 'post-neo-baroque'-style. She writes: 'I started with Rubens, Correggio and Raphael, then branched out to less likely combinations of Poussin and Bougereau. Now it's the animaliers of the 17th & 18th centuries, the boar hunts and dogfights. By combining the hounds from these genres with the figures from more epic scenes the dogs become a dysfunctional Greek chorus further confusing the summarizing of a scene. I am less interested in the narrative than the elements and forms that inspire the abstraction, and movement, with a larger range of color combinations. By combining figures from a variety of artists in a range of eras, I want to transport them from their original meaning into the contemporary

presence of an image⁸⁸. The first to attempt an analysis in the style of experimental phenomenology on the topic was John Ruskin⁸⁹. The effect was used in western art mainly in informal drawings, or the background of 'official' paintings, until the surrealists claimed it as one of their main devices. Leonardo writes:

look at walls splashed with a number of stains or stones of various mixed colors. If you have to invent some scene, you can see their resemblances (similitudine) to a number of landscapes, adorned in various ways with mountains, rivers, rocks, trees, plains, wide valleys and hills. Moreover, you can see various battles, the rapid actions of figures, strange expressions on faces, costumes, and an infinite number of things, which you can reduce to good, integrated form. This happens thus on walls and varicolored stones, as in the sound of bells, in whose pealing you can find every word and name you can imagine.

Of course, the same thing happens when you look at (or into) a painting. John Ruskin is special because he saw that one doesn't need any ancient stained wall. Every vision suffices if you only tune into the presence of 'mystery' in everything. Nothing is absolutely clear. You cannot count the grains of sand beneath your feet, nor the leaves on the tree before you. What the painter paints is not the leaves, but a leafy, 'mysterious' texture⁹⁰. Therein lies the art.

There is a huge realm of the visual arts that exploits the pleasure experienced by observers due to Ruskin's mystery. It has merely come bluntly to the surface in modern times. Like all pictorial structure, mystery occurs at all ontic levels. Much of surrealism occurred at the level of the represented entities. This is the level where René Magritte⁹¹ worked. In a sense, it is the least 'visual' of these manifestations. The level of the 'leafy texture' is the level of the smallest relevant constituents. It is purely visual, and interesting, although only mildly so. It is to be expected in virtually any serious painting (Magritte intentionally tried to avoid it). The most interesting levels from a conceptual point of view are the levels of the *simple meaningful units* and the *salient Gestalts*. Some of the more interesting work of Salvador Dalí⁹² plays on the latter level, but the former is perhaps the more interesting from the viewpoint of experimental phenomenology. Artists who address

⁸⁸ Leonardo's observations on what one might see in an old wall can be found at http://www.mirabilissimeinvenzioni.com/ing_treatiseonpainting_ing.html.

⁸⁹ John Ruskin's mystery is discussed in his *Elements of Drawing*, which can be downloaded from <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/30325/30325-h/30325-h.html>.

⁹⁰ On background texture (leafiness) see http://www.artsconnected.org/toolkit/encyc_texturetypes.html. Good descriptions can be found in John Ruskin's *Modern Painters*, an electronic version of which is available at <http://www.lancs.ac.uk/fass/ruskin/empi/index.htm>.

⁹¹ René François Ghislain Magritte (1898–1967) was a Belgian surrealist artist. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/René_Magritte.

⁹² Salvador Domingo Felipe Jacinto Dalí i Domènech, 1st Marqués de Dalí de Púbol (1904–1989), known as Salvador Dalí, was a major surrealist artist. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Salvador_Dal%C3%AD.

domain and the challenge of newer interpretations'. Pepperell's painting is ambiguous on purpose, he writes '... paintings and drawings are the result of intensive experimentation in materials and methods designed to evoke a very specific, though elusive, state of mind. The works induce a disrupted perceptual condition in which what we see cannot be matched with what we know. Instead of a recognizable depiction the viewer is presented with—what the art historian Dario Gamboni has called—a 'potential image', that is, a complex multiplicity of possible images, none of which ever finally resolves'.

this level (for instance, Robert Pepperell⁹³, or Suzanna Unrein⁹⁴) play on the sentiments described by Leonardo (Figure 43.15).

Conclusion

The topic is virtually boundless. I have only touched on a few conceptually interesting issues here, fully ignoring extensive fields of endeavor like architecture, photography, cinema, or mime. Moreover, I did not touch on the tangencies with music, poetry, and so forth. Each subtopic could easily be extended into a book, or a lifetime of research.

My main objective in this chapter has been to offer some general background for thought, and to indicate potentially profitable openings for future research in the experimental phenomenology of the visual arts.

⁹³ Robert Pepperell (born 1963) is an artist and professor of fine art at the Cardiff School of Art and Design. His website is <http://www.robertpepperell.com>.

⁹⁴ Suzanne Unrein is a Californian artist. Her website is <http://www.suzanneunrein.com>.