Chapter 14

Into the Picture

Husserl’s Picture Theories – and Two Types of Pictures

‘Things, however, are difficult, and it is easy to run wild…’

Husserl (Hua XXIII, 342)

We have investigated the possibilities of diagram manipulation in picture viewing and analysis. A further attempt at surpassing naïve picture understanding is provided by the sections of Husserl’s phenomenology in which he outlines a taxonomy of acts and thus describes the picture as an act type and spends extensive discussions on placing it in relation to other act types.

After having put forward the idea of different types of intentional acts in Logische Untersuchungen which we touched upon in Chap. 6, Husserl often in the following years returned to the attempt of devising a more fine-grained typology than the one outlined there. The distinction between perception, imagination, and signitive acts of various types had to be refined, especially as regards the imaginative types of acts. In the years from LU and to 1912, but even well into the 20s, Husserl struggled with the elaboration of this branch of phenomenology, and the papers containing these strivings are collected in Husserliana (Hua) Vol. XXIII with the title Phantasie, Bildbewusstsein, Erinnerung, a title suitable for the project because Husserl’s investigation concentrates upon establishing a series of subspecies to the imaginative acts of LU where the three types mentioned hold prominent positions.

Most of the papers have a preliminary, discussing character, and even the more thoroughly argued texts often have the character of the investigation of an issue where the conclusion still remains to be made – but in the long run of the repeated investigations, gradually the central problems in the descriptions become clear.

A large work dating from the 1904–05 lectures about phenomenology and epistemology deals with the distinction between fantasy and pictorial consciousness in an explicitly experimental way – Husserl investigates a claim he earlier shared but which is now abandoned during the text: the idea that fantasy is a sort of pictorial consciousness (as in Beilage 1 from 1898). A long series of smaller papers, notes and addenda from these years and thereafter are concerned with fantasy versus picture, fantasy vs. memory, contradiction (‘Widerstreit’) as the basis of pictorial consciousness, empty presentations, etc., and various taxonomies of act types are proposed. The next larger work to follow is ‘Modi der Reproduktion und Phantasie. Bildbewusstsein’ from 1912 where the discussion about the status of fantasy is attempted solved – now on the base of emerging transcendental phenomenology – by
the determination of fantasy as a reproductive modification, based on a distinction between impression and reproduction. This text is also accompanied by a series of Beilagen, inter alia about fictional consciousness, ‘iconic phantasies’, the relation between fantasy and actuality, the different aspects of pictorial consciousness, aesthetic consciousness, etc. Finally, a last group of smaller texts from the years 1918–24 are about the modi of intuition, the relation of fantasy to pure possibilities and to neutralization (taken as the suspension of the act’s character of existence claim).

The notion of picture belongs to the most stable elements in this flux of new ideas and typologies making the many texts not only variants but outlines of original and untested ideas. Here we shall extract an outline of the resulting concept of picture – followed by a concrete proposal for a new phenomenological distinction on that basis.

The distinction in the LU between perception and the bundle of less direct types of access to the object, the imaginative respective signitive acts rests on the idea that an indirect approach to the object may take place with or without accompanying pictures. Here, it is taken for granted that pictures, fantasy, dream, memory, expectation, etc. all share the character of being imaginative – and further investigation naturally must attempt a description of the distinctions between these imagination subspecies. When reading Husserl’s vast works on these problems up to 1912, it is striking to see that the notion of picture holds, as mentioned, a rather stable definition throughout the period. The determination of the concept of picture by the triad of picture, pictural object and sujet is constant, just like the relation of similarity, tying them together, and the relation of contradiction which complementarily prevents them from being identical. This double tension of similarity and contradiction provides a constant description of the picture and the type of consciousness assumed to correspond to it. The decisive problem for Husserl during that period is rather the description of fantasy which seems to be a sort of in-between, difficult to determine, between the explicit relation of similarity between well-defined, separate objects in the picture on the one hand and the immediate and direct access to the object offered by perception on the other.

Fantasy seems to share the picture’s relation to its object, defined by similarly, on the one hand; on the other, fantasy seems, just like perception, to take place directly (even if not referring to any object present) and without any intermediary, thus there is not in fantasy any contradiction or tension between several ways of accessing the same perceptual content as is the case in pictures. Husserl’s never-ending reflection in that period has, for that reason, fantasy as its primary goal rather than pictures proper (fantasy along with memory, dream, expectation, etc. which share fantasy’s picture-like qualities without any explicit similarity/contradiction relation like in pictures proper). Correspondingly, Husserl’s picture concept is narrow, being tied to externally, physically existing picture objects endowed with certain visual or tactical moments. In the perspective of Peirce’s broad concept of icons, iconicity naturally involves fantasy which in a Peircean view must be classified as being a type of hypoicon. A further reason for including both fantasy and pictures under the icon concept is the role of fantasy in the grasping of sophisticated types of icons – more about this later.