



## A reflection on his mind: Bergson, perception and memory in Dalí's writing

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In all his works, Dalí made it difficult or even impossible for us to decide, if he is discussing some serious theory of perception or just again leading the spectator on a false track. Reading Dalí's *Secret Life* today, it seems that his paranoid mind is the source of all surrealist thinking and concept (Finkelstein, 1998: 2). Every trivial incident in the artist's every day life became through his perception a work of art or at least a surrealist, paranoid dream. Nevertheless, there are enough indications in the eclectic works of the Catalan artist, that his mind was no case for psychoanalysis, but playful, intelligent and very erudite.

In the light of the intentionally confusing mass of paintings, writings and other works, it would be a fruitless effort to form a theory of perception and memory out of the lures planted by Dalí. The numerous links between his writings and paintings are analyzed in very valuable studies by Haim Finkelstein and others (cf. Finkelstein, 1996; 1998). Given all the relations to psychoanalysis, spiritualism, science, etc., it is one, that seems to me particularly relevant for a debate about perception today: The work of Henri Bergson, used by Dalí apparently only to add another name to his paranoid panorama, is also the basis of one of the most important theories of cinema by Deleuze and might in the same way support our discussion about perception in the light of digitalization.

Dalí never named Bergson directly as one of his sources of inspiration. Quite the contrary, he expressed rather disagreement if we would take all his comments in this regard seriously. In his late scenario *Babaou* he called Bergson a 'pig', and in one of his first published books *La femme visible* where Dalí laid out his paranoid-critical method, he disregarded Bergson in the same breath with Bataille for their biological premises and materialism (cf. Dalí, 1998: 225, 226). And Dalí seems to be right in this last reproach, if we look at the basis of Bergson's *Matière et Mémoire*. There Bergson argues first that the human body is some kind of receptor which reacts on

excitations. The movements of the centripetal nervous system seem to be the whole secret in human perception.

J'étudie maintenant, sur des corps semblables au mien, la configuration de cette image particulière que j'appelle mon corps. J'aperçois des nerfs afférents qui transmettent des ébranlements aux centres nerveux, puis des nerfs efférents qui partent du centre, conduisent des ébranlements à la périphérie, et mettent en mouvement les parties du corps ou le corps tout entier. (Bergson, 1965 [1939]: 11)

But I think Dalí intentionally misunderstood Bergson here. The keyword in Bergson's argumentation is not so much "corps" but "image". The human body becomes just an image in the universe of images and is in the exchange of reflections between body and thing not more but an equal partner to the thing-world, meaning neither a foundation on biology nor materialism. Bergson even disclaims any relation to materialism/realism as well as to spiritualism/idealism (*ibid.*: 15). To see the world as an accumulation of images which reflect each other and in this process communicate with each other – even are able to change each other – should be quite familiar to a surrealist like Dalí. The material world is reduced to images or to reflections on the retina, but they are much more powerful as it seems first.

J'appelle matière l'ensemble des images, et perception de la matière ces mêmes images rapportées à l'action possible d'une certaine image déterminée, mon corps. (*ibid.*: 13)

One could reproach that perception is a process of more senses involved than just the capacity of seeing. But "seeing" means in Bergson's theory an *interaction* between two images. The image seen by the human is not a simple reflection or representation, but the result of action and movement in the body.

Comparing Dalí's theory of the paranoid-critical method to the theory of perception laid out by Bergson, we have to recognize quite a few similarities. First of all, the premise that perception is founded on changeable images in action and not on a given reality that is kind of photographed by the human eye corresponds to Dalí's creation of surrealist images in his every day life. One famous example of the artist's working process is the anecdote that looking long enough at the rocks in Cadaqués, they finally transformed to surrealists paintings for Dalí's eyes. This is not a revolutionary method invented by Dalí, but the very same creative aid Leonardo da Vinci recommended his pupils (*cf.* Breton, 1992: 377). Nevertheless, the

connection to Bergson and the particularity of Dalí's paranoid-critical method is the activity of human and object in the process of perception. For Dalí, it is possible to see the 'normal' object as well as the paranoid-surreal transformed object at the same time. And more, he opted for the capacity to see at least two different images in the same object – to make the invisible visible for the spectator's eyes. But what is the invisible in perception?

If we presume along with Bergson and Dalí that the reality as seen is no photograph-like representation, it must have some invisible part. This part is up to the perceiving human who transforms the seen object individually, intentionally or unintentionally. With the aim to differ from the surrealist method of the *écriture automatique* and its apparently passive character,<sup>1</sup> Dalí focused on the activity and creativity of the paranoid mind. Only the mental force of the 'paranoiac' is able to see at the same time two completely different images in the same object.

It is by a distinctly paranoiac process that it has been possible to obtain a double image: in other words, a representation of an object that is also, without the slightest pictorial or anatomical modification, the representation of another entirely different object, this one being equally devoid of any deformation or abnormality disclosing some adjustment. (Dalí, 1998: 224)

Dalí demonstrates the effect of seeing two images in one and of seeing the invisible (which would be the paranoid activity) in his paintings like *Dormeuse, cheval, lion* and *Dormeuse, cheval, lion invisible* as well as in his text and painting: *la femme visible* and *l'homme invisible*.<sup>2</sup> Though he claims to change nothing in the anatomical figure, in the painting it is necessary to make light changes to show the double/triple image of the sleeping woman, horse and lion. But the crucial changes are made by the spectator trying to see the invisible.

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- 1 We know though that *écriture automatique* is not really passive neither really automatic, but the willingly transgression of moral laws as well as any other conventions.
  - 2 Dalí's first publication *La femme visible* also contains the article "L'âne pourri" ("The Rotting Donkey") in which he laid out his paranoid-critical method. For more details about the text-image relation of *La femme visible* and *L'homme invisible* cf. Riñler-Pipka (2007).



Fig. 1: Salvador Dalí, *Dormeuse, cheval, lion invisibles*, 1930, oil on canvas, 50,2 x 65,2 cm, Musée d'Art Moderne, Centre Pompidou, Paris (© Salvador Dalí, Fundació Gala-Salvador Dalí / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2009).



Fig. 2: Salvador Dalí, *Dormeuse, cheval, lion*, 1930, oil on canvas, 60,6 x 70,7 cm, Pola Museum of Art, Pola Art Foundation, Kaganawa (© Salvador Dalí, Fundació Gala-Salvador Dalí / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2009).

This sort of optical illusion is no revolutionary creation by Dalí, but quite common in art history where the surrealist artist looked out for inspiration.<sup>3</sup> The fascination is not founded in the optical illusion, but in the 'paranoid' ability to discover and to create surreality by transforming the visual world. Dalí is right when suggesting that perception is a question of education: if he educates our way to see by showing us the 'gemstones in the donkey cadaver', we will never be able to look at a donkey with naive and innocent eyes (cf. Dalí, 1998: 223s). The invisible in this context is not so much the picture of gemstones by the view of a donkey cadaver – that can be made visible in paintings (*L'âne pourri*, 1928) or film (*Le chien andalou*, 1929) –, but the process of perception. And this could be the reason for Dalí's writing.

To change the spectator's way of perception, the Catalan artist needed both: painting and writing – and other media like film, theatre, publicity, design, etc. Arguing with Bergson it is not so much changing the way of perception, but to describe in the first place perception and memory. This is where Dalí's concept of activity and movement comes into operation. He claims to change and even to destroy the common traditions of seeing

3 Cf. the connection to Hans Holbein pointed out by Brad Epps (2007: 117).

“to contribute to the collapse of reality” (Dalí, 1998: 226), but along with it he shows quite philosophically behind his paranoid facade some premises of perception and memory.

Dalí enforces the surrealist concept of the “merveilleux” which shows rather incidentally a surrealist world to the poetic mind. In his distinctive egocentric manner, the artist pointed out that alone his will or his paranoid mind is able to change the perception of all his spectators, just because he make us see gemstones in the donkey cadaver. Besides all eccentricity, Dalí did not reserve this capacity to his own, but encouraged everyone to change reality into surreality by activating the paranoid abilities – naturally taking his own ability superior to anybody else's.

More than other surrealists Dalí focuses on the activity and movement in the process of perception. Everything is able to change – even the past. That is why “memory” is such an important idea for Dalí in his writings. Not only in his pseudo autobiography *Secret Life...*, he used false memories to disturb the reader's perception (cf. Roloff, 2007), but also in his earlier poem *Love and Memory / El amor y la memoria* (1931)<sup>4</sup> he shows a playful association of “memory”. On the one hand, it is a parody of the psychoanalytic memory debate<sup>5</sup> and of Bergson's use of “memory”. On the other hand, it might be very well a true expression of his love to Gala which tries to overcome limits of time and space.

Just to give a short view into Dalí's way of connecting seriously Bergson's theory and of presenting humorously his paranoid extension of it, I try to go into the details of this poem. In *El amor y la memoria*, the artist quite surprisingly refers to Bergson by using a false quotation, which is not the only connection. Even the motto of the poem opens up with the subject of movement: “Hay cosas inmóviles como un pan” (Dalí, 2004: 218.). As we know from reading Bergson and Dalí, they both would deny the existence of given, unchangeable and immobile material. By using something as profane as a “bread” as an example, he enforces the ironic effect of the motto. In this context, “bread” might seem profane but Dalí implicates also the religious symbolic meaning of “our daily bread (given by the Father)” and the psychoanalytic meaning of bread as a phallic symbol in his paintings. In contrast to his motto, Dalí generally likes to set “bread” in motion. For example, in *Le chien andalou* (1929) several breads are balanced on the heads of cyclists; in other paintings, photographs and happenings,

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4 For the English translation cf. Dalí (1998: 162–172).

5 Cf. the still current „False-Memory-Debate“ in psychoanalysis.

the artist throws bread in the air. Even in the poem itself Dalí sets “bread” in motion, making it part of strings of association: “el pan bien dorado/ parecido llanto”; “contra la que pronto/ se va a golpear/ el pan” (Dalí, 2004: 218). Thus, the author disproves his own motto in the poem.

In contrast to the moving bread, the *alter ego* of Dalí in this poem (and in several paintings) “Guillermo Tell” is impotent and immobile. Finkelstein points out this psychoanalytic context in the poem and the associated paintings (cf. Finkelstein, 1996: 131–139). Besides this motive and the main subject of glorifying Gala (cf. Rißler-Pipka, 2007), we are able to detect a deep examination of Bergson’s *Matière et Mémoire* – though hidden, but starting with the motto, the whole poem is linked to Bergson. Dalí spreads key-words of Bergson’s theory into the completely different context of his poem. After the immobile objects (“cosas inmóviles”), he speaks of other indeterminate objects (“otras cosas indeterminadas” [Dalí, 2004: 218]): When Bergson speaks of “indetermination”, it is the first time in his book he links perception to memory. We are not determined to react immediately to the perception like protozoan,<sup>6</sup> but we have the choice how to react. That means that we are able to distance ourselves from perception by taking most of the things in viewing them instead of touching, tasting etc.<sup>7</sup> The existence of choice is for Bergson the principle of human perception called “indetermination”: “Partons donc de cette indétermination comme du principe véritable” (Bergson, 1965 [1939]: 18). On the basis of “indetermination”, perception means for Bergson the variable relation between humans and objects which is characterized as interactive (“une relation variable entre l’être vivant et les influences plus ou moins lointaines des objets qui l’intéressent” [Bergson, 1965 [1939]: 19]). The last named attribute is important and describes another ability of human perception. We are not damned to absorb every sensual stimulus, but we can concentrate on the things of interest and even eliminate to a certain degree items of our perception.

That must have fascinated Dalí – even if the fact itself is quite obvious. Bergson presented it in such a consistent scientific manner that Dalí did not only like the subject itself, but also the kind of philosophical language used by Bergson.<sup>8</sup> To mix his quite corporal surreal language with this kind of serious terminology should be right to the gusto of the Catalan artist.

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6 Cf. the example given by Bergson (1965 [1939]: 19).

7 This ability has to be learned as infants explore the world by tasting and touching.

8 The artist’s fascination for science is proved and analyzed by Astrid Ruffa (2005).

Though the effect is first of all one of parody, there are some basic ideas of Bergson that must have been supported by Dalí. If Bergson underlines the term of “indetermination”, it signifies the complete freedom of creativity for Dalí. To decide what will be part of our perception and what will not means that neither reality nor personal perception are given and detectable.

Right after introducing the terminology of “indetermination”, Bergson comes to the conclusion that perception and memory are connected inseparably:

En fait, il n'y a pas de perception qui ne soit imprégnée de souvenirs. [...] Si courte qu'on suppose une perception, en effet, elle occupe toujours une certaine durée, et exige par conséquent un effort de la mémoire, qui prolonge les uns dans les autres une pluralité de moments. (Bergson, 1965 [1939]: 19–20)

This corresponds not only with the subject of the poem *El amor y la memoria*, but also with the larger part of Dalí's work. The recurrent themes of the little girl seen in his youth and incarnated by Gala or the father-son-complex are not imperative psychoanalytical problems, but part of Dalí's play with false and right memories. They may even lead to a serious thinking about perception and memory which is hidden behind the faked quotation of Bergson's philosophy. To be able to bind Bergson's arguments to his own surrealist poem, Dalí had to study the text itself and not just copying the style of it.

Despite the superficial impression of nonsense and parody, the author uses Bergson's vocabulary for his own theory of perception freed of scientific laws. Addressing Gala, his love, Dalí fakes typographically and stylistically a quotation of Bergson's celebrated work:

Gala  
 mi amor me demuestra  
 la falta de recuerdos que de ti tengo  
 porque no me acuerdo de ti  
 tú no cambias  
 estás al margen de mi memoria  
 porque eres mi vida  
 científicamente  
*«la noción misma*  
*»de la duración del tiempo*  
*»nace*  
*»de la comparación*  
*»entre los fenómenos exteriores*  
*»(movimientos y cambios de estado)*

»y los fenómenos de nuestra propia vida  
 »comparación posible  
 »por la fijación independiente  
 »del devenir  
 »cuyas representaciones respectivas  
 »permiten la memoria». (Dalí, 2004: 223)

The consistent logic of Bergson's argumentation seems to be completely distorted by Dalí. The perception of the Catalan artist is also based on moments of his past and memory like Bergson claims, but the very difference lays in the invention of memory itself by Dalí. There is no need for Gala to be part of his memory, because he feels free to make her a stable figure of all his life, perception and memory. Dalí contradicts himself and calls it "científicamente".<sup>9</sup>

When Bergson speaks of duration "la durée" ("la duración del tiempo") he distinguishes between the personal and the impersonal, homogeneous "durée". The latter one is called fictional ("une idole du langage, une fiction" [Bergson, 1965 [1939]: 123]) and therefore rejected, whereas "la durée" is not measurable and can signify different moments of different durations which seem to happen at the same time. Bergson gives us the example of the dreaming person who sleeps just some minutes, but in his dream he experiences several weeks.<sup>10</sup> Because of the limited human consciousness, we are not able to perceive all the movements in space as single moments of time (Bergson gives as example the 400 billions of oscillations which create red light; cf. Bergson, 1965 [1939]: 122). That means that in our personal duration all these moments of time are concentrated on one. The conclusion for perception is as follows:

Percevoir consiste donc, en somme, à condenser des périodes énormes d'une existence infiniment diluée en quelques moments plus différenciés d'une vie plus intense, et à résumer ainsi une très longue histoire. Percevoir signifie immobiliser. (Bergson, 1965 [1939]: 123)

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9 Whereas here he says that he can't remember Gala at all, in his book *The Secret Life...* he claims to know Gala since before his birth and since his childhood; cf. Rißler-Pipka (2007) for an analysis.

10 "Ne nous arrive-t-il pas de percevoir en nous, pendant notre sommeil, deux personnes contemporaines et distinctes dont l'une dort quelques minutes tandis que le rêve de l'autre occupe des jours et des semaines?" (Bergson, 1965 [1939]: 123)

Dalí speaks of all this in his little faked quotation. He makes perception and memory a very personal subject and exaggerates in this point Bergson's argumentation, but in the main points they agree. If we take "la duración del tiempo" as a translation of Bergson's "durée", Dalí binds it to a comparison of outer and inner phenomena. "Los fenómenos exteriores" are corresponding to Bergson's material world that is subjected under the physical laws. That means that it can be described as moving or in a measurable state, but it is probably not perceptible for us (as the example of the red light shows). All these outer phenomena would be part of measurable (homogeneous) space and time (which is the same for Bergson), but "la durée" needs the assistance of our consciousness and memory, i.e.: "los fenómenos de nuestra propia vida". Only in the contraction of time, in the contraction of two different moments to one single recollection or perception do we see the duration of time<sup>11</sup> – that nothing is lost and gone, even if we think we forgot it.

En un sens, ma perception m'est bien intérieure, puisqu'elle contracte en un moment unique de ma durée ce qui se répartirait, en soi, sur un nombre incalculable de moments. Mais si vous supprimez ma conscience, l'univers matériel subsiste tel qu'il était: seulement, comme vous avez fait abstraction de ce rythme particulier de durée qui était la condition de mon action sur les choses, ces choses rentrent en elles-mêmes pour se scander en autant de moments que la science en distingue, et les qualités sensibles, sans s'évanouir, s'étendent et se délayent dans une durée incomparablement plus divisée. (Bergson, 1965 [1939]: 123)

There is also the "durée" of the outer phenomena which is much too complex for us to perceive, but nevertheless only in the interaction of inner and outer phenomena perception and "durée" are possible. So Dalí is quite right if he speaks of a comparison between inner and outer phenomena, but the conclusion he draws would not be part of Bergson's argumentation. At this point Dalí exaggerates again: there is no complete freedom for an independent fixing of the future ("por la fijación independiente del devenir"). In contrast Bergson speaks of the possibility of influencing the future by taking advantage of the ability to immobilize and contract certain moments in our memory.

[...] et l'organisation plus complexe du système nerveux, qui semble assurer une plus grande indépendance à l'être vivant vis-à-vis de la matière, ne fait que symboliser maté-

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11 This argument of Bergson is also a main point in Walter Benjamin's *Passagenwerk*, where it helps to overcome the 19th century.

riellement cette indépendance même, c'est-à-dire la force intérieure qui permet à l'être de se dégager du rythme d'écoulement des choses, de retenir de mieux en mieux le passé pour influencer de plus en plus profondément l'avenir, c'est-à-dire enfin, au sens spécial que nous donnons à ce mot, sa mémoire. (Bergson, 1965 [1939]: 131)

Dalí reverses the sense of this argument when he writes that not memory makes possible to influence future, but that the representations of the future are responsible for the memory (“del devenir cuyas representaciones respectivas permiten la memoria”). We could see this reversion of sense as surrealist effect, because Dalí likes to disregard the continuity of time and wants to free his mind of it. Even if he exaggerates Bergson's text, he is truly impressed by the concept of “la durée” as discontinuous and of perception as immobilization of moving moments, memories and objects.

So the motto of the poem: “Hay cosas inmóviles como un pan” can be seen in a new light. It is not the object itself (the bread) that is immobile, but to perceive it as bread, we have to condense the moment and the state in which we have seen it and we will probably add other moments and other breads seen before. All this supports Dalí's theory of the paranoid critical method presented in “The Rotting Donkey”: to be able to actively change our way of perception by combining opposed things like gemstones and the rotting donkey. Dalí uses this and other “key-motives” in different media to make sure that the spectator memorizes it and integrates it into his future perception.

Looking at Dalí's work of paintings, film, photographs and performances, we will find that the bread, the donkey and other motives are always captured in an immobile situation even if they are moving. In painting and photography the moments are frozen anyway, but also in his films the motives can be separated to a single memorable image: like the rotting donkey that is pulled up on a rope together with the piano as a surrealist “chain of association”.

When we ask now again: What is the invisible in perception? we can try to answer it with Bergson and Dalí that the invisible is the part added by memory – invented or not, but we are not able to perceive something without seeing not only the one object present but also everything linked to this object by memory. For Dalí, this is a starting point for the creative act as he not only adds unconsciously something out of his memory to his perception (which would be a pure psychoanalytic effect), but willingly mixes false and true memories and calls them “real” or better “surreal”. ■

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Resum: Les nombroses i polifacètiques obres de l'artista català Salvador Dalí no revelen de bon principi que s'hagués pogut interessar seriosament per qüestions filosòfiques de la teoria de la percepció. Tant a les pintures com als escrits, Dalí prioritza encegar l'observador i el lector amb conceptes pseudobiogràfics i sobretot paranoics. Sembla que molt es perd en la paròdia i la bogeria i pot ser interpretat amb fórmules psicoanalítiques. A partir del poema *El amor y la memoria*, que ja fa referència al títol a *Matière et Mémoire* de Bergson, es mostrarà a tall d'exemple com Dalí s'enfronta de manera intensiva als arguments filosòfics, i com els supedita subtilment a la seva pròpia teoria. Dalí també parodia i s'aprofita capaçment de l'obra de Bergson en els escrits sobre el mè-

tode paranoicocrític de *La femme visible*. D'allí s'extreuen reflexions sobre la percepció, la memòria i l'invisible, que són rellevants pels debats actuals sobre virtualitat i hiperrealitats al cosmos digital. ■

Zusammenfassung: Die zahlreichen und vielseitigen Arbeiten des katalanischen Künstlers Salvador Dalí lassen auf den ersten Blick kaum vermuten, dass er sich ernsthaft mit philosophischen wahrnehmungstheoretischen Fragen auseinandergesetzt haben könnte. Dalí legt es sowohl im Bild als auch in seinen Schriften darauf an, die Betrachter und Leser durch pseudobiographische und vor allem paranoische Motive zu blenden. Vieles scheint sich in Parodie und Wahnsinn zu verlieren und leicht mit psychoanalytischer Formel auflösbar. Am Gedicht *El amor y la memoria*, das sich schon im Titel auf Bergsons *Matière et Mémoire* bezieht, wird hier exemplarisch gezeigt, wie intensiv sich Dalí mit den philosophischen Argumenten auseinandersetzt und sie subtil seiner eigenen Theorie unterordnet. Auch in seinen Schriften zur paranoisch-kritischen Methode in *La femme visible* wird Bergsons Arbeit gleichzeitig parodiert und gekonnt ausgenutzt. Daraus ergeben sich Überlegungen zu Wahrnehmung, Erinnerung und dem Unsichtbaren, die auch für die aktuellen Debatten über Virtualität und Hyperrealitäten im digitalen Kosmos relevant sind. [Keywords: Perception, memory, invisible, painting-poem-philosophy] ■