Reconsidering Pictorial Representation by Reconsidering Visual Experience

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THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Some pictures look very much like their subjects. We can recognize things in them quite easily, without special effort or training. Let us call the form of representation distinctively exhibited by such pictures "depiction." Seeing things in pictures is importantly similar to ordinary seeing. We can see a woman in a picture because there is something about the visual experience that is akin to seeing an actual woman. Pictures succeed in having representational content by virtue of providing such experiences. On the other hand, the experience of seeing a woman in a picture and the experience of seeing the actual woman are not exactly alike. Rather, the experience of a picture as a depiction of a scene appears to involve both an awareness of the marked surface and an awareness of what the depicted scene looks like. Borrowing Richard Wollheim's locution, I shall call the experience typically elicited by looking at a picture "seeing-in." [1]

The experience of seeing-in is twofold: It involves simultaneous awareness of the picture surface and of the depicted subject. There are, however, two importantly different ways to conceive of the picture surface. In the first case, we can see a painting as a "mere" material object: We see it simply as a configuration of marks, colors and textures on a two-dimensional surface. In the second case, we can conceive of a picture surface as a configuration of marks, colors and textures in virtue of which it represents a scene. When we look at a line drawing of a face, our experience of the pencil marks does not disrupt your experience as of a face or vice versa. Rather, we can direct our attention to the way the pencil marks capture an eye or a nose. In that case, we consciously attend to the surface and we see it as having an appearance that interplays with the appearance of the depicted subject. We focus on the picture's features in virtue of which it depicts an object. We shall call these features the design features of a picture. Not all visual surface properties are design features: the thickness of the line in a drawing is a design feature; cracks in the paint of an old painting are not, since they do not contribute to the way its subject is depicted.

Depending on these two different conceptions of a picture surface, one can distinguish two different notions of twofoldness. The first kind of twofoldness involves the simultaneous visual awareness of the subject and of the picture surface. This is the standard way of understanding twofoldness. Considerable psychological literature on picture perception centers on the question how the visual system resolves two mutually incompatible impressions of space: one of the 3D depicted scene, the other of a 2D surface. Thus conceived, twofoldness involves two separate experiences and, accordingly, two different entities. I shall call this thin twofoldness. Twofoldness can also be taken to involve the simultaneous visual awareness of the subject and of the picture's design features. This way of understanding twofoldness, which I call thick twofoldness, has been developed by Richard Wollheim. In pictorial experience one is aware simultaneously of the depicted subject and of the way it is depicted. [2]. Wollheim's central thesis is that seeing-in has a distinctive twofold phenomenology that is not comparable with ordinary, non-pictorial experience. Pictorial experience is a complex, component experience with two aspects. Its phenomenology is "incommensurate," as Wollheim calls it, with either the phenomenology of the face-to-face experience of the depicted scene or the experience of seeing the marked surface [4]. Both aspects of a seeing-in experience always interpenetrate one another; they are inseparable and simultaneous.

Thick twofoldness may not be a necessary condition for depiction. Some pictures, such as holiday snapshots, do not call for attention to properties of the surface. Still, thick twofoldness might be a necessary condition for the experience of pictures as pictures. And to appreciate the aesthetic value of a picture requires seeing it as a picture. An adequate account of depic-

Fig. 1. The duck-rabbit figure. We can see the picture as either a rabbit or a duck, but not both simultaneously. According to Ernst Gombrich, there is a similar incompatibility between seeing the surface properties of a picture and seeing what it represents.
tion should allow for twofold experiences in both senses. An account that precludes twofold awareness fails to do justice to the phenomenology of pictorial experience. Consider Ernst Gombrich’s so-called illusion theory of depiction [5]. Gombrich insists that realistic pictures “deceive” the eye, as it were, and give rise to illusionistic experiences of their subjects. To say that seeing-in is illusionistic is to say that seeing an object in a picture is phenomenally indistinguishable from seeing that object face to face. As such Gombrich denies the twofoldness of pictorial experience. For if a spectator were to experience an illusion of seeing what is depicted, then it would not be possible for her to be concurrently aware of the marked surface as a marked surface. So the illusion theory implies that seeing-in is incompatible with seeing a picture as a picture. In Gombrich’s view, the spectator can adopt two stances to a realistic picture that are mutually exclusive: Either she attends to the nature of the marked surface or she projects on it an image of the subject it depicts, but she can never do both at once. Gombrich models his claim on the famous ambiguous “duck-rabbit” figure, which can be seen as either a rabbit or a duck but not as both (Fig. 1). As with the duck-rabbit figure, there is an unbridgeable gap between a picture’s surface and the scene it depicts that can only be resolved through rapid phenomenal “switches” back and forth between the perceptions of each [6]. Yet the analogy fails, because the duck-rabbit figure only illustrates phenomenal switches between two representational contents. One still sees the marks on the surface, and one can still attend to the picture’s design features while seeing either the duck or the rabbit in it. Thus the duck-rabbit example fails to show that it is impossible to see the character of the marked surface and what is depicted simultaneously [7].

If we acknowledge, contra Gombrich, that seeing-in is a perceptual process that allows for thick twofoldness, what underlies or explains it? According to Wollheim, seeing-in does not have its roots in our perception of ordinary objects and their spatial relations but, rather, in our imaginative capacity to project images outward upon all kinds of irregular surfaces: We sometimes see, say, a face in a cloud, or an animal in a stained, cracked wall. However, this idea makes seeing-in unduly subjective: It is characterized independently of the question of how pictures refer to their subjects. We need to understand in what respect the experience of seeing a thing in a picture is related to the experience of actually seeing that thing, and this is missing in Wollheim’s account.

**Experienced Resemblance**

What, then, connects seeing an object in a picture to seeing that object face to face? The obvious answer is: the fact that they look alike. This intuition drives so-called experienced-resemblance theories of depiction. The basic idea is that we see things in pictures because we see some relevant properties of the picture’s surface as resembling whatever is depicted. The leading proponents of this view are Christopher Peacocke, Malcolm Budd and Robert Hopkins [8]. Experienced-resemblance theories acknowledge that seeing-in is thickly twofold. Unlike ordinary seeing, seeing-in is seeing a resemblance between certain design features and the depicted object or scene. Budd makes the comparison with hearing a musical passage as a variation on a certain theme: When we see what is depicted in a picture, we see a relation between it and the depicted object or scene, in a sense similar to that in which we experience the structure of a piece of music as being isomorphic to that of the theme [9].

For Peacocke and Budd, the relevant properties that are experienced as resembling their subjects are those of the “visual field,” which is “just my visual world considered in abstraction from one of its three spatial dimensions, namely distance outwards from my point of view” [10]. According to Hopkins, to see an object in a surface is to see the surface as resembling that object in “outline shape,” which means that for some parts of the picture and some parts of the actual scene there are points at which they subtend similar solid angles. What these accounts share is that they specify the relevant properties as those one could identify if one drew the outline of the objects one saw on a transparent pane of glass placed between the viewer and the scene. Undoubtedly, some pictures resemble their subjects in this way. After all, the idea of the interposing pane of glass traces back to a specific method for constructing realistic paintings that has dominated Western art since the Renaissance. This method, first suggested by Alberti, prescribes treating the picture plane like a “window” through which we look at the visual world. The artist must cease to attend to the meanings of things and attend only to the shapes projected onto an imaginary plane. This method is perfectly illustrated in Dürer’s woodcut of the artist and his frame (Fig. 2). Yet few pictures approach this standard of realistic depiction. So the experienced-resemblance account tends to make the scope of seeing-in too limited. The account might be extended if it allows for pictures that combine multiple viewpoints, as with cubist paintings. This has been suggested by Hopkins [11]. Such pictures could be analyzed into “smaller” pictures, again similar to what they depict. However, there remain many other kinds of pictures. Think of caricatures or various sorts of pictures that depict their subjects in a highly stylized or deformed manner. Even though it may be true that we sometimes recognize what is depicted through noticing resemblances between picture and subject, this is certainly not always the case. After all, in most cases we can tell

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**Fig. 2.** Albrecht Dürer, *Man Drawing a Reclining Woman* (1538). Reprinted in The Complete Woodcuts of Albrecht Dürer, ed. Willi Kurth (New York: Dover, 1963). The Dürer woodcut illustrates the classical post-Renaissance conception of the picture plane as a “window” through which one sees the world.
what kinds of objects a picture depicts in just the same way as we can tell what the visual objects in our environment are. We have no reason to assume that seeing a cat in a picture would depend on perceiving resemblances, any more than seeing that a particular cat is a cat depends on perceiving a resemblance between it and other previously seen cats.

**Pictorial Understanding and Recognition**

One might try to explain depiction by starting from another direction. Rather than saying that we recognize things in pictures in virtue of experienced resemblances, it might be the other way around. We might experience the resemblance because of a more basic knowledge about how a picture represents. That is, what we see in a picture might depend on a grasp or understanding of what it depicts. This idea underlies Nelson Goodman’s symbolic theory of depiction [12]. Goodman understands depiction as essentially conventional, just as linguistic representation is. Pictures refer to their subjects by way of a symbol system independently of resemblance. As with understanding the words of a verbal language, seeing-in essentially involves the acquisition, learning and understanding of a completely arbitrary code. Goodman boldly denies that seeing-in is a genuinely perceptual process: It is cognitive rather than perceptual. This is intuitively hard to accept. It is undeniable that looking at pictures and recognizing things in them is an essentially visual capacity of a kind that reading a text is not, which explains the relative ease with which things are seen in pictures. To say that a picture of a cat need not “resemble” a real cat does not mean, as Goodman insists, that the picture-object relation is as arbitrary as the relation between the word “cat” and an actual cat. Unlike reading a word, seeing an object in a picture crucially depends upon knowledge of that object’s appearance, and in this sense it is dependent on perception.

Goodman’s provocative claim can be weakened, however. The understanding of what pictures depict might depend in crucial aspects on the perceptual skills of their interpreters. This is the core idea of what is known as recognition theory. This account, most prominently defended by Flint Schier and Dominic Lopes [13], claims that recognition is the underlying perceptual mechanism that explains depiction. Recognition is a perceptual skill that enables us to think of objects and so potentially refer to them. On this view, the spectator interprets pictures by recognizing their subjects in the aspects they represent. The virtue of recognition theory is that it is able to accommodate the diversity of pictorial styles and systems: Different styles carry different information about different aspects of their objects and call on somewhat different recognition abilities. The ability to recognize objects by their appearances involves our ability to recognize them under a variety of conditions. Recognition is dynamic, in the sense that features and objects can be recognized under different aspects. Thus, recognizing a thing in a picture does not require having an experience of any resemblance between a part of the picture surface and the actual thing.

May seeing-in be explained in terms of recognition? The problem, as I see it, is that recognition theory fails to do justice to thick twofoldness, mainly because it appeals to perception yet not conscious perception. Visual perception, it is commonly agreed, involves considerable information processing in the brain, of which the perceiver is not herself directly aware. In philosophy, one sometimes speaks of “subpersonal,” as opposed to personal, processes—that is, the processes that causally underpin and enable a person’s sight. Recognition theory explains depiction in terms of unconscious information processing. As such, perception is understood in causal terms: Inner states in the brain contain information about, and so represent, external properties and objects because they are somehow causally connected to them. To see why this account of perception is unsatisfactory, consider an analogy with photographs. Some philosophers hold that photographs are transparent in the sense that they are media through which we see the world [14]. We see through photographs in large part because of their causal and mechanical nature. Being the result of mechanical processes, a photograph simply shows what caused the image on the emulsion. Therefore we have visual experiences of their subjects that do not crucially depend on the intentions or beliefs of the picture-maker. Now, according to recognition theory, this is necessarily true of all pictures. This follows from the causal theory of perception. Lopes asserts that “there is as much reason to believe that we see through paintings and drawings as through photographs, and this is why we see their subjects in both” [15]. This is so because “all pictures, if they are information-transmitting devices, are causally linked to their sources” [16]. When the artist makes a drawing, she accomplishes the transformation on the paper of what she sees under the guidance of subpersonal processes of recognition. The exercise of the recognitional abilities on which both the making and the understanding of the drawing depend allows the spectator to recognize the depicted object without the benefit of beliefs about its properties.

As such, recognition theory explains seeing-in in terms of “seeing-through”. We see the picture surface and we simultaneously see its subject through it. This is unsatisfactory, however, because it explains only thin twofoldness. Conscious awareness of the picture surface may not be necessary for recognizing something in it, yet it seems to be required for thick twofoldness. Therefore we need to appeal to an alternative, experiential notion of perception.

**Perceptual Presence and Dual Perceptual Content**

I propose that seeing-in and its complex twofold phenomenology can be integrated into a general theory of perception, provided that we adopt a proper view on perceptual content. Such view is offered by the so-called “enactive” or “sensorimotor” account, defended by Kevin O’Regan and Alva Noë [17]. In this view, vision is a mode of exploration of the world that is mediated by knowledge of “sensorimotor contingencies” [18]. The sensorimotor contingencies involved in perceptual experience are the laws that link the perceiver’s actions to the changes in sensory inputs that these actions cause. There are two parts to the enactive account. The first is that perception is a way of “acting,” a kind of skillful activity on the part of the perceiver as a whole. The second claim is that the ability to perceive is constituted by the possession of the relevant sort of sensorimotor knowledge: Perceptual content involves knowing, implicitly and practically, that, had things been different, they would have looked different, and that, had one moved, and so changed one’s spatial relation to the environment, things would have looked different. Thus perceptual experience involves both a kind of “acting” and a distinctive kind of “knowledge.” Seeing an object consists in being able to exercise mastery of, for example, the fact that, if one makes an eye or head movement, the stimulus will change in a particular way. Having knowledge of the appearance of things is a practical skill, involving one’s understanding of the relation between how things are and how their appearance changes as one moves.

The enactive view stands in opposition
to the standard way of treating visual perception in terms of inner representations. Seeing does not consist in the production of an internal representation isomorphic with part of the world seen but, rather, in combining the results of environmental probing with knowledge of laws of sensorimotor contingency. For our purposes, the crucial point of difference between both approaches is phenomenological. Consider the phenomenon known as perceptual presence. It is an essential part of the phenomenology of perception that we have a feeling of presence of features of which we are not strictly aware, such as unattended environmental detail, or the far sides and occluded portions of the objects before us. When we look at an apple in front of us, for instance, we visually experience the “whole” apple, not merely its facing surface. According to the standard view in cognitive science, the presence of the whole object is something we infer on the basis of limited sensory information [19]. Within this view, when looking at an apple, we directly see only the visual properties of its facing surface, in virtue of which we “see” the whole apple, through interpreting our limited sensory experience in the light of our knowledge of what apples are. As such, the sense of presence is not really experiential: It is a matter of thinking rather than visually experiencing. Noë, by contrast, insists that the sense of presence is genuinely perceptual and does not depend on the availability of the corresponding belief [20]. He illustrates this with a figure of the Kanisza triangle (Fig. 3). We see this figure as a picture of a triangle that partially occludes three disks. We naturally experience the presence of the occluded portions of the disks located at the vertices. We do not merely “think” the presence. After all, knowing that there are not really occluded bits present does not significantly alter the sense of perceptual presence. The occluded portions of the disks are perceptually present without being actually perceived.

Noë offers an alternative explanation of perceptual presence in terms of “accessibility”: The sense of presence consists in our practical knowledge of how to bring unperceived items into view by movements of the body. Consider the analogy with touch. When one holds a bottle in one’s hand with eyes shut, one makes contact with the bottle at isolated points where the bottle touches the skin. Nevertheless, it seems as if the whole bottle is present to one’s awareness, as if one perceives the whole bottle, and that one has access to detail about currently untouched parts of the bottle by further hand movements. The whole bottle is “virtually” present in the sense that we have direct access to it. The same is true of perception in general. When we see, perceptually it seems to us as if we encounter a world of immense detail, but it does not seem to us as if we have all that environ-

**The Distinctive Phenomenology of Seeing-In**

If perceptual experience in general depends on the perceiver’s deployment of sensorimotor skills, then the same is true of picture perception. When we recognize an object in a picture, we draw on general sensorimotor skills that allow us to see how things are through their variable appearances. In this respect, seeing-in is similar to seeing the circularity of a plate in its apparently elliptical shape. On the other hand, seeing-in is also importantly different from ordinary experience. When we look at an object in a picture, we cannot interact with it, that is, we cannot make its appearance change when we move with respect to the picture surface. We can only interact with a picture qua physical object, not qua depiction. When we look at a depiction, we do not use our visual skills for purposes of action. In the case of picture perception, we engage our sensorimotor skills in a distinct way. The relevant distinction is not simply between the picture surface and the picture’s subject (thin twofoldness) but, rather, between two kinds of content, interplaying with each other (thick twofoldness). Seeing-in is twofold in the sense that we see the surface in a certain way and we simultaneously see an appearance of the depicted subject in it. A crucial element to develop the enactive
approach to pictures into a fully fledged account of twofoldness can be found in Michael Podro’s proposal that the design features of a picture are recognized as being what he calls a “depicting procedure” [21]. This means that pictures are made through marks put down by the activities of drawing or painting, and pictures are looked at this way. Seeing a picture as a picture amounts to seeing the surface as the culmination of an activity, as an object brought about as a result of the depicting procedure. When we look at a line drawing, for instance, and when we follow the lines of the drawing, we can observe the way that the rhythm of the line registers and connects the complex forms of the subject. The subject and the medium mutually bring each other into being. Podro speaks of a “symmetrical relation” between medium and subject [22]: There is a symmetry between seeing the subject in the depicting procedure and seeing the depicting procedure in the subject represented by it.

To be aware of the depiction procedure engages sensorimotor knowledge in a distinct way. To see how the procedure interpenetrates with the appearance of the depicted subject involves understanding the potentialities of the procedure, that is, how it could have been used otherwise, to have other realizations or to pick out different situations in the world. The artist resolves a subject in a particular way. She depicts the subject through capturing an appearance of it, yet one that can exist only in a picture, using a particular depiction procedure. Looking at the picture surface this way transforms the content of seeing the depicted scene in such a way that it no longer matches the content of seeing the scene face to face. The interaction between the “what” and the “how” of depiction produces something new in the world, something irreducible to the kinds of recognition that obtain in ordinary viewing. Yet, precisely through seeing this transformed content, the perceiver has a simultaneous awareness of how the picture represents and of what it represents.

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References and Notes

Unedited references as provided by author.


Glossary

enactive approach to perception—explains perception in terms of skillful activity of the whole organism rather than in terms of inner representations in the brain.

perceptual presence—the feeling of presence we have of environmental features that we do not strictly perceive, such as unattended detail, or occluded sides or far sides of objects seen.

seeing-in—seeing one thing in the light of another, notably, in the case of pictures, seeing the depicted subject in the picture surface.

sensorimotor contingencies—the laws that determine the way changes in sensory input depend on changes in movement.

subpersonal processes—processes that causally underpin visual perception and enable the subject to see, but of which she is herself not consciously aware.

thin twofoldness—the simultaneous visual awareness of the picture surface and what the picture represents.

thick twofoldness—a complex visual experience in front of a picture that involves a simultaneous awareness of what is depicted and the way it is depicted.

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