DEPICTION

by Michele Di Monte

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It. *Rappresentazione figurativa*; Fr. *Représentation figurative*; Germ. *Bildliche Darstellung*; Span. *Representación pictorica*. According to the common use of everyday language the phenomenon of depiction mostly deals with the nature and functioning of pictures and images. The literature on the topic has captured such a fundamental pretheoretical intuition conceiving depiction as a special kind of representation whose focal or paradigmatic examples are figurative paintings, drawings and the like. Depictive representation is thus roughly distinguishable from other kinds of representation, such as descriptive representations, whose focal example is language (or other notational systems).

From this point of view, a philosophical analysis of depiction amounts to answering "the metaphysical question of what it is for one thing to depict another", that is, to providing "individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for being a picture of some object" (Abell and Bantinaki 2010: 2). If so, depiction is mainly a visual phenomenon concerning the ways a thing (a picture) represents something through representing its visual appearances.

WORKING DEFINITION AND CONCEPT EXTENSION

However, even if we agree with this account, there seems to be no principled reason to rule out the possibility of depictions representing through other sensory modes.

If we define the appearances of an object as modes of sensory presentation enabling the perceivers to have a perceptual awareness of that object and to perceptually categorize it as that object, we may also suggest a more inclusive definition of depiction. We thus may understand depiction as a process in virtue of which an object O presents in a sensory mode, through some of its sensory properties, a set of appearances of an object S, so enabling a suitably equipped perceiver of O to correctly recognize those appearances as the appearances of S, and yet to be perceptually aware of the difference between O and S. According to such working definition, there are not only visual depictions, but also tactile, acoustic, and other perceptual kinds of depiction. For instance, the rubber skin of a doll or a human whistle roughly imitating a birdsong could count as cases of, respectively, tactile and acoustic depiction.

On the other hand, if we assume that depiction is always a perceptual representation of something recognizable, then we have to exclude from the concept all those traditional artistic media which are not depictive in this sense, such as abstract painting or sculpture, architecture and other aniconic forms.

CONVENTIONS, CULTURE AND HISTORY

With rare exceptions (Lopes 1997; Hopkins 2000; Kulvicki, 2006: 106-114), the modern debates on depiction have almost exclusively focused on its visual dimension, tackling the many problems raised by the making, understanding and use of pictures (and only occasionally those concerning sculptures; see Clapin 1999 and Hopkins 2004).

From the end of the 60s to the beginning of the 90s one of the central issues of the debate has been that of the alleged conventionality of pictorial representation. Nelson Goodman (1968), in particular, famously challenged the commonsensical idea that depiction is based on visual resemblance, according to the classical theory of mimesis. For Goodman, on the contrary, depiction is essentially a symbolic denotational system, depending for its functioning on the application of conventional codes culturally and historically indexed, not unlike language. From a more explicitly semiotic point of view, the question of the pictoriality of a certain object "is posed – as Greimas put it (1984: 9) – only if an iconizing reading grid is postulated and applied to the interpretation of such objects, but this is not the necessary condition for their apperception, and it does not exclude the existence of other modes of reading that are just as legitimate", because every reading grid is subject to cultural relativism. Such semiotic approaches are often based on antirealist epistemological assumptions (Groupe μ 1992), but they have in any case to face several difficulties, which should be obvious. For instance, it is hardly understandable how to postulate, apply or even conceive an "iconizing grid" if one has not already experienced an actual case of iconic representation in the first place and has not generalized upon it. On the other hand, it seems unlikely that the mere projection of an iconizing grid on an abstract painting – such as a work by Barnett Newman – could make someone see it as, say, a portrait of a woman, not to mention the problem of the standards required to establish when a reading is "legitimate".

Goodman's essay had a large influence on the contemporary debate, but also raised several doubts and objections (for instance, among others, Gombrich 1982: 279), although some recent authors, notably John Kulvicki (2006 and 2014), has been inspired by his work, defending the idea of the symbolic nature of depiction as a denotative structural system. However, in the last decades the authors concerned with the philosophy of depiction rather aimed at discussing and refining, even if from different perspectives, the basic intuition that pictures represent by (some kind of) resemblance, and so they tried to settle the vexed questions of reflectivity, symmetry and vagueness typically entailed by similarity relations.

SUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCE AND OBJECTIVE PROPERTIES

According to the current literature, the most relevant approaches in the field are usually divided into two main groups. In the first group there are the so-called "Resemblance Theories of Depiction", which draw

on the essential role played by visual resemblance in pictorial representations. In the second group there are the so-called "Psychological Theories", which explain depiction primarily in terms of the psychological experiences or states of mind pictures are designed to trigger in perceivers. As a matter of fact, there are many overlaps between the two groups, either implicitly or explicitly, for the relevant similarities between pictures and objects, whatever their specific nature may be, are to be actually perceived, in any case. On the other hand, the effectiveness of the recognitional skills or the specific phenomenology of picture viewing experienced by the perceiver depend in a way or another on the possibility of a matching between picture and object, that is a kind of visual resemblance, if only an experienced resemblance or, at the very least, a resemblance between the psychological states involved in perceiving, respectively, the real object face-to-face and the same object depicted in the picture.

A more substantive distinction has been recently suggested by John Hyman (2006 and 2013), who contrasted subjectivist theories, stemming from Descartes, with objectivist theories, stemming from Plato. According to Hyman's objectivist claim, the resemblance in form and colour pictorially connecting pictures and objects – which he identifies in the occlusion shape of objects – "belongs to optics, not psychology" (Hyman 2013: 143). Other authors, however, have recently tried to combine the merits of different accounts in a "syncretistic" view (Voltolini 2013 and 2015), that aims to reconcile the configurational dimension of depiction, that is the visual information objectively structured in the vehicle, and its recognitional dimension, so capturing also the essential feature of twofoldness which has often been considered as a distinctive property of images and pictures, from Aristotle (*De memoria* 450b 25) to Polanyi and Wollheim (1980 and 1987).

After all, the ontological point is that the perceptual awareness of depiction *qua* depiction must involve more than simple perception of an objective likeness. Where an animal could only discriminate sameness or otherness, a man is able to apprehend an "image of", and that is not a matter of the degree of likeness, but of a conceptual dimension which is essentially constitutive of a specific object, namely, in Hans Jonas' words, an *eidos* (Jonas 1961: 169).

No matter what approach is adopted, the theory of depiction has to deal with a number of puzzling ontological, epistemological and aesthetic problems which we cannot discuss here in detail. One of the most debated issues is the question of the standards of correctness in identifying and articulating the representational contents of depictive objects. Rejecting the idea that depiction is essentially denotation, many authors argued that pictures rather represent the perceptual aspects or the optical array of an object or scene (Ingarden 1962; Gibson 1971). In other words, depiction concerns the "sense" – the modes of presentation – not the "reference", as Hyman (2013 and 2017) put it drawing on the well-known Fregean distinction. However, even putting aside the problem of non-existent or imaginary objects, the perceptual aspects projected in a picture are potentially compatible with a large number of different items, so that the object depicted is referentially under-determined by the configurational properties of the picture (Gombrich 1960). The famous portrait of the *Fornarina* by Raphael, for instance, might depict the painter's mistress or just a model, but also, say, an identical twin sister, a hyper-realistic wax sculpture, a silhouette, another indistinguishable painting and so on.

So, even if we assume that the "figurativity" of pictures might be phenomenologically "self-sufficient" (Spinicci 2008: 85), we are still left with the problem of ascertaining the right picture visual content, that is the object whose aspect or "sense" we see in the painting, the *Bildsujet*, as Husserl has described it (Husserl 1980: 18-20). One way to answer the question is to take into account the intentions of the artist, but even when they are easily accessible to the viewer the fact remains that the artist or author may hold erroneous beliefs about the look and the identification of certain objects. These difficulties notwithstanding, it seems nevertheless reasonable, on a more general level, to maintain that pictures denote and stand for something when they are specifically used to do so (Novitz 1977).

Be that as it may, such quandaries have relevant consequences for the proper understanding of the meaning of pictures, as well as for their aesthetic appreciation and historical interpretation. As the case clearly shows, the problems raised by the philosophy of depiction are connected in a complex network of different factors involving psychology, habits, techniques, conventions, cultural trends and contextual conditions, although we should not overlook "the distinction between pictures and their creation on the one hand, and the use made of pictures on the other" (Novitz 1977: 7).

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