Introduction

This book is about pictures, and the way in which they represent. It is also about the visual imagination, and its relation to vision. Why study either of these issues, and, in particular, why study them together?

Consider first pictorial representation, since that occupies by far the larger portion of what is to follow. One reason for considering this topic is as part of a larger inquiry into the nature of representations quite generally. The notion of representation has, in recent years, come very much to the fore in philosophy and the related discipline of cognitive science. It is now commonplace to apply this notion both to external symbols, used by thinking agents as tools, and to the internal states of those agents which provide their fundamental grip on the world. Thus not only linguistic expressions, sculptures, and the mime artist's gestures are said to represent, but also beliefs, fears and experiential states and even the sub-personal states of the cognitive system which underpin them. Using representation in this way stretches the notion pretty thin, perhaps concealing crucial differences between the various symbols and states, and in particular between the symbols on the one hand and the internal states on the other. This does not provide a reason to abandon the general notion of representing, which indeed quickly comes to seem indispensable. But the way to minimize the problems here is to attend to the differences between, and smaller groupings within, the various kinds of representation. And this is where our inquiry comes in.

In understanding representations of any kind, we naturally turn to external symbols as our models. Developing a decent understanding of the content-bearing nature of our mental and cognitive states is a challenging task indeed. It is very hard to find the theoretical tools with which to do this without drawing on the less elusive examples provided by external representations. But when we consider these, two kinds of representing dominate the landscape. These are representation by language and representation by pictures. For better or worse, we seem compelled to see these as the two paradigms of external representation. This tendency has a long history, dating back to the ancient

1

Greeks.[1] That it is just as strong today is manifest in the recent debates in cognitive science over whether some mental representations are 'pictorial'; the majority, it is assumed, being more like representations in language.[2] Of course, the proposed analogies with pictures and words can be more or less subtle. The more subtle they are, the less directly an account of pictorial representation will influence what we say about certain inner states. But even the most sophisticated treatments tend to draw their inspiration from pictures, even if what they take from them is rather abstract features which might readily find instances, and not just analogues, in the inner realm. Thus even the best treatments might benefit from a sharpened understanding of pictorial representation. For that might bring a shift in our conception of all the features of picturing, from the more concrete and picture-specific to the more abstract and widespread.

A second motivation stems from fundamentally different concerns. A good deal of our aesthetic engagement is with, or is mediated by engagement with, external representations. We relish the unflinching realism of a novelist's descriptions, or savour the delicacy with which a canvas has been worked. There are many and varied aspects to our appreciation here, but pictures offer satisfactions which other representations cannot. Two examples should suffice. A picture, of a landscape say, can allow me to savour the very feature, the beauty of the scene, which might engage me if I were seeing the landscape itself. In contrast, a description of the scene, however perfect, cannot do this. It might convey that the landscape is beautiful, and why. It certainly might itself engage my sensibilities, for the beauty of its language or the nobility of its vision. It might inspire me to visualize the scene, and thereby come to savour its beauty (see below). Nonetheless, in the case of the description, unlike that of the picture, simply grasping the represented content does not offer me what seeing the landscape in the flesh could.[3] The second example is parallel, but from a rather different realm. Both pictures and descriptions can be erotic. But erotic picturing has powers which its equivalent in language does not. Only the former allows us to engage with those very features, and in the same way, as we might if seeing the object of desire face-to-face. Confronting the picture, we may be aroused by the erotic appeal of the sitter. Reading the description, although our erotic interest may be engaged, and although the passage may indeed convey erotically salient features of the person described, it does not allow us to respond to

[1] See, for instance, Plato's *Cratylus*.
[2] See, e.g., Block 1982.
[3] For elaboration and defence of this contrast, and of many of the points relevant to it made below, see Hopkins 1997a.

those features themselves. These two examples suggest that pictures allow for visual engagement, not just with the marked surfaces themselves, but with the things they represent. And the point here extends, as the second example suggests, beyond the realm of the aesthetic. Pictures allow for many forms of engagement with their objects, all the forms, perhaps, which vision itself involves.

How do these observations give impetus to our inquiry into pictorial representation? We need to understand how pictures can have the powers just noted, what it is about the way they represent which enables them to do these things. Perhaps it will seem obvious how to answer. Surely pictures are quintessentially visual representations, as words are not. It is hardly surprising, then, that pictures, but not words, offer us visual satisfactions – the chance to savour the (visual) beauty, or the visually accessible erotic properties, of their objects. But this answer, while not exactly wrong, skates over the real problem. That is precisely to know what sense to make of the thought that pictures are visual representations, and to do so in a way which yields the desired explanations. We understand pictures by looking at them, but that is equally true of the expressions of written language. In both cases we are aware that we are looking at a representation, and in both our experience presents us with marks on a surface, thus differing quite sharply from the experience of seeing the represented object in the flesh. In what, then, does the visual nature of picturing, as opposed to language, lie? Perhaps only the picture *looks like* the landscape or the erotic scene. That indeed, will be the answer pursued in this book. But making it even superficially tempting will demand a lot of work. Moreover, and this is the point here, that work is precisely on the question we are trying to motivate – how pictures represent.

Now consider visualizing. Do our two motivations also connect with this part of our inquiry? The first motivation takes for granted, rather than bolsters, an interest in investigating the visual imagination. After all, visualizing is precisely one of the intentional mental states we might hope to illuminate by comparisons with the pictorial case. However, this is at least a reason for considering pictures and mental images together. The discussion of visualizing in chapter 7 will in fact make somewhat subtle use of the pictorial model. It suggests that, while visualizing is not best modelled directly on picturing, the two do stand in similar relations to vision. Nonetheless, the moral will be that a better grasp of pictorial representation can yield real increments in our understanding of visualizing.

The second motivation fits the book's ambitions better still. For pictures are not alone in having the powers described: visual imagining

4 Introduction

displays them too. Visualizing some long left landscape, or some much desired amorous encounter, I might engage with the beauty of the imagined scene, or the erotic appeal of the imagined person. Other mental states, such as merely pondering the encounter, or rehearsing my beliefs about the landscape's features, do not offer the same benefits. Again, then, the question arises what is it about visualizing which enables it to do these things? Again, the tempting answer is to say that it is somehow visual, as the other mental states considered are not. And again, that suggestion opens up precisely the inquiry I undertake below, to try and understand visualizing's links to vision, to try to make sense of what is visual about visual imagining.

I believe that a satisfying answer to this question has to couple it to the parallel question for picturing. It would have to draw, I think, on precisely the notion of *visual presenting* discussed below (7.1, 7.9).[4] But I should concede now that this book only goes some of the way towards providing the materials that answer needs, and that it does not explicitly relate them to the question here framed. For the notion of visual presentation proves only partly amenable to the treatment offered herein; and thus at the end of the argument we still lack some of what is needed to explain the powers visualizing and picturing share. For all that, I hope that what follows lays the foundations for that explanation. Concerning picturing, the book offers an account which, if right, tells us most of what we could conceivably want to know about the phenomenon. Concerning visualizing, it makes proposals which, though tentative and at most part of the truth, promise to provide at least one key ingredient in a full account.

In this respect my conclusions are rather more modest than those of the only other attempt at these explanations known to me. This is Sartre's *L'Imaginaire*.[5] Sartre concentrated on imagining, and discussed pictures only as a means to that end. I, in contrast, concentrate on picturing and discuss imagining only in the light of those conclusions. But Sartre's motivation is very close to the second one offered here. Although he rejected any simple assimilation of depicting and visualizing, he saw that a proper understanding of each required some grasp of the other. He also saw that only thus could we explain the powers the two share, and thereby understand the value for us of pictures and visualizings, their proper place in human life. If Sartre's views on pictures and images are right, as I suspect they are not, he offered a more complete solution to these problems than I even attempt here. But even if his conclusions are flawed,

[4] All otherwise unspecified references are to parts of this book, by chapter and section number.
[5] Translated anonymously, as *The Psychology of Imagination*, Citadel Press.

there is much to learn from his sense of where in this area the real problems lie.

In what follows, these goals will be present only in the background. I hope, though, that the thoughtful reader will bear them in mind when judging the merits of the argument as a whole. For they help rebut a tempting, but ill-founded, accusation. As I develop the account of pictorial representation, I will, of necessity, have to set aside various phenomena, embodied in putative counter-examples, by reclassifying them. I will, for instance, suggest that although the pictures in question represent, they do not exhibit the form of representation which interests me; or that they do not represent quite what the objection claims they do. Naturally, this provokes the worry that I buy security for my view at the cost of its interest. The charge is that such manoeuvres leave me characterizing a notion which, while perfectly coherent, is just an artefact of my starting point and argumentative methods. The test of this accusation's truth is, in the end, whether what I say can meet the motivations this introduction has described. I believe that the account of pictorial representation developed below helps capture what is visual about picturing. It thereby helps to give focus to the thought that pictures provide a distinctive paradigm of external representation. It also sets us on the way to understanding how pictures have the aesthetic, erotic and other powers they do. What makes the concept I trace interesting is, if anything, its role in discharging these intellectual duties. If the reader can begin to see how it might play such a role, that is her justification for rejecting the accusation. If she cannot, that is her justification for leaving the book unfinished.

Some sketch of the argument may help guide the reader through its twists and turns.

I begin by framing the question pictorial representation poses. The rest of the first chapter discusses various answers which have been proposed, sifting them to see which approach to the topic is the most promising.

Chapter 2 attempts to structure our investigation around certain tasks an account of picturing should perform. I suggest that such a theory should explain why pictorial representation has certain prominent features, and I describe and defend six I take to be central. Returning to the various accounts considered in the first chapter, we are now able to assess them much more acutely. The upshot is that we need to approach picturing through the experience to which it gives rise, and to understand that experience as one of resemblance.

However, any appeal to resemblance in this context faces several serious problems. One, that resemblance seems to have the wrong logical

6   Introduction

form to fit picturing, is readily enough set aside. A second difficulty is that
of stating the respect in which pictures and their objects are experienced
as resembling. This requires much more extended treatment, and in
particular demands protracted discussion, provided in chapter 3, of
general issues in the philosophy of perception. Chapter 4 brings the
conclusions reached there to bear in offering an account of our experience
of pictures; and in closing the gap between such an account and a full
theory of pictorial representation. By this stage, we have a rudimentary
account of picturing, and are able to offer explanations of some of the
features noted earlier.

With an account of picturing before us, we can turn to the last major
problem facing the resemblance view, which is to show that it applies to
all kinds of picturing. The defence concentrates on counter-examples
which raise issues of more general theoretical interest. Thus chapter 5
discusses the problems posed by misrepresenting pictures, and chapter 6
those presented by pictures with indeterminate contents. The former
offers an opportunity to explore further the dependence of the account on
claims about vision. The latter provides a chance to discuss the question
how we interpret pictures, how we use the experiences they engender to
recover their contents. By the close of these two chapters all six prominent
features of picturing have been explained. Thus, after some discussion of
how the account relates to the question of artificial perspective, what I
have to say about pictures is complete.

The last chapter turns to the issue of visualizing. I present the problem
as one of accounting for a feature common to visualizing, ordinary seeing
and our experience of pictures. In this light some of the available
strategies for conceiving the visual imagination are assessed, especially
those proposed by Sartre and Peacocke. The positive account developed
in the chapter is one on which visualizing, like picturing, is related to
vision by ties of content, and of perspectival structure in particular. I
discuss vision's differences from touch and hearing in this respect, and
how these differences are preserved in their imaginative equivalents. But I
am anxious not to ignore the differences between perceiving and imagin-
ing in a given modality, both drawing on and amplifying the work of
Sartre and Wittgenstein on this issue. I end by pulling together the
accounts of visualizing and picturing offered in the book, trying to see
how far they advance us in understanding the notion of visual presenta-
tion.

1   The question

1   Introduction

How do pictures represent? Consider for a moment Picasso's *Guernica* (figure 1). It is a large flat surface covered with paint, broken by differing areas of colour into angular shards of blue-grey, brown and black. This surface has a history, having been painted in 1937 in response to the German bombing of the Basque town; and a location, now residing, after many years of controversy, in Madrid. In these respects – having a distinctive composition, history and location – it is like many objects of the sort which fill our world. Unlike many others, however, the painting also represents. It is a powerful evocation of a terrible event. It shows a scene of suffering, carnage and mutilation, scattered with the bodies of man and beast alike. Thus there are two aspects to the picture's nature. It is on the one hand a material object, on the other a representation. One way to present our problem is to ask how one thing can fill both these roles. How can a paint-covered surface represent other objects and scenes at all?

We can ask a parallel question about language. A written description of a scene is on the one hand a set of marks on a surface, and on the other a representation of absent objects and events. Here too we may wonder how one item is able to play both roles. Yet there is a difference between the two cases. We may begin to suspect this if we note some obvious contrasts between examples of the two. A written description has to be read in a certain order, but the eye is free to roam over a picture without confusing the viewer. The colour of the marks rarely matters to what a description says, but often affects what a picture represents. The relative location of different bits of the picture dictates the spatial relations between the objects they stand for, but the same does not seem true for the words in the description, not at least in any very direct way. And one might go on. These differences suggest that pictures and words represent in different ways, that the form of representation involved is different in the two cases.

Thus one way to reformulate the question with which we began is this. What is pictorial representation? What is the form of representation which

7

Figure 1 Pablo Picasso, *Guernica*

pictures display, and how does it differ from representation in language? Much of this book will be spent trying to understand this form of representation, which I shall for variety's sake consider under several names – 'pictorial representation', 'depiction' and 'picturing'.

Now, we will get nowhere with this issue unless we immediately take note of something. It is that pictures themselves represent in a variety of ways. I do not mean by this that pictorial representation may itself fragment into a largely disparate collection of subspecies. That may indeed be so; but if it is, it should be a conclusion of our enquiry, not a preliminary to it. Rather, I mean that pictorial representation may be only one of several forms which pictures exhibit. An example helps make this suggestion more plausible.

Many pictures from the religious art of the West represent the Holy Spirit by depicting a dove. I suggest that there is not one form of representation here, but two. The dove is depicted, but the Holy Spirit is represented in some other way. After all, the Spirit is only represented by virtue of the fact that the dove is, but the converse is not true. This suggests that the representation of the Holy Spirit is a more complex, more derived phenomenon than the representation of the dove. Further, a description of the scene which mentioned a dove might represent the presence of the Holy Spirit in a similarly derived manner. This provides at least some reason for thinking that the description and the picture represent the Spirit in the same way, a way that will not therefore be distinctively pictorial. In contrast, they represent the dove in very different ways, and the difference is precisely that between pictorial and linguistic representation.

If pictures can represent in several different ways, we will never be clear about pictorial representation unless we take care not to confuse it with those other forms. We must, then, be prepared first to isolate depiction and then to attempt to understand it. Before we engage in either task for ourselves, however, we should see what answers to our question are already available.

2   Resemblance

There is a natural thought with which to begin consideration of these matters, and which has appealed to many. It is that depiction is intimately connected to resemblance. Pictures, the thought runs, look like or resemble what they represent. A photograph of someone resembles that person, and an oil painting of a well-groomed horse looks like a horse. In contrast, written descriptions of these things, whatever tongue they are in, do not resemble them. For how could a series of

letters on a page resemble a flesh-and-blood person or stallion? Here, then, is the crucial difference between representation by pictures and by words: the former depends on resemblance and the latter does not. Here, indeed, is the essence of depiction: one thing depicts another only if the first resembles the second.

Attractive as this idea may seem, it has been subject to copious and powerful criticism.[1] From this onslaught three problems emerge as sufficiently difficult to require tackling by any serious version of the resemblance view. I will briefly expound each.

Before I can outline the first problem, we must consider the logical framework on which the fabric of depiction rests. Some depiction is depiction of a particular item. For example, Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun's *Portrait of Countess Golovine* (figure 2) depicts that woman, the eighteenth-century Russian aristocrat. However, not every picture depicts a particular. Although *Guernica* depicts a mother weeping over her dead child, there is no particular woman represented here. Pictures such as this depict some, but no particular, thing with certain properties – in this case the property of being a woman, being a mother, being wracked by grief, holding a child and so on. However, if we leave matters at that we implicitly exaggerate the differences between the two sorts of picture. For even those pictures which do depict particular things must depict them as having certain properties. The Vigée-Lebrun portrait, for example, depicts the Countess as alert, as holding her shawl to her chest in a striking way, as wearing a distinctive scarf in her tousled hair. Vigée-Lebrun did not *have* to attribute these properties to the Countess – she might have depicted her without her shawl, dozing peacefully. But what she could not do was to depict Golovine without attributing *any* properties to her. Thus the distinction we want is really between pictures representing some set of properties, though not some particular which possesses them; and pictures representing some set of properties as possessed by a particular thing.[2]

Against this background we may formulate the first problem for the resemblance view. It is that it seems only to cope with the depiction of particulars. The problem is that resemblance is a relation between two particulars – one resembling the other. It is hard to know how to make sense of resemblance between a particular thing and some, but no

---

[1] Criticism goes back at least to Descartes. See the selection from the fourth discourse of his *Optics* (1637) in Cottingham et al. 1985, pp. 164–66. For more recent scepticism, see Goodman 1969, chapter 1; Black 1972, pp. 117–25; Walton 1973, footnote 23; Schier 1986, pp. 2–9, 179–88.

[2] The *locus classicus* for discussion of these issues is Goodman 1969, chapter 1, sections 5–6. For a related distinction see Kaplan 1969, pp. 225–28. For discussion see Howell 1974; Novitz 1977; Phillips 1978; and Wollheim 1987, chapter 2, note 16.