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978-0-521-10940-6 - Deeper into Pictures: An Essay on Pictorial Representation

Flint Schier

Excerpt

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## 1

*The enigma of depiction*

Pictures are my theme, what they are and how we understand them. Anyone who reflects on pictorial experience cannot fail to sense that pictures are both like and unlike literary works. A Dutch landscape painter and a travel writer can give us, each in his own way, an idea of what a town or river looks like, but while the painter makes us see his town, the writer can at best inspire us to imagine our seeing it. Vermeer's *View of Delft* is just that: a view of Delft: we seem to see through his canvas to a small Dutch town, its dark reflection shimmering in the river. No doubt the gifted writer can 'paint' such a scene with a few deft words, but reading her will not remotely resemble a Vermeerian view of Delft.

To get a feel for the importance of this distinction, imagine replacing various depictions by descriptions. Take down the portrait of grandfather judge and replace it by a description of his appearance; replace the altarpiece by a passage that describes the crucifixion; take down the poster of Bakunin or Colette and put a description in its place. Pictures, one finds, are more apt than descriptions to stand in for what they symbolise or denote. Nor is the representational virtue of depiction due to any aesthetic inferiority of description, for not even the most moving description of the crucifixion could take over the function of the meanest provincial altarpiece. Icons and not prose arouse the ire of purist and puritan, Christian and Muslim. Pictures, not descriptions, steal away the soul of the depicted one. Jonas Barish has documented a two-thousand-year anti-theatrical streak in Western thought.<sup>1</sup> It is impossible to imagine such a campaign of vilification directed against sonnets, villanelles or short stories as such. Books have been burnt, but almost never simply on account of their being books. It is the dream of the philosopher of art to account for the magic of pictorial experience,<sup>2</sup> but unfortunately, despite the distinctiveness of the experience, analysis has proved diabolically difficult. Do depictions

<sup>1</sup> Barish 1981. See also Kenneth Clark's *Moments of Vision*, London, 1981.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Kris and Kurz 1979 and Gombrich and Kris 1940 on the magical aspects of depiction. Panofsky 1964 is also highly suggestive.

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give us illusions as of seeing what they depict, as the numerous fables about Zeuxis et alii suggest? No: only a rude mechanical would reach for the ripe peaches ensconced in Sebastian Stoskopf's *Allegory of the Five Senses*. Then again, perhaps a picture resembles what it depicts. But it is hard to see how a cracked painted surface could look like a ripe, round, succulent peach. The failure of the resemblance model has encouraged some to infer that depiction is not so much distinct from language as a peculiar form of it, while others have concluded that the very idea of depiction as a clearly definable sort of symbol is just so much marshgas.

It is evident that pictures strictly so called have affinities with other symbols. Consider, for example, an actor's gesture in stabbing the King, or an impersonator's version of Humphrey Bogart's voice, or a bust of Louis XIV. Aristotle (*Poetics* 1448a) drew a distinction between the mimetic action of the actor and the narrative description of an action. I am tempted to say that whereas the narrator describes action, the actor depicts it. C. S. Peirce, the first to perceive the uniqueness, integrity and extent of this class of symbols, gave them the name that has stuck: they are 'icons'. In this essay I shall concentrate on visual icons and on pictures in particular. A successful account of depiction should set us on the right path to a theory for all icons.

Although the present work is intended to offer an account of depiction and not a survey of the wreckage of previous accounts, it will help the reader to get his bearings if first we sketch the main theories of depiction now on the market, warts and all. Philosophical excitement starts when the best accounts fail and we have to go back to the drawing board. I should warn the reader that the theories which come in for criticism in this chapter are being rusticated and not excommunicated. The concept of natural generativity proposed in chapter 3 will help us see more clearly which pieces of each rejected theory can be summoned back from the flames and which must be consigned to them for ever.

## I RESEMBLANCE

The view that pictures resemble what they depict is enshrined in vulgar aesthetics; it is common to compliment a picture for being a good or striking likeness of its subject, and what could this mean but that the canvas or drawing or photograph resembles its subject in some good and striking way? But the resemblance model of depiction has migrated from folklore into theory, thanks especially

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to the associationist psychologists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and it is as theory rather than proverbial commonplace that we must assess it.

The resemblance model says that depiction is mediated by resemblance, or, to put matters on a formal footing:

(R) S depicts O just if S represents O in virtue of visually resembling O.

We can break this down into two claims:

(Ri) If S depicts O, then S visually resembles O.

(Rii) If S represents O in virtue of visually resembling O, S depicts O.

The visual resemblance model contains or presupposes some such theory of pictorial understanding as

(RU) If S depicts O, the viewer's understanding that S depicts O is mediated by his noticing that S resembles O.

At the moment I am playing fast and loose with the dummy letter 'O' which in these formulae can stand for anything from an individual object to a state of affairs. To avoid the clumsy locution 'what S depicts' I shall often resort to the dummy letter 'O' or to the locution 'iconic content' to refer to a picture's depictum. It is too early to refine the notion of pictorial content (see chapters 5 and 6), but the resemblance model suggests some such theory as

(RC) If O resembles S, where S is a symbol, then S depicts O.

As it stands the resemblance model is obviously incomplete. Many writers have pointed out that in saying that X resembles Y one gives very little away: everything resembles everything else in some respects.<sup>3</sup> The prime responsibility of a model of depiction is to tell us how pictures differ from other sorts of symbols; in simply telling us that pictures resemble their depicta the resemblance model does not discharge this responsibility, since it is also true that many non-iconic symbols resemble what they symbolise.

But of course the resemblance model does claim a little more than a resemblance between picture and depictum when it says that the resemblance mediates or explains the picture's representing what it does. Thus, if I write the word 'black' in black ink, the resulting inscription resembles what it denotes, but its doing so is accidental

<sup>3</sup> See Davidson 1979 for similar thoughts. The same point is stressed in Max Black's 'How do pictures represent?' in Gombrich, Hochberg and Black, 1972.

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and unnecessary; the word 'black' continues to mean black whatever colour of ink it is inscribed in. By contrast, the resemblance model claims, alterations in what a picture resembles would change what it depicts.

However, this qualification is insufficient, for it is obvious that resemblance-mediated representation need not be iconic. A child may choose a red block to be his fire engine because it has the colour of a fire engine without thereby transfiguring his toy into a pictorial representation. So resemblance-mediated representation need not be iconic. People will say: 'The trouble with the child's toy fire engine is that it does not resemble real fire engines in the right number of respects. Iconic representation is mediated by a reasonably rich resemblance between icon and iconified.' But this proposal suggests, at first blush, that iconicity is positively correlated with resemblance, so that the greater the resemblance between symbol and symbolised, the more the symbol will tend to depict or iconify what it symbolises. However, this expectation is doomed to frustration. Consider a sample of Liberty fabric that tells you what the Bauhaus design is like; this sample stands for the fabric which it perfectly resembles, of which indeed it is an instance, yet it does not so much depict as 'exemplify' this fabric.<sup>4</sup> So we must conclude that representation mediated by rich resemblance need not be pictorial.

If there is some doubt that the resemblance model offers conditions sufficient for pictoricity, there is also room for doubting that its conditions are necessary. It is no easy task to chivvy out the respects in which a picture of David Bowie resembles the man himself. Of course, there are trivial respects in which the picture resembles Mr Bowie – they are both physical objects – but there seem to be no interesting such respects. Certainly the 'rich resemblances' called for in the last paragraph seem a long way off.

It is tempting to try to put across the resemblance model's message by saying, very emphatically, with furrowed brow and much pounding of the table, that Mr Bowie's photograph *looks like* Mr Bowie. Of course, it is admitted, Mr Bowie does not really share any properties in common with his photograph, since he is human and his photograph not, etc.; but even so, his photograph *appears to* resemble him.

On reflection, the introduction of appearances and looks into the discussion does little to advance the case for resemblance, for it is simply not true that Mr Bowie's photograph appears human. It is at this point that the advocate of resemblance imputes a technical

<sup>4</sup> For the term and concept of exemplification see Goodman 1968, chapter 2, section 3.

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meaning to the notion of appearance. Of course, to everyday, conceptually impregnated visual consciousness, Mr Bowie's photograph does not appear to have any of the more interesting attributes of Mr Bowie. However, it is not appearances of this everyday sort which concern the resemblance theorist. He hankers after a more exotic brand of appearance which we might call 'raw appearance'. An object's raw appearance at a moment consists of those properties it would seem to have were the perceiver to regard it simply as an item in his current visual field, quite apart from such knowledge as he may have gleaned from sources outwith his current visual field.

How strange are these raw appearances which are apparent to no one!<sup>5</sup> So far from their being immediately evident to visual consciousness, they are rarely if ever sighted. It is not as if we could at will perform the conceptual striptease required to whittle Mr Bowie down to his raw appearance, nor do we know what he would look like at the end of this enterprise of conceptual defoliation. Indeed, how do we know that anything at all will remain of either Mr Bowie or his photograph once the last conceptual fig leaf has been peeled back? If Mr Bowie's raw appearance is postulated as a theoretical entity, the better to explain certain facts about visual consciousness, it is not obvious why it should be expected to give much joy to the resemblance theorist, who, I presume, must claim that photograph and subject are identical or at least very alike at the level of raw appearance, despite their being so very dissimilar at the level of everyday visual consciousness. Some very funny things must happen on the way from raw appearance to everyday appearance.

Let me expand on this last point. If the raw appearance model is to work its magic, it requires us to suppose that the everyday aspects of Mr Bowie, in virtue of which we decline to allow that his photograph resembles him, are either suppressed or transferred to his photograph at the level of raw appearance. For example, one obvious fact is that Mr Bowie is humanoid while his photograph isn't. This difference would not be registered at the level of raw appearance.

What does it mean to say that the difference between S and O in respect of O's being human is not registered at the level of raw appearance? I think it can mean but one of two things: either (a) that neither S nor O rawly appear human; or (b) that both S and O rawly appear human.

<sup>5</sup> On the vagaries of the innocent eye see Gombrich 1960 (especially the introduction), Goodman 1968 (pp. 7–9) and Wilfrid Sellars's famous demolition of 'the myth of the given' in 'Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind' in Sellars 1963.

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Taking the first possibility, that neither S nor O rawly appear human, we are left with the problem of explaining how the picture can depict Mr Bowie as human if it does not rawly appear human. I take it as given that our picture of Mr Bowie depicts him as human. But then, on the resemblance model of depiction, our picture must resemble Mr Bowie in point of his being human. And on the raw appearance version of the resemblance model, this is tantamount to saying that our picture of Mr Bowie presents the raw appearance of being human. Consequently, if the picture does not rawly appear human it cannot depict Mr Bowie as human. But, *ex hypothesi*, it does depict Mr Bowie as human, so it does rawly appear human. Thus, option (a) is not compatible with the raw appearance model of depiction.

This leaves us with the second possibility, which claims that when S depicts Mr Bowie as human, S presents the raw appearance of a human being. But if S presents the appearance of being human, it presents a false appearance. In other words, S causes (at some level) an illusion as of S's being human. Hence, on the second version of the raw appearance model, we no longer have a version of the resemblance model *per se* but of that particular brand of it known as the illusion theory, a brand dealt with in the next section.

There is an additional ambiguity instinct in the notion of raw appearances. Originally I simply said that an object's raw appearance was constituted by how it would appear to me were I to subtract all knowledge gleaned from outwith my current visual field. The question then arises whether such raw appearances are purely hypothetical or are actual components of normal visual experience. That is, when I see Mr Bowie, do I actually perceive, among other things, his raw appearance or is this something I would only perceive under rather unusual conditions?

Let us suppose that I would only perceive Mr Bowie's raw appearance under those abnormal conditions of cognitive suspension already adumbrated. Under normal conditions I perceive neither Mr Bowie's raw appearance nor his photograph's. Yet surely there is something about Mr Bowie's photograph that distinguishes it *qua* picture from other symbols even in normal conditions. There must be some cue, other than the photograph's rawly appearing to resemble Mr Bowie, that triggers my recognition that it is a picture of Mr Bowie. What is this mystery cue? The hypothetical version of the raw appearance model is in no position to say.

In order to explain how pictorial interpretation is available to everyday visual consciousness, and how the peculiarity of pictorial

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representation registers itself upon even the conceptually jaded eye, the raw appearance model must claim that, somehow, the fact that picture and depictum would present similar appearances to a conceptually innocent eye is registered by normal perceivers in normal circumstances. *Ex hypothesi* the normal perceiver does not consciously experience an object's raw appearance, so how then does he know what an object's raw appearance would be? Remember: an object's raw appearance is what the object would look like to a drastically truncated perceiver. We are asking how a normal perceiver could ascertain what S and O, picture and depictum, would look like to a truncated perceiver. From the argument of the last paragraph, we have seen that the raw appearance model of depiction is committed to ascribing such knowledge to the normal perceiver. Now the question is how the normal perceiver gets such knowledge.

I can think of only three answers to this question: (1) someone, an internal homunculus, tells the perceiver what O's appearance is; (2) the perceiver remembers O's raw appearance; or, (3) the perceiver subliminally perceives O's raw appearance.

The homuncular theory claims that within every normal perceiver there resides a subnormal, conceptually innocent perceiver, who nevertheless has the advantage of the normal perceiver in being able to see the raw appearances of things. The subnormal homunculus condescends to pass on the fruits of his negative capability to his more intelligent host. Baroque as this theory seems, elements of it are suggestive of the illusion theory of depiction, and I suggest that we bracket it for later consideration (see chapter 9).<sup>6</sup>

The second theory claims that once upon a time we perceived the raw appearances of things; we no longer perceive them, but our mature perception continues to be informed by the experiences of our innocent past. Aside from the lack of any evidence to support it, this theory overlooks one glaring fact: novelty. There are many objects whose raw appearances I have, *ex hypothesi*, never seen: these are the novel sorts of objects I meet with regularly. Since I have never experienced their raw appearances these appearances cannot form part of my memory. For any such novel object O and novel picture S, there is surely nothing to prevent my recognising that S depicts O, yet it cannot be my remembering their raw appearances that effects this recognition.

The final possibility is that I perceive the raw appearances of

<sup>6</sup> See Gregory 1966 and Gregory 1970; on homunculi see Dennett 1978, pp. 85–7.

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things, but only subliminally, as one might register the floral pattern in a carpet without noticing it. But one can switch one's attention to the subliminally registered figure in the carpet. Try switching your attention to the raw appearance of the carpet. Try to look at Mr Bowie and his photograph in such a way that they appear identical to you. I dare say you won't have much luck. You will discover that you have not subliminally perceived their raw appearances.

Perhaps there are things we know even though we do not in any sense perceive them, and perhaps raw appearances are just this sort of trackable but unperceivable entity. I suppose that we can know about atoms and molecules even though, strictly, we should not wish to say that we can see such things. Nonetheless, we perceive their effects; they are the hidden order behind the apparent order of the world. Of course, it may not be exactly impossible to perceive an object's raw appearance – it is just extremely unlikely that one has ever done so – but the crucial point is that we can know about something's raw appearance without our ever having perceived it. So we posit raw appearances rather as we posit atoms and molecules.

Note that the raw appearance theorist is not just saying that *he* wants to postulate raw appearances; he is making the more interesting claim that we know about raw appearances in rather the way we know about atoms: by their explaining the order of experience. The raw appearance theory, in other words, must ascribe itself to all perceivers. But it must, incredibly, do more than that: it must suppose more than just that the normal perceiver entertains or believes the hypothesis that there are raw appearances. The raw appearance theory, as we have seen, must suppose that we actually know what an object's raw appearance is. To see that *S* depicts Mr Bowie, it isn't enough just to know that *S* and Mr Bowie have some raw appearance and that they are similar in point of this raw appearance. One must also know just what this raw appearance which Mr Bowie and his photograph both share is. As I think most perceivers are unaware of entertaining all these hypotheses, there could be grounds for ascribing all this knowledge to them. Moreover, *what* in our experience is explained by such hypotheses? What could be their function?

It appears that we have reduced the resemblance theory to near absurdity. We first nudged the resemblance theorist into admitting that Mr Bowie and his photograph did not have many properties in common; we then got him to admit that, to the conceptually informed eye at least, Mr Bowie and his photograph did not even



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*appear* to have much of interest in common. With his back against the wall, our theorist imputed a rather extravagant meaning to appearance. We have now worked out the implications of the raw appearance model and found it wanting in several respects.

There are further problems for the resemblance model of iconicity. For example, the resemblance model's account of depicting particulars seems to be a comedy of errors. Indeed, the claim that resemblance plus representation begets depiction has already been confounded by the examples of the child's toy fire engine and the samples of Bauhaus prints. But even if we grant that S is, say, a picture of a lemon and that it resembles a lemon, we are not entitled to conclude that S depicts any particular lemon it resembles: it may depict one lemon while resembling many. Likewise, a picture of one twin brother is not necessarily a picture of the other. So perhaps the problem of the double provides a swift refutation of the resemblance theory, its *coup de grâce*.

## 2 ILLUSION

The crudest form of the illusion theory is just the resemblance model *in excelsis*. Pictorial experience of a peach depiction is modelled on an illusion as of seeing a peach; in other words, a picture of a peach is so like a peach that we are liable to mistake it for one. While few if any writers have held so crude a doctrine, many have held views that are little better. On at least one reading of Gombrich's early views of depiction, our experience of a picture is said to alternate between a perception as of the depicted object and a perception as of a flat, rectangular, painted object. Gombrich's model for the pictorial experience is the famous duck-rabbit figure that can be seen as either rabbit or duck but not both.<sup>7</sup> Wollheim has had some justly critical things to say about this facet of Gombrich's story, noting, among other things, how unaccountable it makes the value of pictorial experience.<sup>8</sup> Presumably, our seeing a picture of a peach may give us some aesthetic thrill that does not attach to the mere contemplation of a peach; what then could be the aesthetic mileage to be got out of seeing a peach picture if this experience consisted in a mere alternation between seeing the peach and seeing a flat, rectangular, painted object?

The simplest refutation of the alternating illusion view of depict-

<sup>7</sup> Gombrich 1960, pp. 5–7.

<sup>8</sup> Wollheim 1968, Wollheim 1974, and Wollheim 1980.

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tion is that it makes no contact with pictorial experience. Of course, it is true that I can see a Canaletto as a rectangular phantasmagoria of coloured blobs of paint instead of as a picture of the Grand Canal, and it is important to characterise this difference. However, as Wollheim has emphasised, the duck-rabbit analogy cannot illuminate the difference, because while it is only possible to see the duck-rabbit figure as duck or rabbit but never both, it is certainly possible to see the Canaletto as at once a picture of Venice and a flat, rectangular, painted surface. Moreover, it is clear that there is nothing obviously illusory about any part of my encounter with the Canaletto.

One can put the illusion theory in a hypothetical form that goes: S depicts O only if there are circumstances under which the perceiver would mistake S for O. I take it that the hypothesis is not that if we sufficiently dement the viewer he will take the Canaletto for a canal in Venice. I suppose if we make someone sufficiently mad he might mistake Hugh Honour's *Guide to Venice* for a gondola on the Grand Canal. The idea of the hypothetical illusionist must rather be that a normal, intelligent, pictorially competent viewer might be in circumstances where he mistakes the Canaletto for the Grand Canal. We need not waste any time trying to devise such circumstances,<sup>9</sup> for the hypothetical illusion model exhibits two outstanding and incorrigible faults.

First, recall that a theory of depiction must be general enough to explain the iconicity of everything from the meanest pictorial scrawl on the wall of a tenement close to a ceiling by Tiepolo. But there is no chance that a sane, pictorially competent person could be placed in a position in which he might mistake, for example, a Scarfe caricature of Mrs Thatcher for the Prime Minister. The hypothetical illusion theory has fallen into the snare of supposing it need only account for realistic depictions. Of course, it is a good question just what distinguishes realistic from other sorts of depiction, so it might be thought that hypothetical illusionism can aspire at least to some subsidiary role in the overall theory of depiction. 'A realistic icon is one which would give an appropriately placed viewer an illusion as of seeing the depictum', the claim might go. However, I doubt that we would withdraw an ascription of realism from a picture solely on account of its having failed all the relevant illusion-inducement tests.

On the hypothetical version of the illusion model it is not supposed that normally one mistakes the Canaletto for the Grand

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Goodman 1968, pp. 11–13.