Representation in Art (II)
Pictorial Representation[1]

Rostislav Niederle

The classical theory of the value of pictorial representation used to be expressed – from the perspective of visual reception psychology – as a case of doctrine of an innocent eye. Such a doctrine can be characterized as an immediate realism, namely, a thesis according to which our visual perception is transparent and pictorial representation should be a manifestation of that fact. Consider the following argument on behalf of the innocent eye:

1. In visual perception, we are conscious of outer subjects.
2. In visual perception, we are not conscious of our minds.

∴ Our visual perception is in no way mediated, that is why our eyes are *innocent*.

Modernism in fine art can be handled, from the perspective of the psychology of visual reception again, as a theory of accented representing: the world is given to us merely indirectly via our education and specific cultural milieu (representing = which represents, represented = which is represented). For our purposes, just such a conception can be grasped as a background of conventionalism, the thesis that at the level of sensual perception we have immediate cognizance only of our mental states and, as a result, that cognizance of outer subjects is mediated in a way. The fact of an outer world is available to us only on the basis of arguments to the best explanation. Then, pictorial representation theories can be divided – roughly, of course – into a theory of similarity or a stronger doctrine of illusion, and conventionalism. According to the theory of illusion (as a strong view of similarity) a painting is an initiator, or better a cause, of the illusive visual

[1] This paper is a part of the project *The Concept of Representation in Contemporary Aesthetics*, supported by GAČR 408/09/0651.

experiences of subjects which do not actally exist or which are not present. *Wivenhoe Park* deceives its viewers in such a way that it simulates being faced with the real *Wivenhoe Park*.[2] Let us admit that the illusion theory is correct. If you ask a painter to represent, e.g., the vase standing over there, valuably of course, are you sure what it is you ask for? Are you sure you ask for the illusion of the vase's real presence? The theory of Illusion, even if widely acceptable, is not unproblematic. As a doctrine it can be formulated in the following way:

(i) *x* represents *y,* if and only if, *x* is a cause of *y* in a viewer's mind.

A problem appears at once:

1. Illusion makes the representing and the represented identical.
2. Under normal conditions – when we do not suffer from not being able to distinguish reality from its mapping – we are able to sharply distinguish levels of representation.
3. A necessary condition of the artness of *x*: *x* has to be a representation of something.
4. *x* represents *y,* if and only if, *x* is a cause of *y* in a viewer's mind.

∴ The artness of *x* is available exclusively when sensual perception disorder is present.

The closure seems to be nonsensical. The reason for that lies in premise 4 or in explication (i). Another objection against the Theory of Illusion can be formulated as follows:

1. If an illusion of a present *x* would be both a necessary and sufficient condition, artistic success would be *a priori* available through photography and related genres. But surely – not every photograph is a good piece of art. Similarly for veristic painting. In which sense is Delacroix's central female figure of his *Liberty Leading the People* similar in an illusive way to an abstract concept of freedom? Churchs' vaults and walls used to be decorated using the *trompe l´oeil* technique. As regards an altar, a

[2] Compare Gombrich (1960).

healthy person does not expect that it is a kind of a window through which you can see the actual Heaven.

2. There are many paintings that normally represent, even though not in an illusive way.

Remember: for Plato, Forms are such entities which are not recognazible through their visual properties. It seems he maintains that pictures and poetry are misleading or even dangerous for their offering illusions of reality, even though – in fact – they block an epistemic way to it. One worry of representation based on similarity or rather illusion is that there is the possibility of a substitute mistake where a symbol, an idol, ceases to be a representation of God and is newly seen as God himself or a part of him, say his hand or eye. Prohibition of painted representations of God used to be interpreted in just such a way.

Our question for a successful representation has not yet been answered: if a painter is to represent reality succesfully, what exactly should he do? Can he portray the vase in any way or does he have to respect its visual properties? If so, to what extent? One possible piece of advice is this: the essence of painting is not to represent objective visual properties of things but rather an artist paints what *he himself* can see as represented. Such a piece of advice forms the background of an argument called the *Myth of the Innocent Eye*.

1. Each piece of visual information cannot be consciously differentiated from its interpretation.
2. Every reception of each piece of visual information is both temporally and causally prior to its interpretation; that is why interpretation depends on reception.
3. Visual reception is common to all human beings with healthy sight.
4. Interpretation of visual reception is not common to all human beings with healthy sight: it differs according to private dispositions, education, cultural milieu, etc.

∴ Perception is always interpretation.

A parallel argument on behalf of the myth of the innocent eye can be stated in this way:

1. Practically, we are not able to distinguish a visual reception from its interpretation: we can never *see plainly*, but we can always *see as*. Why? Because
2. visual reception is determined by interpretation. Human beings perceive the world through private dispositions, etc., and since
3. there is no reception without interpretation, then

∴ there is no such thing as bare seeing the world.

In the Twentieth Century the innocent eye theory was refused by many philosophers and art historicians. The most famous of the former group is Goodman[3] and that of the latter one is Gombrich.[4] If the illusion theory, as a strong variation of similarity, is so problematic, there is still a weaker similarity as a source of painting value: no visual similarity in all respects, no illusion, but only similarity in characteristic visual features between representing and represented. Such a weaker similarity can still be a necessary condition of representation. Now, we can advise our painter to work in such a way that the resulting picture will be similar to the real vase in at least one characteristic visual feature. This weaker theory of similarity is probably the most widespread way of visual art evaluation. It can be characterized in this way:

(p) *x* represents *y,* if and only if, *x* recognizably visually resembles *y*.

According to such a theory, similarity is a sufficient condition of representation. Is this correct? If *x* resembles *y*, does it follow from this fact that *x* represents *y*? No. Consider monovular twins *a* and *b*:

1. *a* and b maximally visually (recognizably) resemble each other.
2. *a* and *b* do not represent each other.

[3] Goodman (1968).

[4] Gombrich (1960).

∴ Maximal visual similarity is not a sufficient condition of representation.[5]

We can attempt to adjust definition (p) in the following way:

(p*) *x* represents *y,* if and only if, *x* as the *representing* recognizably visually resembles *y*.

Goodman, however, draws our attention to the fact that whatever is somehow similar to whatever else. (p*) has a troublesome outcome:

1. Rembrandt's two-dimensional self-portrait as the *representing* recognizably visually resembles Adriaen Brouwer's two-dimensional *Sleeping Peasant* more than it does the actual physical Rembrandt.
2. *x* represents *y,* if and only if, *x* as the *representing* recognizably visually resembles *y*.

∴ Rembrandt's self-portrait represents *Sleeping Peasant* by Adriaen Brouwer.

If similarity faces so many unpleasant consequences, we could ask: must the representing really be similar to the represented? In other words, is similarity a necessary condition of representation? Goodman can be right in saying no. For let us consider the following case:

1. Similarity is a necessary condition of representation.
2. A cross is in no way similar to Christianity.

∴ A cross does not represent Christianity.

It seems that similarity is not a necessary condition of representation. The key notion of representation can be rather that of denotation, as Goodman says. According to him the language of visual arts consists not of icons but arbitrary symbols within a given system. Realistic depiction relies on indoctrination rather than on imitation. Whatever can depict nearly anything, we can always find a system of correlations. "Correctness" is not measurable by similarity, but by standardness

[5] Goodman (1968). Goodman's arguments show that a concept of similarity is not synonymous with a concept of representation, see the previous essay.

within a given system. Depiction is a matter of choice. Realism is a kind of a habit. Goodman summarizes his objections against similarity into seven points:

1. Similarity is not sufficient for representation. An example: let us consider a print starting with the sentence "The last six words within this page" and ending with the sentence "The last six words within this page". Even if both sentences are maximally similar, the first one represents the second, but the second does not represent the first.
2. Similarity is not a criterion for determining particular tokens into types. An example: *a* – A. Is there any visual similarity between the two?
3. Analogically to the previous example: two performances – tokens – of one symphony-type can be mutually very disimilar. What decides in this case whether a token is of a given type or not is not similarity but *the score*.
4. Similarity does not explain sentences like "Some colour tones are velvety". So, similarity in no way explains metaphor. Whatever – as has been already mentioned – is, in some respects, similar to whatever else. Or in what respect the velvety quality of the colour tone is similar to the velvety quality of the velvet?
5. Similarity does not contributes to predictions in any way. Predicted events are interpreted as similar to the past ones only in a retrogressive way, after their coming into being. It is hard to say in what non-trivial respects the past would be similar to the future.
6. Similarity is not useful in defining properties. If A is similar to B in a respect x and B is similar to C in a respect y, then A need not be similar to C in any respect, because $x \neq y$.
7. Analogically to the previous points. Similarity does not explain common features. Consider a domain consisting of three things. Then, any pair of the three things comes exactly into two classes and have exactly two common properties: 1. the property *to come into the class consisting of the two things* and 2. the property *to come into the class consisting of the three things*. If the domain is

> more populated, a number of common properties becomes "more populated", but an algorithm stays the same for every pair of things.[6]

(Note especially the point six. Does it hold true in the case of visual similarity?) Goodman then abandons similarity in picturing and instead offers a semantic theory: picturing representation covers denotation and predication within a given symbolic system. In the same way as a word or a sentence in natural language refers to its subject of states of affair, a picture belongs to a system of picture symbols in which it refers to its subject or scene. In the same way as some words or sentences function as predicates, a picture in a given picturing symbolic system represents what it denotes as something that has properties. *Mona Lisa* is a picture of a young woman portrayed as smiling mysteriously for it belongs to a system within which it denotes a specific person and predicates the property of *being mysterious* to her. A drawing representing Winston Churchill as *a lion* denotes Churchill and predicates a property to him. Churchill does not instantiate the property verbatim, but merely metaphorically. Denotation and predication always occur within a context of a system whose function is to specify what a given representing symbol denotes or predicates. Pictures belong to various different styles of systems. These styles have their inner compactness. That is why competence for the "reading" of pictures depends on a given pictorial system–language. It means that from an ability to interpret some pictures in one system follows an ability to interpret easily and correctly other pictures within the same pictorial system, but not an ability to interpret easily and correctly pictures of other styles or systems – other "languages". The one who is skilled in the academic landscapes system will have to learn the language of European Cubism. It seems that possibilities of representation in conventionalism which made itself free of similarity are endless.

Both Goodman in philosophy and Gombrich in art history notice that it is fruitful to grasp particular artistic styles of various ages and cultures conventionally: to understand, e.g., the Egyptian art you have

[6] Goodman (1972, 437 – 447).

to learn a specific language – *the* system of representations.[7] Another system is Renaissance painting within which everything is depicted from the only perspective angle. If an Aboriginal wishes to understand Renaissance painting, she has to internalize the expressive tools of it, its "language" system which links representing to represented: she has to grasp linear perspective, know what an aura links to, the same for the cross, stigmas, angels, passion scenes, etc. As if she would have to learn a maternal language. Why? Again: the reason is a conventional basis linking representing to represented. A conventionalist's advice to our painter would then be this:

> *x* pictorially represents *y* if and only if *x* conventionally denotes *y* within the framework of a given system.

The conventionalist theory sems to be superior to the theory of similarity. The conventionalists are convinced of their superiority when criticizing realism based on similarity as a two-faced game against viewers: representational practices of realism tend to hide mere representional relationships (conventional ones, what else) which are always present at painting, as if paintings would be some slices of the World untouched by the authors' hands and minds. Conventional as a shadow of artistic modern seems to urge pictures which should display their own ways of signifying. There are all over these modernistic smudges, blots, "forgotten" lines and other "imperfections" which are the causes of so many attacks against modernism. Magritt's *Ceci n'est-ce pas un pipe* can be, in this sense, understood as a manifestation of levelness of picture representation which is represented by their mixing on the picture's surface. Or think of Escher's *Gallery*: a viewer gapes at the picture of which himself is an inherent part: due to the paradoxical unification of two levels of representation into the single one a represented subject of that picture seems to be the relation of representation itself.

It seems that conventionalism is really able to explain more modes of picturing. This theory, however, faces an argument based on the concept of artistic realism as a case of "technical innocent eye". Consider the following argument:

[7] Gombrich (1960). In fact, the book is deeply rooted in this thesis.

1. A photograph of Doctor Gachet is more realistic than Vincent van Gogh's portrait of Doctor Gachet.
2. A photograph is a more realistic language than painting.
3. More realistic = more similar.
4. Similarity is irrelevant within an exclusively conventional system.

∴ The sentence "A photograph of Doctor Gachet is more realistic than Vincent van Gogh's portrait of Doctor Gachet" does not make good sense within an exclusively conventional system.

Premise 4. is probably too strong. To maintain that representing enriched by tools of fine art expressivism is – regarding the exactness of depicting – within the same degree as representating made by a neutral, mindless camera, is counter-intuitive. The word "exactness" loses its sense in conventionalism. Then, conventionalism as a *general* explication of picturing value is not unquestionable. Objections against this theory has appeared not only from the realm of painting but also from courses of study of which conventionalism itself used to derive its arguments – psychology of reception or antropology. If conventionalism were right, we would not be able to explain due to what we understand pre-historic depictings in Lascaux without internalizing neolitic pictoral convention. That is why understanding pictures cannot be a matter of *only* learning various picture code conventions. It seems rather that there is something like pictoral comprehension common to all human beings which comes into being in universally comprehensible pictograms. We know pictorial forms of pictograms from airports, bus or railway stations, most buildings open to the public. For understanding a pictogram normal sensual feeling should be enough. In this sense Flint Schier presents his objections against conventionalism.[8] According to Schier, to recognize the represented in a painting we do not need either Goodmanian semantical rules which link a painting's surface to a represented subjects, or syntactic rules linked to particular smudges on a surface. In normal cases, recognition of the represented is to depend merely on our ability to recognize real represented things. We simply

[8] Schier (1986, 339 – 355).

unite particular sensual pieces of experience of painting and represented subjects. If a painter draws a biblical character whom he has never seen then for a correct interpretation of the drawing our ability to recognize the character in reality should be enough. The reason is that we recognize the possible *character* just on the basis of *characteristic* property which returnes us back to refused similarity. Similarity strengthened in such a way can be written in the following way:

> if *R* is a representation of subject *S*, then viewers are able to recognize *S* if there is a distinctive similarity between the visual shapes of *R* and *S*.

In a *similar* way *similarity* is justified by Kendall Walton:

> a picture *P* is a representation of a subject *S* if *P* prescribes visual experience of *P* to be similar (or equal, in ideal case) to the visual experience of *S*.[9]

Representation is a key concept in what Walton calls make-believe games. Picture is to prescribe definite common imaginings and thereby they stimulate their viewers to enter into their fictional worlds. Such imaginative experience enriches, giving new and surprising perspective to the actual world. The value lies in tension between representing and represented: the more enriching is interaction between both poles of representation, the higher is the value of a painting. Visual experience of pure representing can be even much deeper then the possible experience of real represented. That is the case of good figurative paintings. Abstract paintings do not reach the represented and the value founding imaginings happen on the surface:

> The imaginings *Suprematist Painting* prescribes are imaginings about parts of that work itself. We are to imagine of the actual rectangular patch of yellow on the canvas that it is in front of the green, and so on (…) The yellow rectangle in *Suprematist Painting*, however, is imagined to be what it is: a yellow rectangle (…) Le Grande Jatte portrays people and objects distinct from the painting itself (fictitious ones perhaps), whereas Suprematist Painting merely depicts its own elements in a certain manner. La Grande Jatte induces and prescribes imaginings about things external to

[9] Walton (1990, 69).

> the canvas; Suprematist Painting calls merely for imaginative rearrangement of the marks on its surface.[10]

Being instructed in Schier and Walton's lessons, let us now characterize the relation of representation and similarity as this: something is a picture of an object when it can be interpreted as the thing represented, and when such an interpretation depends only on the ability to recognize the object:

> a picture x pictorially represents y, if and only if
>
> (1) x causes a normal viewer to recognize y in x by pure visual perception due to characteristic visual property y, and
>
> (2) a normal viewer recognizes y in x because s/he distinguishes representing from represented.

This characterization avoids the aforementioned difficulty of the illusion theory by introducing a requirement of intentional representation. Now we can advise our painter this: try to use at least one characteristic visual tool in such a way so that a viewer recognizes the represented smudge as a vase and distinguishes real vase from its two-dimensional picture.

Finally, let us try to answer the question as to what extent, if any, are the data about the represented relevant for a verdict about the total aesthetic value of a thing. Goodman noticed that representation has two faces hidden in the depths of natural language:

> From the fact that *P* is a picture of, or represents, a unicorn we cannot infer that there is something that *P* is a picture of or represents. Furthermore, a picture of Pickwick is a picture of a man, even though there is no man it represents. Saying that a picture represents a so and so is thus highly ambiguous as between saying what the picture denotes and saying what kind of picture it is. Some confusion can be avoided if in the latter case we speak rather of a „Pickwick-representing-picture" or, for short, „Pickwick-picture" or „unicorn-picture" or „man-picture". Obviously a picture cannot, barring equivocation, both represent Pickwick and represent nothing.

[10] Walton (1990, 56 – 7).

> But a picture may be a certain kind – be a Pickwick-picture or a man-picture – without representing anything.[11]

Goodman draws our attention to two possible ways of representing. Consider Magritte's painting *A Girl Eating a Bird*. The painting can be read in such a way that Magritte represented *the* girl eating *the* bird. Within one of two senses of the word "to represent" the picture can be interpreted in the sense of an existential commitment. Such a "reading" mirrors in quantified inscription:

> $\exists x\ \exists y$ (x is *a* girl and y the bird and Magritte's painting represents x and y and x as eating y).
>
> *To be is to be a value of a bound variable.*

As regards evaluating, we can ask whether it is founded of the fact that we really investigate the world searching existence of what is represented to determine the value of a painting as a whole. In our case we rather tend to suppose that Magritte's painting is normally interpreted in such a way that there is the *character* of a girl eating a bird which can be instantiated by *anyone with the proper characteristic property* and that there is a character of a bird being eaten by a girl which can be instantiated by *whatever with the proper characteristic property*. To be sure, there are paintings representing subjects existing in the actual world, e.g., the portrait of Churchill. On the other hand, there are paintings representing fictional subjects or abstract ones – Magritte's girl or Delacroix's Liberty of his *Liberty Leading the People*. To answer the question to what extent, if any, the data about the existence of the represented are relevant for the overall value verdict, let us give names to Goodman's ambiguity:

> The predicate may be applied directly to the character spoken of (*dictus*). Such a construction may be described – stretching a somewhat medieval term – as a predication *de dicto*. Alternatively, the predicate may be applied to whichever individual thing (*res*) bears the character. This construction may be described as a predication *de re*.[12]

[11] Goodman (1968, 22).

[12] Tichý (2004, 254 – 255).

Let us try this semantical difference transfer to paintings. Here we cannot decide what modality is depicted just *a posteriori*. Whether *de re* modality can cover existence of a particular represented thing or a situation and depict visual properties of a particular subject, *de dicto* modality depicts a visual role which can be occupied by anyone/anything with a characteristic visual property of represented. Moreover, the *de re*/*de dicto* distinction can help to distinguish fine art genres. Documentary photography does represent (copy) in accordance with *de re* modality; Sir Laurence Olivier's theatre photograph represents (copy) Laurence Olivier *de re* and represent Hamlet *de dicto*; Van Gogh's portrait of a postman represents *de dicto* an office which can be occupied by anyone having the poper visual properties, and imitates *de re* a particular man who sat as a model for Van Gogh. The question, whether to "read" a representing picture one way or the other can be provisionally answered in this manner: until a represented thing is found, interpretation would have been oriented *de dicto*.

An answer to the question – to what extent, if any, are the data about the represented relevant for a verdict about the total aesthetic value of a thing – is this: if some data on behalf of interpretation *de re* are found than this data can be counted as parts of the verdict. For it is maximally verisimilar that an interpretation of Leonardo's most famous painting would be changed if it suddenly came to light that the model for La Gioconda was not Mona Lisa but a nameless young man.

Seminář estetiky FF MU Brno
Arne Nováka 1
60200 Brno
Czech Republic
nikdo_1962@yahoo.com

References

GOMBRICH, E. H. (1960): *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*. London: Phaidon Press.

GOODMAN, N. (1968): *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols*. Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merill Company.

GOODMAN, N. (1972): Seven Strictures on Similarity. In: Goodman, N.: *Problems and Project*. Indianapolis: Bobbs Merill Company.
SCHIER, F. (1986): *Deeper into Picture: An Essay on Pictorial Representation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
TICHÝ, P. (2004): De dicto and de re. In: Svoboda, V. – Jespersen, B. – Cheyne, C (eds.): *Pavel Tichý's Collected Papers in Logic and Philosophy*. Otago: University of Otago Press, Praha: Filosofia.
WALTON, K. (1990): *Mimesis and Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Art*. Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard University Press.