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(I have noticed a strange fact that, once people have had their resistance broken down to the idea that some abstract paintings are representational, they become dogmatic that all abstract paintings are representational: they repudiate the very idea of a non-representational abstract painting.)

Richard Wollheim, *Painting as an Art*, p. 62

Contents

Introduction	p. 7
Chapter One	p. 15
Analytical Theories of Pictorial Representation: A Historical	
Introduction	
1. Plato's views on resemblance and the mirror analogy	p. 17
2. Images in the eye and windows onto the world	p. 23
3. Descartes: the illusion view of depiction	p. 27
4. The Cartesian inheritance: Ernst Gombrich	p. 33
5. The Cartesian inheritance: Richard Wollheim on seeing-in	p. 43
6. An alternative account of seeing-in: Robert Hopkins	p. 50
7. Conventions and perception	p. 60
8. Plato's and Descartes' shadows	p. 70
Chapter Two	p. 73
Resemblance and Pictorial Representation	
1. Resemblance in pictures	p. 75
2. A Wittgensteinian foundation for a theory of PR	p. 79
3. The anti-subjectivist stance	p. 97
4. A basic resemblance account of PR	p. 103
5. The basic resemblance account of PR: limits, criticisms, and replies	p. 113

Chapter Three	p. 123
Four Available Accounts of Abstract Pictures: A Critical Examination	
1. Richard Wollheim and the emergence/recession criterion	p. 126
2. Clement Greenberg: abstract pictures and the figure/ground dynamics	p. 132
3. Kendall Walton: imagination and self-reference in abstract pictures	p. 141
4. Lambert Wiesing and the epistemological difference of abstract pictures	p. 147
Chapter Four	p. 153
Abstract Pictures and Pictorial Representation: A Proposal	
1. Content, Embodiment, and PR	p. 153
2. PR: the case for abstract pictures	p. 158
3. Decoration, painting, and PR	p. 165
4. A (very limited) vindication of Ernst Gombrich on abstract painting	p. 175
5. Abstract painting, self-reference, and painterly tradition	p. 184
Conclusions	p. 189
Illustrations	p. 199
Bibliography	p. 213

Introduction

This work is an investigation into the analytical debate on pictorial representation and the theory of pictorial art. My main concern are a critical exposition of the questions raised by the idea that it is resemblance to depicted objects that explains pictorial representation and the investigation of the phenomenon of abstract painting from an analytical point of view in relation to the debate on depiction. The discourse in analytical aesthetics is often concerned with ontological questions and, more generally, with questions of definition: What is a work of art? What distinguishes a certain art kind from other kinds? What tells us if a certain work of art belongs to a certain category of art rather than another? Philosophical discourse on pictures in the analytical tradition originated from debate on art, and showed from the beginning concern with similar questions. Nelson Goodman's *Languages of Art* (1968) is the first work in the analytical tradition that brings together the analysis of the concept of picture with the analysis of different art forms, arguing that art objects are produced within a variety of systems of symbols, each characterized by certain syntactical and semantic features. Goodman's theory is in part a reply to Ernst Gombrich's *Art and Illusion* (1960), a widely influential work on both art history and philosophy. To Gombrich's idea that what is peculiar to pictures is a certain experience they produce in the viewer – an experience that he calls “illusion” – and that figurative art in the West developed following the goal of achieving newer and more compelling forms of “illusion”, Goodman opposes the idea that pictorial art should be explained as a form of denotation and that it is intrinsically conventional: what we see in pictures depends on our context

and culture and we should not seek to build up a narrative of Western art in terms of “psychological experiments” – as Gombrich had – since what we see in pictures is ultimately a matter of conventions we have absorbed thanks to our experience and education. Another alternative to Gombrich’s theory is put forward in Richard Wollheim’s *Painting as an Art* (1987), which outlines a phenomenology of the vision of paintings (revolving around the concept of “seeing-in”) and explains how, in various ways, painters have exploited the peculiarities of such phenomenology to produce artworks.

After *Painting as an Art*, philosophical debate on pictures has mostly abandoned its special concern with pictures as art-pictures, and has devoted all its attention to the definition of pictorial representation, conceived as the peculiar form of representation displayed by pictures ¹. In philosophical jargon, those pictures that pictorially represent are often designated as “depictions”. What is the difference between a mere picture and a depiction? In the second half of the XIX century Charles Peirce famously distinguished between signs that are indexes, signs that are symbols, and signs that are icons. “Indexes” are those signs that refer to the object they denote because they are affected by such an object (for example, smoke refers to fire because it is caused by fire); “symbols” are those signs that refer to their denotata by virtue of a convention (such as words); “icons” are those signs that represent because they are similar to what they represent (a portrait is an ideal example). Images can perform as indexes (Van Gogh’s highly-recognizable brushstrokes work as signs of the causal action of the painter on the canvas), symbols (a dove symbolizes the Holy Spirit in many paintings in the Christian tradition) and icons, but it is the

¹ According to John Kulvicki, depiction is not exclusively visual, but it is a specific form of representation, characterized by transparency, which can be achieved through different media. Pictures can depict, as well as musical works (see Kulvicki, 2006).

iconic character that is peculiar to them only. Philosophical accounts of depiction seek to make sense of what Peirce called the iconic character of pictures. Peirce, following a millenary tradition which stems – as far as we know – from Plato’s *Cratylus*, argued that icons represent thanks to their bearing resemblances to what they represent. In other words, there is something distinctively visual that explains the peculiar character of icons: the fact that they bear visual resemblances to what they represent. As we shall see in chapter one, the traditional resemblance theory of depiction has encountered many objections in the analytical debate. However, Peirce’s idea that there is something peculiar about icons and that it has to do with their visual character has survived into large part of today’s debate on depiction.

The first part of my investigation is dedicated to a survey of the analytical debate on depiction, with special attention to the fortunes and misfortunes of the resemblance theory of depiction. In the first chapter I give an outline of the main contemporary theories on offer, contextualised within an historical background that stretches from Plato to Descartes. I have decided to focus on the theory of resemblance, more than on other approaches on depiction because much of my research is dedicated to an analysis and implementation of one of the theories that have recently sought to re-discover the resemblance paradigm, although with certain important modifications. Namely, the second chapter is dedicated to the exposition of John Hyman’s basic resemblance theory of depiction, to the elucidation of its presuppositions and to the discussion of some criticisms and objections that the theory has raised. The third and the fourth chapter are dedicated to the implementation of Hyman’s theory in relation to the phenomenon of abstract painting.

There are two peculiarities about Hyman's theory: first, it is in counter-tendency in comparison with all the other accounts of depiction on offer, in that, as we shall see, it does not need to conceive of pictorial representation as of representation of particulars or kinds of objects that we can easily identify. Second, it is a theory that has brought art back into the realm of philosophical accounts of depiction. I believe the two points are related, although it may not be evident how at first sight. I shall develop on this point in the remaining part of this introduction.

In 1996 Dominic Lopes published *Understanding Pictures* – a book that, together with Robert Hopkins' *Pictures, Images, and Experience* (1998) has heavily influenced debate on depiction over the past fifteen years. Lopes explicitly claims that the concern of a philosophical theory of depiction should be first and foremost with pictures as means for communicating, independently on their counting as art or not ². This claim, explicit in Lopes' formulation, seems to have been (implicitly) assumed by Hopkins and several other contributors to the debate (e.g. Abell, Kulvicki, Nanay). Also Hyman does not claim that a theory of pictorial representation should be a theory concerned only with pictures that qualify as art and I happily share this view. However, there is an aspect of Lopes' claim that, I believe, we should not take for granted. He says that pictures are essentially instruments for communication. This is hardly deniable, but how to qualify this claim? Every device that is used to convey meaning is an instrument of communication, therefore defining pictures as instruments of communication (even if only at a mere preliminary

² "A central claim of this book is that pictures are at bottom vehicles for the storage, manipulation, and communication of information. They put us in touch with our physical environment, especially our visual environment, often parts of it that are beyond our reach, across space or time. Pictures share language's burden in representing the world and our thoughts about it. And this function of pictures is at the forefront in the demotic rather than the

level) seems almost pleonastic. I believe, however, that Lopes' claim betrays some assumptions that may lie in the background of much contemporary literature on depiction, and of much literature on depiction overall. "A picture tells a thousand words" is a say that often appears in introductions to the main questions on pictorial representation: it manifests the popular idea that pictures communicate in a denser manner than language (or, more precisely, that picture's content is non-conceptual, whereas linguistic content is conceptual). Other ways in which the debate is strongly influenced by the comparison with verbal languages emerge if we consider the importance that is given to the idea that whereas we need to make much effort to learn how to speak and understand a language we do easily learn how to understand pictures painted in a style we are unfamiliar with, and to the idea that pictures denote the objects they depict. Moreover, the fact that the content of pictures does not seem to be convertible into words is very intriguing for philosophers, and rightly so. Notwithstanding the relevance of all these observations, letting the comparison with language shape the discussion of depiction may not be a faithful to the nature of pictures. What if, instead of comparing pictures with what we know better (i.e. language), we try to grasp what is peculiar about pictures by means of analysis that is strictly limited to what distinguishes them from verbal languages, namely their visual aspects? I believe this might be considered one of the starting points of Hyman's theory of depiction. And I believe it explains the relevant role that the tradition of painting as an art assumes in Hyman's work, especially in his *The Objective Eye* (2006). Painting as an art can be considered the laboratory for new and interesting forms of depiction, a laboratory where painters work with the instruments of a, as it were, strictly

aesthetic" (Lopes, 1996, p. 7).

visual logic. It is a challenge for the philosopher to seek to illuminate certain aspects of such logic thanks to an analysis of the concept of depiction.

In *The Objective Eye*, Hyman illustrates his theory thanks to many examples taken from the history of figurative art. The second part of my work is inspired by the idea that the basic resemblance theory can be applied to abstract paintings as well. Developing an analysis of abstract painting from an analytical point of view is a task that very few authors have tried to accomplish so far – as far as I am aware. Some do not take abstract images into consideration for principled reasons, since they are persuaded that they cannot count as pictorial representations in any case, others – remarkably Richard Wollheim and Kendall Walton – have only dedicated sparse remarks to this issue. I believe that the irrelevance given to the question of abstract pictures may be another consequence of the “tyranny” exercised by the comparison between pictures and language. There is nothing in language that compares to abstract pictures and abstract pictures are exclusively produced in the domain of art or, at least, of candidates for artistic appreciation³. These two facts might be sufficient to account for the lack of interest in abstract pictures by a number of contemporary scholars engaged in the debate on depiction.

Notwithstanding the widespread disinterest in abstract images in the debate on depiction, it is evident that the task abstract painters have set themselves is interestingly akin to the task philosophers try to accomplish when arguing about depiction. It is widely agreed that one of the main topics of contemporary art is art itself, and the understanding of its forms and ways, and that one of the main topics of contemporary painting, and especially of abstract

³ According to Lambert Wiesing abstract paintings are the pictorial equivalent of self-referential expressions such as “I” and “me”, however, this is all but an intuitive and shared claim (see Wiesing 1997).

painting, is the art of painting itself, the art of producing pictures, the exploration of its limits and its conventions. With these considerations in mind, I have sought to sketch my proposal for a basic resemblance theory of abstract painting. Philosophical analysis should not turn into art criticism, but it might illuminate interesting aspects of the practice of painting as an art.

Chapter One

Analytical Theories of Pictorial Representation: A Historical Introduction

Accurate introductions to the current state of the analytical debate on pictorial representation (from now on “PR”) are not largely available⁴. This should not be surprising, since we are considering an ongoing discussion in a very limited philosophical niche: compared to other topics, PR has a marginal role in shaping contemporary debate in philosophy. The first volume of essays meant to set the agenda for the philosophy of PR appeared in 2010 (*Philosophical Perspectives on Depiction*, eds. Catharine Abell & Katerina Bantinaki), at a time my research was reaching completion. There also seems to be a difficulty intrinsic to the debate: as Abell and Bantinaki point out, “there is nothing even approximating philosophical consensus on any of the major issues in the philosophy of depiction” and “the number and scope of the philosophical issues raised by depiction is far greater than had previously been recognized”⁵. I agree with Abell and Bantinaki, and am aware that the situation makes it difficult to provide a comprehensive story when it comes to depiction; philosophical studies on images, broadly conceived, cover a wide area, and can support in several ways more specific research on PR. Areas of interest range from the philosophy of mind and perception to phenomenology, from ontology to semiotics, from aesthetics and the philosophy of art to the

⁴ Basic information is provided by some handbooks and introductions to aesthetics and the philosophy of art: see e.g. Davies (2006, chap. 7); Goldman (2003); Rollins (2001); Lopes (2001); Goldman, Lopes and Sakamoto (1998).

philosophy of language. It seems that all one can do is making a list of theories and explaining that they deeply differ in target, methodology and scope. However, I am not totally sceptical about the possibility of offering a coherent narrative of the development of philosophical theories of PR, and I believe this requires a historical approach, which unfortunately is seldom found in analytical publications.

My decision to have the description of the main contemporary proposals on PR preceded by an historical introduction to the theory of pictorial images was inspired by the reading of Ernst Gombrich. In *Art and Illusion* (1960), Gombrich offers a compelling narrative of the shift that has occurred to philosophical and extra-philosophical thinking on the visual arts. He explains that to the idea that images imitate the qualities of objects – an idea rooted in Plato’s *Cratylus* – modern thinkers, such as John Locke, George Berkeley and Adolf von Hildebrand, opposed the idea that it is the experience we have of things we see in images that is a good imitation of the experience we have of objects in the world. This explains how, for instance, under the label “mimetic pictures” we have not only images through which their authors purported to reproduce qualities and appearances of objects, such as images on Greek vases or Renaissance paintings, but also paintings by the Impressionists, that were meant to reproduce retinal images, which were believed not only to play a role in the production of visual stimuli, but also *to show* the way the viewer sees the world. To sum it up in a single sentence, pictorial art has abandoned mimesis – broadly understood – at the beginning of the XX century, but the theory of art had abandoned the idea that images truly imitate qualities and aspects of objects much earlier, with Descartes, who introduced the idea

⁵ Abell & Bantinaki (2010, pp. 23-24).

that images give us an illusion of the visual world, and with the empiricists, who insisted that a theory of PR had to be first and foremost a theory of pictorial perception.

In what follows I shall develop from Gombrich's suggestion, driving also from John Hyman, who, in *The Imitation of Nature* (1989) and *The Objective Eye* (2006), has carried out an analysis of the shift from the "resemblance theory of PR" (epitomized by Plato) to the "illusion theory" (introduced by Descartes). I am persuaded that, within a historical framework, current accounts of PR should look more unitary than they might appear to be if considered singularly, because it should emerge that they all are concerned with questions that have long roots in the history of Western philosophy. The architecture of this chapter has also the purpose of introducing the theoretical presupposition underlying my investigation. I share Hyman's concern that current debate on PR has grown excessively affectionate to certain ideas, such as the scepticism towards the traditional resemblance theory of PR, and a preference for a subjectivist approach to PR. As I have explained in the Introduction, the main goals of my research are to illustrate the explanatory force of a resemblance-focussed theory of PR and to show how this view can be positively applied to the understanding of abstract pictures.

1. Plato's views on resemblance and the mirror analogy

If we were to evaluate theories of PR on the basis of the influence they have had on philosophical debate so far, there would be no doubt that the most successful theory of PR is the mimetic theory put forward by Plato, with a first

formulation in *Cratylus* and a widely known argument in *Republic* ⁶. The kernel of Plato's view is that a PR represents its objects by means of copying their form and colour. This is a theory of resemblance, since if two objects share some qualities (in this case form and colour) then we can say that they resemble each other. The success of the mimetic theory might be thought to extend well into the XIX century, until the advent of openly anti-mimetic avant-garde art. But this would be an overestimation: although Plato's theory outreaches all its competitors because of its long-standing influence on the debate on PR, philosophers have ceased to consider it the paradigm account from the XVII century onwards. A key figure for this change of views was Descartes. This will be the topic of a further section: let us look at Plato's theory first.

Before commenting on Plato's remarks on pictures, it is important to recall the general context in which such remarks are put forward. Plato is interested in images from a very peculiar point of view: in *Cratylus* he claims that he wants to find a "principle of truth" in images ⁷. In modern jargon, we could say that he is not interested in defining what pictures are, while, rather, he is interested in considering how pictures work as epistemic tools. The analysis of the epistemic value of pictures, namely, helps Plato in outlining his theory of truth as correspondence between two objects (*homoiosis*) and of knowledge as approximation to the realm of ideas. This is transparent from the famous passage in *Republic* where Plato compares the degree of reality of, respectively, the idea of bed, a real bed, and the image of a bed ⁸. Truth consists in a relation of correspondence between two things, but famously, for

⁶ Plato, *Cratylus*, XL: 434a; *Republic*, III: 386-396; X: 596-608.

⁷ Plato, *Cratylus*: 432b-d.

⁸ Plato, *Republic*: 596-598.

Plato, some things are more real than others, and the degree of reality of things has to be taken into account in order to trace the way that leads from them to the truth. So, Plato argues, it is correct to say that a bed-image resembles a bed-object in certain respects, but the bed-object itself corresponds to the idea of bed in certain respects, and it is the latter, and not the former, that enjoys a higher degree of reality, while the highest degree of reality is a feature of the idea of bed only. Although it is true that the image of a bed resembles a bed-object, the image of a bed would not bring us close enough to the truth, since it is only an imitation of an object that is itself an imitation (not a replica!) of the only real bed there is, i.e. the idea of bed.

What does it mean that a bed-image resembles a bed-object in certain respects? To answer this question, let us now make a step back to *Cratylus*, the first source of information concerning Plato's views on pictorial images: here, images are said to imitate only the outward form and the colour of objects. Further interesting insights into Plato's views on resemblance are provided by the passage from *Sophist* where Plato distinguishes between those paintings that are *eikones* and those that are *phantasmata*⁹. *Eikones* are considered better paintings, because they are faithful imitations of the objects they depict, they produce likenesses, since they reproduce their *real* form and colour. They do not pretend to be more truthful than they are, they do not try to deceive the viewer, which, from the point of view of Plato's correspondence doctrine of truth, is crucial. Hyman suggests that Polygnotus, a painter whose technique based on line drawing, without shading or perspective, is likely to be the

⁹ Plato, *Sophist*, XXIII: 235d-236c; Hyman (1989, pp. 84-94).

painter Plato would have considered a painter of *eikones* ¹⁰. Unlike *eikones*, *phantasmata* are mere appearances, images that pretend to be faithful to their objects, but aren't, because they produce mere semblances and not true likenesses. They are the pictorial equivalent of the arguments of the Sophists. For Plato they are bad paintings, since they deceive the viewer and therefore keep him away from the path of knowledge. Hyman claims that *phantasmata* can be said to be those paintings that employ *skiagraphia* ("shadow-painting"), a concept mentioned in *Theaetetus* and *Republic*, meaning the use of shading (i.e. pictorial rendering of brightness and shades of colour), but also applied to other supposedly deceitful techniques, such as perspectival diminution, as a passage from *Republic* suggests ¹¹. Apollodorus and Agatarcus of Samos were considered masters of this technique at the time Plato was writing. Hyman explains that Plato wrongly thought that putting things in perspective on a pictorial surface was not faithful to the form of objects, and therefore not truly imitative. Plato did not realize that "perspective diminution and shading, far from violating these requirements, actually allow them to be satisfied, since they provide the painter with the means to show, for example, the (non-planar) spatial relations of the parts of a building, or the plasticity of a face" ¹². What can be concluded is that Plato thought that those resemblances which are relevant for good depiction, i.e. for the production of *eikones*, are resemblances in form and colour that hold between pictorial surfaces and objects in the world, and not between objects *as represented by pictures* and objects in the

¹⁰ Hyman (1989, p. 88). Hyman bases his reading on passages from Xenophon, Aristotle, and Quintilian that with their descriptions of Polygnotus' style allow for hypothesising that Polygnotus was the painter who best exemplified the skills Socrates appreciated in painters.

¹¹ Hyman (1989, pp. 86-87); Plato, *Theaetetus*: 208e; *Republic*: 602c-d: "The same magnitude, I presume, viewed from near and from far does not appear equal. . . . And the same things appear . . . concave and convex, owing to similar errors of vision about colours, and there is obviously every confusion of this sort in our souls. And so painting [*skiagraphia*] in its exploitation of this weakness of our nature falls nothing short of witchcraft".

world¹³.

The best known among Plato's passages on painting is the one from *Republic*, X I have mentioned above. That passage introduces also an element that, as we shall see, has greatly influenced literature: the analogy between image and mirror¹⁴. Plato observes that images are incomplete copies of the objects they represent, unlike replicas, because they reproduce such objects only in the limited respects of colour and form. This, according to Plato, accounts for their scarce cognitive value. The same is true of mirrors, which are not replicas of the objects mirrored on them, as Plato argues. A mirror shows the way objects appear, but real objects remain outside the domain of mirrors, which can only show appearances. Similarly, pictures only imitate features of the external appearance of objects. This analogy supports Plato's ontological distinctions: images present only visual aspects of objects, therefore they are a limited approximation to three-dimensional objects, which are themselves only limited approximations to the only real objects there are, i.e. ideas. Apart from the unlikelihood of the distinction between images, objects, and ideas, it is important to notice that Plato's analogy between mirrors and pictures is misplaced. Whereas the mirror is causally linked to the object we see on it, so that we can claim that we see such object in the mirror, because of the way light is uniformly reflected by a mirror-surface, pictures are representations of objects, i.e. objects of a certain kind that *stand for* objects of a different kind, without any need of there being a direct causal connection between the two¹⁵. While it is true to say that both mirrors and pictures are not

¹² Plato, *Republic*, X: 602; *Sophist*, XXIII: 235 e-236 a; Hyman (1989, p. 92; 2006, p. 235).

¹³ Hyman (2006, p.73).

¹⁴ Plato, *Republic*, X: 596-598.

¹⁵ For the analogy between pictures and mirrors see also Plato, *Sophist*, XXVII: 239d. For the rejection of the analogy see Hyman (2006, p. 123) and Spinicci (2008, pp. 44-56). That there

replicas of the objects we see when we look at them, it would be wrong to infer from this that they function in the same way. Whereas pictures are representations, images on mirrors are reflections¹⁶.

As Tatarkiewicz has argued, although it is customary to refer to the theory of art dominant among the Classics as to the “mimetic theory”, there were at least four meanings of “mimesis” around 400 B.C.: mimesis as expression (as in ritual imitative practices), mimesis as imitation of the way nature acts (according to Democritus), mimesis as reproduction of aspects of nature (Plato) and mimesis as free composition departing from natural motives (Aristotle)¹⁷. Most notably, whereas Plato condemned mimesis within the framework of his correspondence theory of truth, Aristotle praised it, and it was Aristotle’s positive evaluation that influenced the tradition the most¹⁸. On the other hand, Plato’s non-evaluative claims enjoyed great success, so that, especially in the Hellenistic and Roman Ages, mimesis was widely understood as reproduction of nature. If mimesis is understood as reproduction of nature, then the mimetic theory of PR claims that pictures reproduce aspects of reality, and the theory of the evaluation of mimetic pictorial art claims that the best painting is the one that best imitates reality. It is my opinion that in this context the conception embodied by Plato’s picture/mirror analogy ended up providing the evaluative standard for the best paintings. This, I believe, can be inferred from those anecdotes, such as the story of Zeuxis and Parrhasius, which were

does not need to be a causal connection between representation and represented object does not mean that there cannot be one: in other words, photographs qualify as pictorial representations. For a detailed analysis of photographs in the context of a theory of PR see Scruton (1983); Walton (1984); Currie (1991); Cohen and Meskin (2004); Spinicci (2008, pp. 44-67); Abell (2010).

¹⁶ For an original reading of Plato on mirrors and paintings see Halliwell (2002, pp. 135-136). In a nutshell, Halliwell argues that rather than putting paintings in analogy with mirrors, Plato seeks to remind the reader that it is not appropriate to look at paintings *as if* they were mirrors.

¹⁷ Tatarkiewicz (2004, pp. 275-276).

¹⁸ Aristotle, *Poetics*: 1448a 1; 1451b 27; 1460b 13.

used to illustrate the goal the good painter had to pursue. The story is narrated in the following passage from Pliny's *Natural History*:

Parrhasius entered into a pictorial context with Zeuxis, who represented some grapes, painted so naturally that birds flew towards the spot where the picture was exhibited. Parrhasius, on the other hand, exhibited a curtain, drawn with such singular truthfulness, that Zeuxis, elated with the judgement that had been passed upon his work by the birds, haughtily demanded that the curtain should be drawn aside to let the picture be seen. Upon finding his mistake, with a great degree of ingenuous candour he admitted that he had been surpassed, for whereas he himself had only deceived the birds, Parrhasius had deceived him, an artist¹⁹.

It is because the painting shows the curtain exactly in the way it would appear if it were a real curtain that it manages to deceive Zeuxis. It can be said, then, that the painting behaves like a mirror, in that it reproduces the way objects look, just like a mirror reflects the visual aspects of the objects it mirrors. There is, then, a conceptual link between Plato's analogy and the widespread praise of life-likeness in painting in Classical literature²⁰.

2. Images in the eye and windows onto the world

Whereas ancient theories of depiction revolve around the concept of mimesis, the distinctive mark of ancient theories of vision is the idea that there has to be an *Ersatz* contact between objects and the eye in order to explain

¹⁹ Pliny (1857, vol. 6, XXXV, chap. 36, p. 251).

²⁰ For the appreciation of paintings that look "real" among the Ancients see Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, III: 10.6 and Meleager of Gadara's *Antologia Greca*, which collects epigrams from various sources.

visual perception²¹. The idea was canonized in a passage from Aristotle's *De Sensu* where it is claimed that perception without contact is impossible²². There was no empirical basis for the hypothesis of the *Ersatz* contact: the hypothesis was a mere theoretical presupposition relying on the idea that tactile perception – which implies contact – should be the paradigm case of perception. The *Ersatz* contact was identified with a picture that was supposed to be received by the eye, since it could be observed that the cornea reflects an image²³. This view was very popular in the Middle Ages, especially in the version given by Alhazen (the intromissionist doctrine, originally an atomist doctrine), where the idea of an image in the eye was combined with a mathematical theory of vision²⁴. The main problem with this theory was considered to be the fact that Alhazen was compelled to make a number of dubious steps in order to argue that although the image on the cornea looked inverted if compared to the visual scene it was supposed to allow the viewer to see, this fact did not undermine the correctness of his theory. Kepler sought to overcome this problem and to give a scientific formulation of the theory: whereas Alhazen maintained that the eye receives images from the outside world, Kepler argued that, rather, it is the eye that fabricates such images²⁵. Very roughly, the kernel of Kepler's view is that, thanks to the way light hits

²¹ For the analysis of medieval and modern literature on visual perception I have followed Hyman (1989, Introduction, chap.1 and 2).

²² Aristotle, *De Sensu*: 4.422.29.

²³ An alternative view was defended by Euclid and Ptolemy, who argued that radiation issues from the eye.

²⁴ For a brief exposition of Alhazen's theory see Hyman (1989, pp. 5-6).

²⁵ See e.g. Kepler (1939, pp. 151-152). Hyman argues that to understand what Kepler did and what he did not it is important to stress that Kepler wrongly assumed that images in the eye are produced by the irradiation coming from the retina. This is why he thought he was being faithful to the intromissionist claim that there is a contact between the eye and the world thanks to which we get images. Images in the eye, however, are not the product of the irradiation of the retina, so Kepler had come out with an idea that would have allowed him to dismiss intromissionism. This fact, however, was not clear to Kepler himself, as well as, as we shall see below, it was not clear to Descartes when he set up to criticize Kepler's theory in order to get

the eye, the eye *produces* an image, which mirrors the outside world, and it is this image that we see when we see the world. This theory implied a shift of paradigm: whereas for Alhazen, as well as for the Ancients, the eye was a passive recipient of images, for Kepler it was an active builder of images. The problem of the inversion was resolved with an argument that, to us, cannot but sound *ad hoc*:

If you are bothered by the inversion of this picture and fear that this inversion might be followed by inverted vision, I ask you to consider the following. Vision is not an action [*actio*], simply because illumination is an action, but is a sensation [*passio*], i.e. the opposite of action: hence it is fitting that the things which are acted upon [*patientia*, i.e. *retinal pictures*] should be placed opposite to the things that are acting upon them, so that the positions may correspond. Now the positions are perfectly opposite when all the lines connecting opposite points run through the same centre, which would not have been so if the picture had been erect. . . . Therefore, when the picture is inverted, the absurdity from which Witelo ran away does not occur²⁶.

Disputes in the theory of vision did not have a serious impact on theories of depiction when, with the Humanists, the classical doctrine of mimesis was brought again to the stage, after its Medieval eclipse. This is because it was believed that the idea that images imitate reality, reformulated and systematized in the form of Leon Battista Alberti's rules for geometrical perspective, could be explained in purely mathematical terms (basing on Euclidean geometry), without any need to refer to a specific theory of vision²⁷. In a nutshell, Alberti understood visual perception in terms of rays of light

rid of its (unnecessary – according to the modern reader) intromissionist implications (Hyman 1989, p.7).

²⁶ Kepler (1939, p. 185) in Hyman (1989, p. 7): Hyman's italics.

²⁷ Hyman (1989, p. 68). See also Gaiger (2008, pp. 21-27).

travelling straight from the surfaces of objects to the eye, so that they form a visual pyramid. Then, he claimed that a picture plane should be understood as intersecting the visual pyramid, thereby producing a second visual pyramid, this time between the eye and the pictorial plane. He understood the resemblance between picture and depicted objects in terms of the geometrical similarity of the two visual pyramids.

Alberti, as well as other Renaissance artists and writers, praised truth to nature in a way that echoed the Classics: he described paintings as capable of making the absent present and representing the dead to the living²⁸. Similarly, Vasari said of Leonardo's *Mona Lisa* that the woman's throat looked as if she were breathing²⁹. The classical ideal of life-likeness, combined with the idea that it only needs mathematics to explain depiction, issued in Alberti's famous comparison between paintings and windows: "Let me tell you what I do when I am painting. First of all, on the surface on which I am going to paint, I draw a rectangle of whatever size I want, which I regard as an open window through which the subject is to be seen"³⁰. According to this analogy, a truly mimetic picture is life-like, in that it can be compared to the view from an open window, but it is also such that its life-likeness depends on the viewer occupying the right position while looking at it, i.e. the position that is analogous to the standpoint of the imaginary viewer who is looking at the scene represented by the picture from a window, where the standpoint of the imaginary viewer has been established by the painter. This would allow for seeing the resemblances between the visual pyramid connecting the pictorial plane to the viewer's eye and the visual pyramid that would connect the

²⁸ Alberti (1972, p. 61).

²⁹ Vasari (1987, p. 266).

³⁰ Alberti (1972, p. 55).

viewer's eye to the represented objects, if she were looking at them from an open window. (Alberti's hypothesis, evidently, does not take into account neither the binocularity of vision, nor the mobility of the viewer). Of course it would be insensate to attribute to Alberti the belief that when we look at a painting of *X* we cannot perceive any difference from when we look at *X* from a window, but it is reasonable to claim that the view from the window set the ideal standard for painting, just like the mirror did in the story of Zeuxis and Parrhasius, but with the difference that the standard this time was based on a geometrical theory of mimesis.

3. Descartes: the illusion view of depiction

In this section I shall show how it is with Descartes that, for the first time, the new insights in the theory of vision were combined with a theory of depiction that took significant distance from the classical theory of mimesis³¹. In formulating a theory of vision, Descartes' first goal was to get rid of the intromissionist doctrine implied by Kepler's theory of vision: according to Kepler, the retinal stimulus, which explains how vision occurs, is given by the picture produced by the eye when the eye is hit by light rays, and geometry suffices to explain how vision works. *Contra* Kepler, Descartes argued that a retinal image is not a surrogate for the objects it mirrors, while it works as a mechanical stimulus that produces a specific psychological effect. He made this point thanks to the assimilation, which he borrowed from the Stoics, of the workings of visual perception to the information about the visual world a blind

³¹ For my analysis I shall draw from Hyman (1989, chap. 1; 2006, pp. 113-126).

person gets thanks to the stimuli she receives from the walking stick she holds in her hands³².

There is no need to suppose that something material passes from objects to our eyes to make us see colours and light, or even that there is something in the objects which resembles the ideas or sensations that we have of them. In just the same way, when a blind man feels bodies, nothing has to issue from the bodies and pass along his stick to his hand; and the resistance or movement of the bodies, which is the sole cause of the sensations he has of them, is nothing like the ideas he forms of them. By this means, your mind will be delivered from all those little images flitting through the air, called “intentional forms”³³.

Descartes’ was a great, if controversial, step for modern theory of vision. The idea that the fact that our corneas mirror the outside world is relevant in explaining vision was abandoned, and rightly so. The new core idea was that perception is a matter of stimuli and response: our sense organs are like sticks in the hands of blind people. Sense organs transmit to the mind stimuli caused by external objects, to which the mind responds forming an “idea” of the perceived objects, an idea that is causally connected to them. This is a stimulus-and-response understanding of perception where the role of the senses is wholly passive. Moreover, this view famously opens the road to the hypothesis that we might be deceptively stimulated in a way that leads us to form an “idea” of certain perceived objects, while actually we are not perceiving such objects (and we may not be perceiving any object at all). This, as we shall see, is exactly what happens in the case of pictures, according to

³² Diogenes Laertius, VII, 157.

³³ Descartes, *Philosophical Writings* 1: 153; see Aristotle, *De Sensu*: 440a15.

Descartes³⁴. Going into the details of Descartes' new theory of perception, and especially visual perception, however, falls outside the boundaries of the present investigation. The reason why I am interested in Descartes is that his theory of vision is bound with a theory of depiction that will prove extremely influential on modern and, arguably, contemporary debate on depiction. I shall now characterize Descartes' view on pictures and I shall explain how it has influenced contemporary debate further in this chapter.

After what I have said about Descartes' abandonment of the intromissionist theory, it might sound surprising that, in the following passage, Descartes argues that vision can be explained with an analogy with our experience of pictures:

[The philosophers'] sole reason for positing such images [i.e. retinal images] was that they saw how easily a picture can stimulate our mind to conceive the objects depicted in it, and so it seemed to them that, in the same way, the mind must be stimulated, by little pictures formed in our head, to conceive the objects that affect our senses. We should, however, recall that our mind can be stimulated by many things other than images – by signs and words, for example, which in no way resemble the things they signify. And if, in order to depart as little as possible from accepted views, we prefer to maintain that the objects which we perceive by our senses really send images of themselves to the inside of our brain, we must at least observe that in no case does an image have to resemble the object it represents in all respects, for otherwise there would be no distinction between the object and its image. It is enough that the image resembles its object in a few respects. Indeed the perfection of an image often depends on its not resembling its object as much as it might. You can see this in the case

³⁴ Hyman (1989) dedicates much attention to the link between a causal theory of perception and a causal theory of depiction both in Descartes and in contemporary debate on depiction. Moreover, Hyman has rejected the causal theory of perception in both its modern and its contemporary formulation, especially in the writings of Paul Grice and Peter Strawson. See Locke (2004); Grice (1961); Austin (1962); Strawson (1974); Strawson (1979); Hyman (1992 and 2003b).

of engravings. . . . Now we must think of the images formed in our brain in just the same way, and note that the problem is to know simply how they can enable the soul to have sensory perceptions of all the various qualities of the objects to which they correspond – not to know how they can resemble these objects ³⁵.

Descartes here assumes that an explanation of how visual perception works can be obtained through an explanation of how pictures work. Why? As Hyman explains, although Descartes wanted to reject intromissionism and the idea that what we actually see are images in the retina he was still contaminated by the intromissionist hypothesis. More precisely, although Descartes did not think that what we actually see are images in the retina, he did not detach himself from the idea that tracing parallelisms between vision as such and the vision of pictures is a good way of explaining how visual perception works ³⁶. The conception of perception as a sheer matter of stimulus and response, combined with the idea that the analogy between pictures and vision is an effective means for explaining vision, inspired in Descartes a theory of depiction according to which “a picture can stimulate our mind to conceive the objects depicted in it”, so that it looks as if it were resembling the objects it depicts, whereas it actually bears with them very limited resemblances, if any. This is an illusion view of depiction, since it entails that pictures “stimulate” our mind to see things which we are not really looking at, objects which are not there ³⁷. As Hyman comments, when Descartes argues

³⁵ Descartes, *Philosophical Writings* 1: 153.

³⁶ “Whereas Kepler had mistaken the retinal stimulus for a picture, Descartes proposed that a picture is simply a visual stimulus. A picture, he maintained, resembles what it depicts only in respect of shape, and even that resemblance is imperfect. . . . a picture ‘stimulates the mind to conceive the object depicted in it’ . . . as a word or a sign stimulates the mind to conceive what it signifies” (Hyman, 1989, p. 18).

³⁷ “The illusion theory [of depiction], which was originally advanced by Descartes, says that a picture is a marked surface that produces the experience that is normally caused by seeing an

that pictures produce “sensory perceptions of the various qualities of the objects they represent”

instead of supposing that the peculiar nature of the experience of looking at a picture . . . is explained by the nature of pictures themselves, he claims the opposite: that what makes a picture an unusual kind of object is the peculiar nature of the experience which it produces in the mind of a spectator. And what is peculiar about this experience is that it is not, or not exclusively, a sensory perception of the various qualities of the picture itself, but of the objects that the picture represents. A picture is therefore something whose essential nature is disguise . . . This is, in effect, an illusion theory of pictures³⁸.

That Descartes’ was a view of depiction strongly alternative to the traditional resemblance theory can also be inferred from his scepticism towards the resemblance view, expressed in passages such as: “it is enough that the image resembles its object in a few respects. Indeed the perfection of an image often depends on its not resembling its object as much as it might”, and the following one:

In no case does an image resemble the object it represents in all respects, for otherwise there would be no distinction between the object and its image. It is enough that the image resembles its object in a few respects. Indeed the perfection of an image often depends on its not resembling its object as much as it might. You can see this in the case of engravings: consisting simply of a little ink placed here and there on a piece of paper they represent to us forests, towns, people, and even battles and storms; and although they make us think of countless different qualities in these objects, it is only in respect of shape that there is any real resemblance. And even this resemblance is very

object of the kind depicted – that is, that it imitates the effect of a visible object on the senses rather than the object itself” (Hyman, 2006, p. 60).

imperfect, since engravings represent to us bodies of varying relief and depth on a surface which is entirely flat. Moreover, in accordance with the rules of perspective they often represent circles by ovals better than by other circles, squares by rhombuses better than by other squares, and similarly for other shapes. Thus it often happens that in order to be more perfect as an image and to represent an object better, an engraving ought not to resemble it ³⁹.

Descartes does not limit himself to the platonic claim that resemblance between an image and the objects it represents is not perfect, but restrained to a few respects. As Hyman notes, he seems deliberately to refer to engravings, rather than to coloured pictures, in order not to mention colour as a possible aspect of resemblance between image and object. Furthermore, he observes that it is not true that an object's shape is always faithfully reproduced by an image of that object that we would judge persuasive ⁴⁰. With such remarks, Descartes set the foundation for a theory of depiction alternative to the resemblance theory, according to which images do not depict because they resemble the objects they depict, but because they produce in the viewers a visual illusion of the depicted objects ⁴¹.

Let me now introduce a number of points that I shall develop in the next sections and, in some cases, further in the next chapters. They should allow us to see how Descartes' ideas on depiction are linked to contemporary debate on PR. First, as I have explained, Descartes' claims are the first to bring together a modern theory of vision and a theory of depiction, based on the idea that paintings produce a peculiar visual experience in the viewer. As I shall explain

³⁸ Hyman (2000, p. 21).

³⁹ Descartes (1985, Vol. I, p. 165).

⁴⁰ Hyman (2006, p. 74).

below, this idea has had an influence on the views defended by Ernst Gombrich, Richard Wollheim, and Robert Hopkins, although this is a claim that, as we shall see, requires some qualification. Second, in the first passage quoted above, Descartes traces a comparison between pictures and words that famously has its origins in Augustine⁴². Such a comparison has the function to persuade the reader that pictures are quite similar to words, and that therefore resemblance is not relevant to understand how pictures work. Third, Descartes says that true resemblances between pictures and depicted objects are very few, if there are any. In the passage quoted above he claims they are at best rough resemblances in shape, while the hypothesis that there are resemblances in colour between pictures and depicted objects is not even taken into consideration. Both the second and the third claim, as we shall see, will reappear in contemporary literature on depiction.

4. The Cartesian inheritance: Ernst Gombrich

The representation . . . is not a replica. It need not be like the motif. The craftsman of Jericho did not think eyes indistinguishable from cowrie shells any more than Picasso thinks baboons indistinguishable from motor-cars, but in certain contexts one can represent the other. They belong to the same class because they release the same response⁴³.

This quote from Ernst Gombrich's *Art and Illusion* (1960) reminds us of Descartes' theory of depiction: what is crucial for a PR to be effective is that it

⁴¹ Descartes argues: "the problem is to know simply how [pictures] can enable the soul to have sensory perceptions of all the various qualities of the objects to which they correspond – not to know how they can resemble these objects" (Descartes 1985, Vol. 1, p. 166).

⁴² Augustine (1971, pp. 636-637).

⁴³ Gombrich (2002, p. 94)

“releases the same response” the object it represents would release in a normal viewer. What brought Gombrich to this claim in 1960, after many advancements in the psychology of vision since Descartes’ times? As I shall try to explain in this section, Gombrich had absorbed a culture of scepticism towards the resemblance view, a culture that has its origin in Descartes’ writings. Moreover, drawing from studies in the psychology of vision of his time, Gombrich put forward a theory of depiction that retains the basic Cartesian idea that a picture is essentially a pattern of visual stimuli, which produce a very specific effect in the viewer. However, it would be wrong to characterize this effect as an illusory perception in the case of Gombrich’s formulation.

Gombrich’s analysis departs from the observation that we can make very little use of the idea that paintings resemble the objects they represent. This is an idea that, as we have seen, originates in Descartes. It is, however, with 18th century art-school literature on drawing that such observation acquires relevance in the theory of pictorial art: Jonathan Richardson, James Barry, John Constable and John Ruskin, among others, were of the opinion that transformations in pictorial style are not due to technical improvements in the imitation of nature, while they are the consequence of a better understanding of how visual perception works ⁴⁴. The shift towards the psychology of perception, however, did not determine the abandonment of the idea that *mimesis* was a goal for painters. Those who held the view that sense data, the

⁴⁴ Gombrich (2002, pp. 10-12). Gombrich quotes the following passage from Ruskin: “The perception of solid Form is entirely a matter of experience. We *see* nothing but flat colours; and it is only by a series of experiments that we find out that a stain of black or grey indicates the dark side of a solid substance, or that a feint hue indicates that the object in which it appears is far away. The whole technical power of painting depends on our recovery of what may be called the *innocence of the eye*; that is to say, a sort of childish perception of these flat stains of colour, merely as such, without consciousness of what they signify – as a blind man

basic constituents of perception, are accessible to the subject, claimed that a painter's task was to reproduce visual sense data on the canvas, in order to provoke a mimetic effect. This is, famously, the idea that inspired the Impressionists in their experimentations with colour⁴⁵. However, this idea was abandoned when sense data started to be understood as not accessible to the subject, since it did not make sense anymore to say that the mimetic painter seeks to reproduce sense data on the pictorial surface⁴⁶. What does the mimetic painter do then? *Art and Illusion* has a new answer to this old question.

Gombrich was persuaded that if PR was not a matter of imitation, it could be a matter of translation; the artist “cannot transcribe what he sees; he can only translate it into the terms of his medium”⁴⁷. But what is a visual translation? Let us suppose that we can explain the effect of the English word “dog” in the listener who is competent in English as the effect of evoking the thought of a dog. If we follow this view, we can say that “cane”, the Italian translation of “dog”, should evoke in the listener who is competent in Italian the thought of a dog. In the same way, according to Gombrich, the PR of an object *X* should evoke in the viewer a response analogous to the one the vision of *X* would evoke. The Albertian assimilation of paintings to windows onto the world acquires a new meaning in this context: “what may make a painting like a distant view through a window is not the fact that the two can be as indistinguishable as a facsimile from the original: it is the similarity between

would see them if suddenly gifted with sight” (Ruskin, *Modern Painters* in Gombrich, 2002, p. 250).

⁴⁵ Gombrich (2002, p. 169) explains: “It is the point of impressionist painting that the direction of the brushstroke is no longer an aid to the reading of forms. It is without any support from structure that the beholder must mobilize his memory of the visible world and project it into the mosaic of strokes and dabs on the canvas before him. ... The image, it might be said, has no firm anchorage left on the canvas – it is only ‘conjured up’ in our minds. The willing beholder responds to the artist’s suggestion because he enjoys the transformation that occurs in front of his eyes”.

⁴⁶ See Palmer (1999, pp. 48-58).

the mental activities both can arouse”⁴⁸. Gombrich argues that a relevant part of the job of painters consists in looking for those pictorial formulas that are more apt to trigger a certain psychological effect, and in replacing less effective formulas with more convincing ones: “making comes before matching”⁴⁹. It can be said that, according to this theory, true imitation is at best a rare thing in painting: it could be confined to those cases when the artist can actually reproduce aspects of visual objects with aspects of his medium, such as when gold leaf is used to represent gold, or blots of colour are used to represent blots of colour on a palette.

Following Descartes was not a goal Gombrich had set himself to pursue: rather, he was drawing substantial inspiration from mid-XX century psychology of vision and from the theory of knowledge developed by his friend Karl Popper. However, his researches brought him to a stimulus-and-response conception of the perception of pictures and a deep scepticism towards the idea that pictures resemble what they represent, two views that are prominent in Descartes’ writings. Here I would like to stress that these considerations do not amount to the claim that Gombrich holds an illusion view of depiction that misses some essential aspects of our experience of pictures. This allegation, most notably made by Richard Wollheim, has widely influenced the reception of Gombrich’s theory in contemporary debate on depiction, and is intuitively supported by the fact that Gombrich himself calls “illusion” the psychological effect that a painting has on the viewer. But of course use of the same word is not enough evidence for the claim that Gombrich’s “illusions” are proper illusions, in a genuinely Cartesian sense.

⁴⁷ Gombrich (2002, p. 30).

⁴⁸ Gombrich (1973, p. 240).

⁴⁹ Gombrich (2002, p. 99).

Wollheim sought to support the claim that Gombrich's is an authentic illusion view with an analysis of some of his passages. I do not agree with his reading and I prefer to endorse an alternative reading recently suggested by Katerina Bantinaki ⁵⁰. I shall now compare the two readings. The reason why I am concentrating on this issue is that I believe not only that Wollheim misunderstands Gombrich's proposal, but also that Wollheim's reading may have the consequence of making Gombrich's views look far more distant from his own views than they actually are.

According to Wollheim, Gombrich maintains that in seeing a picture of *X* we have an experience as of *X*. He claims:

Gombrich [assimilates] what he calls the "seeing canvas"/"seeing nature" disjunction...to the seeing the duck/seeing the rabbit disjunction . . . I cannot be simultaneously visually aware of *the medium* and of *the object* of the representation and to perceive both I have to switch perception. . . . [I]t is Gombrich's failure to assign to the seeing appropriate to representations a distinctive phenomenology that impels him towards the view that there is nothing distinctive about the seeing of representations, or that seeing someone's representation is quite continuous with seeing that person face to face ⁵¹.

Under this reading, Gombrich claims that the phenomenology of the experience of *X* and the phenomenology of the experience of a convincing picture of *X* are identical, and therefore his qualifies as a proper illusion theory of depiction. As for Wollheim's alternative proposal, he claims that there is an aspect of pictures themselves that prevents the illusion from occurring in all

⁵⁰ Bantinaki (2007, pp. 268-279).

⁵¹ Wollheim, (1996, pp. 214-215). See also Wollheim (1987, note 6 p. 360). See Gombrich (2002, pp. 4-5; pp. 24-25). For a similarly minded reading of Gombrich see also Budd (1992, pp. 261-262).

pictures (with the only exception of *trompe l'oeil* pictures). Namely, it is the material aspects of the pictorial surface. Such aspects, according to Wollheim, are one of the two essential components of our experience of pictures, its “configurational” side. The other essential component is called “recognitional”. The configurational aspect is defined as “our awareness of the marked surface itself” while the recognitional aspect is defined as “discerning something in the marked surface”⁵². Gombrich then – Wollheim maintains – wrongly characterizes the viewing of a painting as an experience that is phenomenologically identical with the experience one could have of the very objects the painting represents. The phenomenology of pictorial vision, according to Wollheim, is intrinsically different from the phenomenology of the vision of non-pictorial objects.

Bantinaki’s central claims are that Wollheim misinterpreted Gombrich’s “illusion view” and that Gombrich’s account is compatible with Wollheim’s characterization of the experience of seeing a picture. First, she observes that Wollheim disregarded an important detail, i.e. that Gombrich’s “illusion” – as Wollheim described it – would only take place under ideal circumstances. Ideal circumstances, as Gombrich explained, would be met only by *trompe l'oeil* pictures and pictures seen with one stationary eye, through a peep-hole, from a particular point of view, like objects in one of Ames’ rooms, which perfectly match our experience of the objects they depict⁵³. Gombrich was aware that pictorial space is generally not experienced as actual three-dimensional space: there usually is discontinuity between pictures and their environment (pictures have a frame around them and/or their subject does not

⁵² Wollheim (1987, pp. 72-73).

⁵³ For Ames’ rooms see e.g. Gombrich (2002, pp. 209-211).

fit into their surroundings) ⁵⁴. Bantinaki also has a stronger criticism against Wollheim's reading. She develops her argument commenting on the following passage from Gombrich:

Remember that a picture, before being a battle horse . . . is essentially a plane surface covered with paint in a certain arrangement. It is a fact not very difficult to remember for those who are engaged in storing paintings. . . . But is it possible to "see" both the plane surface and the battle horse at the same time? If we have been right so far, the demand is for the impossible. To understand the battle horse is for a moment to disregard the plane surface. We cannot have it both ways ⁵⁵.

Looking at this excerpt one can easily understand Wollheim's interpretation of Gombrich: Gombrich here claims that the viewer cannot simultaneously "see" the medium and the subject matter of a PR, therefore, according to Wollheim, he is disregarding the twofoldness of pictorial seeing (i.e. the fact that the experience of a picture has a configurational and a recognitional aspect blended together) which, for Wollheim, is an essential character of pictures. I shall explore the strengths and the weaknesses of Wollheim's claims on the twofoldness of pictorial vision in the next section. Here, independently on our accepting or rejecting Wollheim's view, I would like to follow Bantinaki's suggestion that Gombrich's proposal might actually be compatible with Wollheim's ideas on the twofoldness of pictorial vision. According to Bantinaki, Gombrich's theory

⁵⁴ "Following as it does from our inability to look around corners, a perspective picture cannot exist in its own right, as a three-dimensional model can. . . . To ask for it, finally, to be hung on a wall and viewed from any part of the room while still preserving the illusion is to ask for an absurdity" (Gombrich, 2002, p. 215).

⁵⁵ Gombrich (2002, p. 236).

allows that when one sees what a picture represents the medium can be somehow part of one's visual awareness: what it excludes is the possibility of seeing the picture's design as a *meaningless* design – as *just* marks on a surface – while seeing what the picture represents . . . The claim is then that when we see a picture with understanding we do not see it *at the same time* detached from that understanding – much as when we see a familiar meaningful word we do not at the same time see the word as *just* a set of marks ⁵⁶.

If we accept this reformulation of Gombrich's claim it is unlikely that we might want to disagree with him, and there are also no obstacles in bringing together Gombrich's claims and Wollheim's twofoldness hypothesis. Bantinaki bases her interpretation on the following argument. She refers to the passage where Gombrich claims that for "illusion" he means that, when one is confronting an effective pattern of pictorial stimuli (a certain formula for depicting something), one develops "the conviction that there is only one way of interpreting the visual pattern in front of us. . . . What we can see . . . does not directly and immediately reveal to us 'what is there'; in fact, we cannot possibly tell 'what is there'; we can only guess, and our guess will be influenced by our expectations" ⁵⁷. According to Bantinaki this passage reveals that Gombrich deems pictorial experience illusory "because in such an experience the picture figures as an object with a determinate meaning, while the picture really is an indeterminate frame that allows for different readings – very much like a Rorschach inkblot. And, as with the Rorschach inkblot, it is the mental set of the viewer, rather than the design itself, that determines what the viewer is going to see in a picture, which makes the object perceived really

⁵⁶ Bantinaki, (2007 p. 273).

⁵⁷ Gombrich (2002 pp. 210-211).

a product of the viewer's mental set" ⁵⁸. The kernel of this reading is that Gombrich's illusion theory is not to be identified with the claim that a painting produces an experience that – under ideal conditions – would be illusory in that it would be phenomenologically like the experience of the represented object one would have outside a representational context. According to Bantinaki, Gombrich's illusion theory consists instead in the claim that the experience of a painting is illusory because the viewer has the illusion that the pictorial object has a determinate meaning, whereas the meaning of such an object is intrinsically indeterminate. In other words, it is not an illusion concerning the way *the pictorial subject* is experienced, but it is an illusion concerning the character of the interpretation of *pictorial design*, "the non-veridical experience of there being a determinate meaning for the picture" as Bantinaki has. According to this reading, the "making and matching" process of picture production described by Gombrich does not allow the painter to find a way *to deceive* the viewer, while it helps the painter in finding the most compelling way to prompt the viewer to give a certain interpretation of the picture, and to believe that no other interpretation should be given of the picture, even though she may be well aware that she is giving an interpretation of an essentially indeterminate pattern. What is "illusory" about this process is that the viewer accepts to behave as if there were a univocal interpretation of the marks on the pictorial surface, even though she might be aware that the meaning of the marks is essentially indeterminate.

I believe that Bantinaki's reading allows us to see how, for Gombrich as well as for Wollheim, the experience of seeing the representational subject of a painting of *X* is phenomenologically different from the experience of seeing the

⁵⁸ Bantinaki (2007, p. 276).

real object *X* itself. As a consequence, Gombrich's theory can't be said to have inherited Descartes' conception of pictorial illusion. However, there is a Cartesian component in Gombrich's thoughts, since Gombrich thinks that in order to understand pictures we have to look at the effects they have on the viewers, at our experience of them, rather than at their objective features. But this is a claim that, as we shall see, Gombrich shares with much contemporary literature on depiction, Wollheim's writings included.

Bantinaki also observes that, conceding, with Gombrich, that pictorial patterns are indeterminate, does not allow for understanding depiction thanks to the description of the dialectic of pictorial stimulus and viewer's response, because it misses out the fact that pictures are essentially social objects which do not count as PRs unless they are "used by an agent with the intention to stand for (and to be recognized by an audience as standing for) another real or imaginary object"⁵⁹. So it is because the viewer has understood the communicational context of a picture that she opts for a certain reading, and not because she is under the influence of some psychological trick. In conclusion, although Gombrich's theory should not be rejected because it is an "illusion" theory in the Cartesian sense, it should be rejected because Gombrich totally disregards the fact that pictures are always pictures in specific communicational contexts and introduces analogies in perceptual response where understanding of the context of use of a picture should be taken into account. So much for a general evaluation of Gombrich's proposal. What I hope to have shown in this section is especially that Gombrich is indebted with Descartes for the idea that depiction should be explained by a characterization of the experience a picture produces in the viewer, and for the dismissal of the

⁵⁹ Bantinaki (2007, p. 277).

resemblance theory, whereas Gombrich's "illusion" theory is not an illusion view in the Cartesian sense.

5. The Cartesian inheritance: Richard Wollheim on seeing-in

Like Gombrich, Richard Wollheim agrees with Descartes in that he assumes depictions to arouse a particular kind of experience in the viewer, and he maintains this experience is what we have to analyze if we want to understand depiction. Whereas – as I have claimed following Bantinaki's reading – for Gombrich the peculiar experience is the "illusion" of there being a unique interpretation for a certain pattern of colours and forms (a univocal "matching"), Wollheim postulates that a specific kind of vision is activated in the presence of depictions: seeing-in, which is the simultaneous visual experience of a marked pictorial surface under two aspects: the "configurational" and the "recognitional" aspect⁶⁰. As the following passage from *Painting as an Art* (1987) shows, the configurational aspect is defined as the awareness of the marked surface itself, while the recognitional aspect is defined as the discerning of something in the marked surface, which involves an awareness of depth in the surface.

Seeing-in is a distinct kind of perception, and it is triggered by the presence within the field of vision of a differentiated surface. Not all differentiated surfaces will have this effect, but I doubt that anything significant can be said about what exactly a surface must be like for it to have this effect. When the surface is right, then an experience with a certain phenomenology will occur, and it is this phenomenology that is distinctive

⁶⁰ Wollheim (1987, pp. 72-73). Previously, Wollheim had argued that a duality of experiences, rather than a twofold experience, is what characterizes pictorial vision (Wollheim, 1980). For a comparison between the two accounts and criticisms against both see Budd (1992).

about seeing-in. . . . The distinctive phenomenological feature I call “twofoldness”, because, when seeing-in occurs, two things happen: I am visually aware of the surface I look at, and I discern something standing out in front of, or (in certain cases) receding behind, something else ⁶¹.

In Wollheim’s account, seeing-in comes together with a standard of correctness, illustrated in the following passage:

Representation can be explained in terms of seeing-in, as the following situation reveals: In a community where seeing-in is firmly established, some member of the community – let us call him (prematurely) an artist – sets about marking a surface with the intention of getting others around him to see some definite thing in it: say, a bison. If the artist’s intention is successful to the extent that a bison can be seen in the surface as he has marked it, then the community closes ranks in that someone who does indeed see a bison in it is now held to see the surface correctly, and anyone is held to see it incorrectly if he sees, as he might, something else in it, or nothing at all. Now the marked surface represents a bison ⁶².

The passage is meant to illustrate that, in a community of viewers who are already familiar with the practice of seeing-in, it is the artist’s intention to depict a certain object that sets the standard of correctness for seeing-in relatively to a certain depiction: a viewer has an appropriate experience of seeing-in a certain painting if what he sees in the painting is what the painter intended him to see in it. I shall come back to this below.

The main problem with Wollheim’s proposal is that he does not explain what seeing-in consists in. This objection is widespread in the literature, also among those who think Wollheim is right in claiming that we see objects in

⁶¹ Wollheim (1987, p. 46).

pictures, that what he calls “twofoldness” is a distinctive aspect of pictures, and that these are the elements philosophers should concern themselves in an explanation of how PR works⁶³. Wollheim says that when we see something in a picture, we recognize something as depicted by a surface with certain configurational features, and that this experience of recognition is one and the same thing with the awareness of the configurational features of the surface. This, however, is not an explanation of how seeing-in works. It is a statement concerning the experience that seeing-in is supposed to trigger in the viewer. Twofoldness, in other words, is of no help in explaining depiction. Wollheim does not provide an argument to support his claims on the twofoldness of seeing-in and he himself is sceptical about the fact that his claims can be grounded in some other philosophical explanation⁶⁴. His basic idea, I believe, is that, given that the phenomenology of pictorial vision is undoubtedly different from the phenomenology of actual vision, his characterization of seeing-in should be accepted as an effective working hypothesis of why it is so. As Malcom Budd has claimed, this is a very dangerous step for Wollheim’s theory, because Wollheim insists that seeing-in is not just different from, but also incomparable with normal visual experience:

The insistence that the recognitional aspect and the corresponding face-to-face experience are experientially incomparable undermines the force of the idea that for any recognitional aspect there is an analogous face-to-face experience after which it can be

⁶² Wollheim (1987, p. 48).

⁶³ See for example Peacocke (1987, p. 401); Budd (1992, pp. 269-273); Walton (1992, p. 282); Hopkins (1998, pp. 19-20; 37-38).

⁶⁴ “Seeing-in is triggered off by the presence within the field of vision of a differentiated surface. Not all differentiated surfaces will have this effect, but I doubt that anything significant can be said about exactly what a surface must be like for it to have this effect” (Wollheim 1989, p. 46). “I too think that something must be said about what it is like to see something in a picture, and, the more that can be truly said, the better. But to think that enough

described. The recognitional aspect cannot properly derive the only description it can be given from an experience with an incomparable phenomenology: the alleged experiential incommensurability prevents the description of the one from being modelled on the description of the other – or, if it is so modelled, makes it inappropriate, indeed mistaken. Hence, the so-called recognitional aspect of seeing-in merely masquerades as an analogue of a face-to-face experience; and when the description it has wrongly borrowed is stripped from it, it not only has no other description to clothe itself in, but is revealed as having no nature of its own⁶⁵.

The problem of the lack of explanation for seeing-in has engendered two reactions: on the one hand there are those who believe that seeing-in can be defined, and that what is needed is a correct theory of visual perception and a theory of depiction more refined than the one endorsed by Wollheim (Peacocke, Walton, Hopkins and Levinson⁶⁶); on the other hand there are those who are sceptical about the whole enterprise of explaining depiction in terms of the experience pictures produce in their viewers (Lopes, Hyman⁶⁷). I shall look at the details of some of such theories later in this chapter. Here, I would like to mention some specific objections Wollheim's account has raised, since they illustrate some of the challenges authors writing on depiction today have to face.

The first group of objections concerns the fact that Wollheim's account excludes *trompe l'oeil* pictures from the domain of depiction. Wollheim argues that such paintings “are non-representational . . . because they do not invoke,

needs to be said so that someone who didn't believe that there are such experiences is convinced of their existence is to succumb to unrealistic standards” (Wollheim 2003, p. 235).

⁶⁵ Budd (1992, p. 271).

⁶⁶ See Peacocke (1987, p. 401); Walton (1992, p. 282); Levinson (1998, p. 229); Hopkins (1998, pp. 19-20; 37-38). Other experiential accounts of pictorial representation, not specifically linked with Wollheim's views, can be found in Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Worlds and Works of Art* (1980); Roger Scruton, *Art and Imagination* (1982); Flint Schier, *Deeper into pictures* (1983); Malcom Budd, *On Looking at a Painting* (1992).

⁶⁷ See for instance Lopes (2006, pp. 160-174, esp. p. 167); Hyman (2006, p. 140).

indeed they repel, attention to the marked surface”. In other words, *trompe l’oeil* do not satisfy Wollheim’s requirement according to which twofoldness is an essential feature of seeing-in, i.e. of the experience we have when we see a PR⁶⁸. Wollheim then claims that our experience of *trompe l’oeil* pictures is not an experience of PRs, and since he holds that we are to define pictures basing on the experience we have of them, then he concludes that *trompe l’oeil* are not PRs. The general reaction to this claim has been negative, and of course there is a spontaneous suspicion towards the idea that *trompe l’oeil* pictures actually are not proper pictures. There are two main lines of objection: on the one hand, Dominic Lopes has argued that twofoldness is not necessary for pictorial experience, therefore the fact that *trompe l’oeil* do not trigger a twofold experience does not provide an argument for excluding them from the domain of depiction⁶⁹. On the other hand, John Hyman has observed that if a picture’s attracting attention to the features of its surface has to be the criterion for PR, while pictures that only attract attention to their representational objects do not qualify as proper PRs, then it is not only *trompe l’oeil* pictures, but also may other paintings that should be excluded from the domain of depiction⁷⁰. For example, paintings by Jan Van Eyck and Dominique Ingres, which definitely ask the viewer to imagine to be seeing the pictorial subjects he sees while looking at the pictorial surface, because they make a point of producing very vivid representations, although not *trompe l’oeil* ones (consider, for instance, Van Eyck’s *Portrait of Giovanni Arnolfini and his Wife* and Ingres’ *Valpicon Bather*). Wollheim’s point can be applied exclusively to *trompe l’oeil* – Hyman

⁶⁸ “There are paintings that are non-representational ... because they do not invoke, indeed they repel, attention to the marked surface. *Trompe l’oeil* paintings, like the exquisite series of cabinets in gouache by Leroy de Barde . . . are surely in this category. They incite our awareness of depth, but do so in a way designed to baffle our attention to the marks upon the surface” (Wollheim, 1987, p. 62).

argues – only if we take Wollheim to be claiming that *trompe l’oeil*, unlike other realistic pictures, produce proper visual illusions in the viewer, i.e. that they are truly deceptive pictures. But Wollheim, Hyman observes, seems to acknowledge that it is relevant for our experience of *trompe l’oeil* pictures that we are aware that they are indeed pictures: Wollheim says that *trompe l’oeil* are designed to “baffle our attention” to the pictorial surface, but this does not imply that they have to prevent the viewer to be *aware* of their surface ⁷¹. Instead, such awareness is the condition for appreciating the illusionist painter’s *bravura*. It is, therefore, on Wollheim’s own terms that it can be claimed that *trompe l’oeil* are PRs.

A second difficulty in Wollheim’s theory is that there are reasons to think that his description of seeing-in may apply to art pictures only and therefore not provide a sound means to define depiction as such ⁷². The objection might be raised that it is only for art pictures that it makes sense to claim that in order to understand them we need to appreciate the interplay between configurational and recognitional aspects, whereas for non-art pictures (“demotic” pictures, as Dominic Lopes calls them) all we have is the recognitional aspect of the experience ⁷³.

According to Jerrold Levinson and John Hyman another problem raised by Wollheim’s claims concerns the identification of the standard of correctness for

⁶⁹ Lopes (1996, pp. 49-50).

⁷⁰ Hyman (2006, pp. 132-133).

⁷¹ See Wollheim (1989, p. 62). Hyman explains: “I may . . . be aware of the colour of an object, or its shape, without attending to these properties. To attend to the colour or the shape of an object is to make this property the centre or the focus of one’s engagement with it. But we are not obliged to give this role to whatever we are aware of. Indeed we often cannot do so. I may, for example, be aware of a dozen people talking simultaneously, but I cannot simultaneously attend to what each of them is saying” (2006, pp. 132-133).

⁷² See Lopes (1996, p. 48); Levinson (1998, pp. 228-9); Nanay (2005, p. 249).

⁷³ For sceptical remarks against Lopes on twofoldness see Gaiger (2008, pp. 58-62).

depiction in the artist's fulfilled intention⁷⁴. Levinson observes that the question of the artist's intention being or not being fulfilled by the viewers does not make much sense the way Wollheim puts it (especially in *Painting as an Art*, while the formulation in *On Pictorial Representation* – Levinson notes – is more cautious). This is because “what it is for the pictorial intentions of the artist of P to be fulfilled cannot be specified apart from what suitable viewers are enabled to see in P. Such intentions are fulfilled if viewers are in fact enabled . . . to see in P what the artist intended to be seen there. The artist's fulfilled intention cannot be thought of as an independent condition to which viewers' responses can be held accountable, but can only be understood in terms of the responses of appropriated viewers being the ones they were intended to be”. John Hyman has another objection. He argues that it is false that “a marked surface cannot depict a kind of object unless the artist has the intention that a spectator should see that kind of object in it” because “there may be a difference between what a picture depicts and what the artist meant it to depict”. This is Hyman's suggestion: if a painter intends to depict, say, a man in the uniform of a midshipman but, by mistake, ends up depicting a man in the uniform of a captain, then the picture he has produced depicts a captain, not a midshipman, no matter the painters' intentions. This is not to claim that there is no connection between the pictorial content of a picture and the intentions of its maker: however, it could be that the mere intending to depict *something* is sufficient to determine the relevance of the painter's intentions to the production of pictures.

To conclude, let us go back to the issue of the influence of Descartes' views on Wollheim: as in the case of Gombrich, the Cartesian influence on

⁷⁴ Levinson (1998, p. 232); Hyman (2003a, p. 163; 2006, p. 137).

Wollheim is to be inferred from Wollheim's claim that there is a peculiar experience of seeing pictures that we should characterize and understand in order to explain depiction. But whereas Wollheim dismissed Gombrich's view as "illusionistic", Wollheim's view has inspired contemporary authors, especially Robert Hopkins. In particular, Hopkins maintained the Cartesian idea that there is something peculiar about the experience of pictures we should concern ourselves with if we want to understand PR, and that this peculiarity has to do with pictures presenting an experience related to the non-pictorial experience of the objects they depict. I shall now introduce Hopkins' view. In the next chapter, I shall comment on the dangers of the Cartesian inheritance for contemporary views on depiction.

6. An alternative account of seeing-in: Robert Hopkins

Three philosophers have pursued the goal of improving Wollheim's loose definition of seeing-in: Christopher Peacocke, Kendall Walton, and Robert Hopkins⁷⁵. I shall only consider Robert Hopkins' attempt: on the one hand, it is by now widely recognized that Peacocke's account failed to target the experience of seeing-in in the way Wollheim conceived of it, and also that it implies a dubious distinction between sensational and representational properties of vision; on the other hand, it is claimed that Walton's account is of little use to a theory of depiction, since its main concern is the imaginings pictures trigger, and scarce attention is given to the specific pictorial character of pictures' content⁷⁶.

⁷⁵ Peacocke (1987); Walton (1990); Hopkins (1998).

⁷⁶ Peacocke purports to elucidate Wollheim's notion of seeing-in. It must be said that Wollheim himself (1987, p. 360) acknowledges – although with scepticism – this endeavour of

In a nutshell, Hopkins' proposal is that, although Wollheim's twofoldness is necessary for the seeing-in experience to obtain, it is not sufficient: seeing-in also requires that the pictorial surface present a specific visual aspect for it to elicit an experience of resemblance with objects in the visual world that are characterized by that very visual aspect⁷⁷. Hopkins calls the relevant visual aspect "outline shape"⁷⁸. The reason why this concept is introduced is that Hopkins is persuaded an explanation of depiction must be an account of the visual character of pictures, in particular of the fact that whatever can be depicted can be seen⁷⁹. This is taken to be an aspect of pictures we are intuitively aware of, and rightly so, since depiction "is a form of representation which essentially works by capturing the appearance of things"⁸⁰. Therefore,

Peacocke's. However, Budd (1992, pp. 276-277) has argued that there is a basic discrepancy between Peacocke's and Wollheim's respective conceptions of seeing in: "first, Peacocke's conception, unlike Wollheim's, does not credit a spectator's visual awareness of the picture surface when he sees a picture as a depiction with a nature that is experientially incommensurate with that of the relevant face-to-face experience and which disallows its separate existence. Second, the experience of visual field shape similarity [i.e. the experience described by Peacocke] is not a visual awareness of depth, but an awareness of a resemblance between the intrinsic properties of two two-dimensional visual fields, one actual, the other hypothetical". Moreover, Hopkins (1998, p. 89) observes: "as Peacocke himself notes (pp. 388, 390), his characterization of seeing-in is not, strictly speaking, one on which the *marks* are experienced as resembling something else. It is rather areas in the subject's visual field between which resemblance in shape is experienced. So the subject is aware of a similarity between the sensational features of his current experience and the sensational features of other, possible, experiences. And this may seem rather removed from what is, in seeing-in, the heart of things - the appearance of *the marked surface*". For a criticisms of Peacocke's distinction between sensational and representational properties of vision see Lopes (1996, pp. 20-24). For further criticisms see Hyman (2003a). As for Walton's proposal, scepticisms towards its ability to address core issues for depiction has been expressed, for instance, by Schier (1986, pp. 24-25), Budd (1992, p. 275), Wollheim (2003, p. 145). An analysis of the relation between Walton's account and Wollheim's twofoldness concept is provided by Nanay (2004). He claims that it is arguable whether Walton succeeded in his attempt to provide a characterization of the twofoldness of pictorial representation, which may count as a reliable alternative to Wollheim's seeing-in account. According to Nanay, the definition of twofoldness as it is given in *Mimesis as Make-Believe* and in later articles unmistakably differs from Wollheim's definition, and it turns out either that Walton's pictorial game of make-believe cannot be described as perceptual or that Walton's characterization of pictorial experience as twofold must be abandoned (see Nanay, 2004 and Walton 1990; 1991; 2002). Moreover, Wollheim (1991) insisted in stressing the incompatibility of his account with Walton's. I shall consider some aspects of Walton's account in more detail in chapter 3.

⁷⁷ See Wollheim and Hopkins (2003, pp. 136-139; pp. 155-167).

⁷⁸ Hopkins 1998. For a concise explanation see Hopkins (1995, pp. 425-455; and especially 2006, pp. 145-159).

⁷⁹ Hopkins (1998, pp. 24-36).

⁸⁰ Hopkins (2003a, p. 656). See also Hopkins (2003b, pp. 150-151).

there has to be at least an aspect of “what can be seen” that has to be experienced in our experiencing a picture. Hopkins argues that the outline shape of the depicted objects is definitely one such aspect, and that it is an aspect we experience in all pictures. Let us now look in more detail at Hopkins’ concept of outline shape ⁸¹.

Looking through a slightly misty window, I can trace on it the features of things outside. The shape of the tracing is two-dimensional, but will vary with the three-dimensional shape of the object traced. If the object traced is cubic, the resultant tracing will be very different from that for an object which is spherical. Moreover, it does not seem wholly wrong to describe the tracings as pictures of the objects traced. Indeed, the suggestion that such a tracing is what the artist should aim to reproduce has been familiar since the Renaissance ⁸².

In *Picture, Image and Experience* Hopkins introduces the concept with a reference to the analogy between picture and window that, as we have seen, exemplified the “geometric” version of the resemblance theory of depiction defended by Alberti and widely accepted in the Renaissance and further on. The shape of the real object and the contour traced on the window surface do not look the same, but there is a correlation between them. Hopkins’ idea is that the correlation explains the fact that even if the object’s shape is not similar to the shape of the part of a picture that depicts that object, they are *experienced as similar* by the picture’s viewer. In order to make this claim, Hopkins needs to describe the correlation between an object’s shape and an object’s depicted shape in terms that allow the correlation to be identified in all pictures, not matter the point of view of the picture’s viewer (this is a first

⁸¹ Hopkins (1998, pp. 53-57).

aspect in which Hopkins' proposal substantially differs from the Albertian understanding of painting, the second aspect being the fact that Alberti's is a resemblance theory whereas Hopkins' is an experiential theory of depiction)⁸³. In *Picture, Image and Experience* Hopkins explains outline shape in terms of the angles an object subtends when it is intersected by a plane. I shall leave the geometry to his words:

Consider the base and the apex of one face of [a] pyramid. At the point from which the tracing is drawn, both base and apex subtend an angle - the base a large one, the apex one close to zero degrees. As we move up the face of the pyramid between base and apex, the angle subtended by the face gradually reduces from the large to the small. In effect, what we are doing here is considering the angle subtended, by the pyramid, at the point, in each of a variety of planes. In every such plane lies the tracing point and two points at the extremities of the pyramid's face. We start with the plane in which lie the tracing point and the pyramid's base. Then we consider the slightly higher plane, in which lie the tracing point and a section of the pyramid just above the base; then a slightly higher plane still; and so on. And in each successive plane, the angle subtended, at the tracing point, by the extremities of the pyramid's face, reduces. Thus far we have confined ourselves to angles in two dimensions. In each of the planes discussed, the face of the pyramid subtends a particular two-dimensional angle. But it makes perfect sense to talk of angles in three dimensions too - solid angles, as they are known. As we consider ever higher planes intersecting the tracing point and the pyramid, just such a complex three-dimensional angle is limned. Nor should we be misled by the simplicity of the pyramid's (three-dimensional) shape here. Even were it a more complex shape, perhaps bulging near the top, we could still speak of the solid angle it subtends at the tracing point. Were the pyramid that shape, the angles subtended by it in individual planes would begin to increase again, at some point between base and apex. But that would be reflected in the solid angle the pyramid subtends, since that is simply the

⁸² Hopkins (1998, p. 53).

⁸³ See Hopkins (1998, pp. 147-158; 2006, pp. 152-154).

combination, in three dimensions, of all the angles subtended in individual planes. The advantage of talking about solid angles is that it allows us to ignore a difficulty in specifying the geometrical relation which interests us. The selection of planes considered above was somewhat arbitrary. We might as easily have done things rather differently. Suppose we again start with the plane intersecting the tracing point and the two bottom corners of the pyramid's face. Then, bisecting the angle the base subtends in that starting plane, we could consider the planes which are, effectively, rotations of that plane around the bisecting line. The result would be another set of angles subtended in another set of planes. There is no interesting difference between the two sets. They reflect the same geometrical features of the situation, and they do so equally well. But it is fiddly to specify which set one has in mind, and sloppy to fail to do so. This problem simply vanishes once we adopt the notion of a solid angle. For the two sets of (two-dimensional) angles, indexed to two different selections of planes, yield, as the combination in three dimensions of those angles in those planes, the same solid angle⁸⁴.

A few lines below Hopkins sums up: “we can now define an object's outline shape at a point as the solid angle it subtends at that point. Two items will resemble in outline shape to the extent that, at some point, one subtends a solid angle similar to that subtended, at some point, by the other”⁸⁵. As Hopkins explains, the advantage of talking of solid angles is that they exempt one from clarifying what sort of relation is supposed to hold between intersected object (the pyramid in the above passage) and plane. More recently, Hopkins has opted for an explanation of outline shape that drives from the writings of XVIII century philosopher Thomas Reid, who distinguished between the “visible figure” of an object and its “ordinary shape”.

Reid notes that ordinary shape, be it two- or three-dimensional, is a matter of the

⁸⁴ Hopkins (1998, pp. 53-55).

⁸⁵ Hopkins (1998, p. 55).

differing relations in which parts of the object stand to one another. Visible figure, in contrast, is a matter of the differing relations of parts of the object to the eye. It concerns the *directions* of these parts from the eye. Their distance is irrelevant. Visible figure/outline shape is a genuine property of things. Although Reid defines it by relation to “the eye”, it is not dependent on any viewer. We can make perfect sense of the idea of the directions of an object’s parts from a *point* in its surroundings, without any claim about what occupies that point. Outline shape is relative to such a point, and objects will in general have as many distinct outline shapes as there are points around them. But this relativity does not undermine the objectivity of the property. For it is a matter of mere geometry what outline shape a given object has at a given point⁸⁶.

Hopkins, then, has established that outline shape is an objective property of objects, a property we perceive, and of which, sometimes, we are aware, as the following passage shows:

Looking down a road which runs straight across a flat plain, I see its edges as converging. I do not for a moment believe that they really do converge. On the contrary, I not only know what the 3-D shape of the road is (a long, flat, cuboid), my experience represents it as being that shape. I will take that experience to have misled me, not if the road stays the same width as I walk along it, but precisely if it turns out to be shorter and more triangular than is usual - as it would be if it were the product of some elaborate perspectival trick. So perhaps it is a mistake to say, as I just did, that I see the edges as converging, for that suggests my experience misrepresents the way the road is extended in space. Nonetheless, talk of converging edges certainly promised to capture something about the world, as represented in my experience. What is this feature of the represented world? I suggest that it is nothing other than the outline shape of the road. Where the road is nearest to me, kerbstones on opposite sides subtend a large angle. Farther away, in the distance, opposing kerbstones subtend a smaller one. False talk of the edges seeming to converge is our way of capturing true claims about the decreasing

⁸⁶ Hopkins (2003b, p. 152). Here Hopkins refers to Thomas Reid, *Inquiry into the Human Mind*

angles subtended, i.e. of capturing at least part of the outline shape of the road⁸⁷.

Having showed what outline shape is and that it is objective Hopkins is persuaded that he has all he needs in order to argue that the experience of seeing-in a picture is always in part the experience of resemblance in outline shape between a picture and its subject.

Reid saw that since outline shape prescind from the third dimension (distance from the eye), a flat surface such as a picture and a robustly three-dimensional object might match in outline shape and he saw that this fact might be central to picturing. What he did not have available was Wollheim's insight, that the key to picturing is the experience to which it gives rise. He thus did not see that the notion of resemblance, if it is to be used in an account of depiction at all, should be used in an account of that experience. My suggestion is that we do just this. Seeing-in is experienced resemblance in outline shape⁸⁸.

It must be noted that Hopkins has not explained *why* we have an experience of resemblance in outline shape between a picture and its subject when we look at a picture, instead of another kind of experience. Hopkins, however, believes that this is not the task a philosophical theory of depiction should seek to accomplish⁸⁹. He argues that it is, instead, the task for a causal account of depiction, which is empirical, and not philosophical, in character. The philosophical concern with depiction is of a constitutive, rather than causal, character and, according to Hopkins, the experienced resemblance view provides good arguments for outlining the constitutive features of the

1764, Ch. VI, Sections VII-IX.

⁸⁷ Hopkins (1998, p. 59; 2003b, p. 156, 159).

⁸⁸ Hopkins (2003b, p. 153).

⁸⁹ Hopkins (2003, pp. 660-661).

experience of depiction: “The view expects the causal question to have an answer, but does not consider that it is its job to produce it. And it expects that the right answers will come from the empirical disciplines, and sees no reason to expect those answers to have any philosophical import”⁹⁰.

Hopkins observes that in order to get an account of depiction in terms of experienced resemblance also a standard of correctness for depiction needs to be indicated. Depiction, he argues, clearly is a human artefact, the product of human intentions, linked to certain goals and actions. But the mere intention of depicting something does not provide a sufficient standard of correctness for depiction. According to Hopkins: “even if the surface has been formed in order that something be seen in it, it will not depict *O* unless *O* is the thing one is supposed to see there”⁹¹. So the relevant intention has to be the intention of depicting that very *O* which is seen in the picture. Although normally we do not have access to the painter’s intentions relative to a certain picture independently of the picture itself, we can make educated guesses about the intended seeing-in content, thanks to our knowledge of the world, of the appearances of objects and of pictorial techniques⁹². But what about pictures of which we believe that they depict *O* and also that they are intended to resemble *Q* in shape? This difficulty has been raised by Hyman and, in a nutshell, it expresses the idea that sometimes even appeal to the painter’s

⁹⁰ Hopkins (2003, p. 661). Moreover, on pp. 664-665 Hopkins shows that there are some empirical investigations that can make good sense of seeing-in. Hopkins’ claims against the necessity of a causal account for a philosophical theory of depiction are strongly critical towards Dominic Lopes’ project, which is firmly grounded in empirical analysis. On the other hand, Lopes has addressed a number of criticisms against Hopkins, all aimed at demonstrating that he cannot defend his view without committing to some causal explanation. See Lopes (2003 esp. p. 638; 2006).

⁹¹ Hopkins (1998, p.71). Hopkins acknowledges that there is a difference between pictures that are products of a causal process (such as photographs) and pictures that are not, in this respect: “When intention underwrites depiction, misrepresentation is possible; when causation does the underwriting, it is not. As we might put it, non-photographic pictures are necessarily corrigible; photos are necessarily incorrigible” (74).

⁹² Hopkins (1998, pp. 137-138).

intention to depict a certain outline shape so that it can be experienced as resembling a certain object O in outline shape is not enough to secure that a picture depicts O, because a painter might depict some outline shape with the intention it to be seen as resembling not only O, but also Q in outline shape⁹³. In other words, sometimes we say that a picture depicts O, although we are aware that it is intended to resemble both O and Q in shape; therefore Hopkins cannot appeal to the painter's intention the picture to be described as resembling a determinate object in outline shape in order to secure the individuation of the subject of a PR, because painters can have ambiguous intentions about the experiences of resemblance in outline shape their pictures should trigger. Hopkins, then, does not succeed in demonstrating that pictorial representation is always representation of a particular object, or of an object of a certain kind, which is the object the painter intends the picture to be experienced as similar to in outline shape. All this should sound much clearer when illustrated with an example. Hyman's mentions Degas' *Dancers at the Bar* (1877, fig. 1), "in which a watering can, presumably used to sprinkle sand on the floor, wittily echoes the shape of a dancer with one leg raised high so that the foot rests firmly on the bar, and one arm extended with the hand resting on the raised leg"⁹⁴. In this case, Hyman observes, it is true both that the dancer was designed so that we would experience (and describe) the shape of the design as similar to the shape a dancer might have and that the dancer was designed so that we would experience (and describe) the shape of the design as similar to the shape a watering can might have. An analogous example, I believe, is offered by William Blake's *The Ancient of Days* (1794, fig. 2). Here, the legs of the figure representing God Father form a triangle that echoes the

⁹³ Hyman (2000, p. 38; 2006 p. 141).

triangle formed in the lower part of the picture by the compass in the hands of God Father. The outline shape of the depicted legs, then, is not only conceived in order to be experienced as resembling the outline shape of human legs in a certain position, but also to be experienced as resembling the outline shape of a compass in a certain position.

Another objection to Hopkins has been raised by Catherine Abell. She understands that, according to Hopkins, we should distinguish between two kinds of pictorial content, “the first of which, *the content of seeing-in*, is determined by experienced resemblance in occlusion shape and the second of which, *pictorial content*, is determined by the content of seeing-in and picture makers’ intentions”⁹⁵. In the stick-drawing of a man with a huge circle in place of his head (such as the one in fig. 18), for example, the seeing-in content is a person with a big head, whereas the pictorial content is a person with a head of indeterminate shape and size, because we do not have reasons to attribute to the painter the intention of depicting a man with an abnormal head. Abell observes that, however, one could also claim that the seeing-in content of the picture is some four-legged animal seen from above. In order to determine whether the seeing-in content is the four-legged animal or the big-headed man we need to have some knowledge of the picture’s depictive content prior to our experience of the picture and Hopkins does not explain how this can be. Abell observes that Hopkins could reply that, as I have stressed before, his theory is about the constitutive features of the experience of depiction, rather than about why we have a certain experience of resemblance in outline shape and not another while looking at a certain picture. We might accept this point, but we are left with the problem that Hopkins has not given a complete explanation of how the

⁹⁴ Hyman (2000, p. 38).

content of depiction comes to be determined in cases like the one of the stick-drawing⁹⁶.

There are two main explanatory alternatives to Hopkins' theory: on the one hand, one could argue with Dominic Lopes that "we see in pictures what they depict, that seeing-in consists in experienced resemblance in outline shape, but that experienced resemblance in outline shape does not determine, but is determined by, what pictures depict"⁹⁷. In section 7 I shall explore Lopes' view in more detail. On the other hand, one might want to pursue John Hyman's suggestion (that has been anticipated in the discussion of Wollheim's intention criterion). According to Hyman, it would be wrong to believe, as Hopkins does, that in order for a picture to depict we must be able to identify the specific object it depicts. Pictures can depict material objects, visible objects (e.g. the sky), unfamiliar kinds of objects: "at the limit, we may be forced to describe it more or less purely in terms of colour and form – for example, as grayish-pink and yellow and shaped like a piece of molten wax"⁹⁸. This is not the place for an evaluation of alternative proposals. I shall expand on this point in the next chapter.

7. Conventions and perception

While commenting on Descartes' scepticism towards the resemblance account of depiction I have noticed that he makes a comparison between pictures and verbal languages. Although Descartes does not develop on this point, it is clear that the comparison is meant to engender in the reader more

⁹⁵ Abell (2009, p. 191).

⁹⁶ See Abell (2009, p. 194).

⁹⁷ Lopes (2006, p. 167).

doubts on the resemblance view. Just like the resemblance and the experiential view of depiction, the comparison between images and words has a long history, dating back to S. Augustine's distinction between "natural" and "conventional" signs ⁹⁹. But it took XX century American philosophers for bringing the comparison to the stage. Charles Sanders Peirce noticed that Augustine's distinction between natural and conventional signs was not accurate enough ¹⁰⁰. This is because, in dividing between signs that stay in a causal or intrinsic relation to what they signify ("natural signs") and signs that are stipulated by convention ("conventional signs"), Augustine did not take into account the fact that there are, on the one hand, natural signs that are products of causal processes connecting them to the objects they represent, although they do not resemble such objects (just like the smoke is connected to the fire) and, on the other hand, natural signs that look like what they represent (such as the imprint of an animal's foot). Peirce then introduced a tripartite distinction that he considered especially useful for an understanding of the sign-character of pictures, as opposed to the conventional character of words. "Icons" are those signs that represent because they are similar to what they represent, as it is the case for pictures; "indexes" are those signs that refer to the object they denote because they are affected by such an object (both the imprint/foot and the smoke/fire case fall under this category); "symbols" are those signs that refer to their denotata in virtue of a convention (such as words). In tracing this distinction, while providing remedy against Augustine's confusion, Peirce did not detach himself from the traditional resemblance theory. This can be inferred from passages such as the following: "The icon has

⁹⁸ Hyman (2006, p. 64).

⁹⁹ Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*.

no dynamical connection with the object it represents; it simply happens that its qualities resemble those of that object, and excite analogous sensations in the mind for which it is a likeness”¹⁰¹. However, Peirce’s distinction (together with De Saussure’s works on the concept of sign) provided the infrastructure for a big turn that characterized much XX century thinking on images: the idea that pictures, rather than as “icons”, should better be understood as “symbols”. This is now a standard position in contemporary art studies, endorsed by prominent figures such as Norman Bryson, Rosalind Krauss and Yves-Alain Bois. Such a new perspective is often thought to better fit the need of understanding much contemporary art, with its firm detachment from the mimetic paradigm¹⁰². However, understanding art pictures, and also understanding pictures as cultural phenomena, is not the same as building up a theory of PR. Peirce himself grants that iconic pictures can be used as symbols, but this does not imply that in so doing they lose their character of iconic PRs. However, according to another American philosopher, Nelson Goodman, Peirce’s claim is objectionable, because it can be demonstrated that pictures do not pictorially represent in virtue of their being iconic, i.e. in virtue of bearing resemblances to what they represent, while they represent because they are “symbols”, in Peirce’s jargon. It is Goodman’s theory, outlined in *Languages of Art* (1968), that more than any other account brought to the philosophical stage the question of the comparison between pictures and words, arguing that they do not differ from each other in being respectively iconic and conventional signs, whereas they differ in being conventional signs that belong

¹⁰⁰ Peirce (1984, Vol. 1, p. 475; Vol. 2 pp. 56, 446-447; Vol. 3 pp. 62-68, 75-77; Vol. 4, p. 251; Vol. 5, pp. 162-166; Vol. 6, pp. 211-215).

¹⁰¹ Peirce (1955, p. 114).

¹⁰² For an introduction to structuralist and post-structuralist perspectives in contemporary art history and criticism see Foster, Krauss, Bois and Buchloh (2004, pp. 32-48). For a selection of

to different systems of conventions.

The core of Goodman's proposal is that PR has to be explained in terms of denotation, and that it is necessary to explain how pictorial systems of denotation differ from other systems of denotation, first of all verbal systems¹⁰³. Goodman maintains this goal can be reached if: a) we focus on the fact that pictures differ from words because even a small difference in appearance between picture A and picture B can amount to a difference in the representational content of A and B respectively, while the same word, written in different fonts, does not change meaning; b) if we accept that this fact can be explained while describing the essential characters of pictorial systems of conventions: syntactic density, semantic density, and relative repleteness. Goodman's theory is motivated by the firm refusal that appeal to resemblances between pictures and objects can be of any explanatory value in a theory of depiction, and is sustained by an appropriate criticism of "the myth of the innocent eye", which Goodman claims to be at the kernel of traditional resemblance theories of depiction¹⁰⁴.

Much ink has been spent in analyzing the details of Goodman's theory

readings see Harrison and Wood (2007, chap. VII, section B and D; chap. VIII, section A and B).

¹⁰³ "Denotation is the core of representation and is independent of resemblance" Goodman (1968, p. 5. For Goodman's explanation of his theory of depiction see chap. 1, 2, 4).

¹⁰⁴ Goodman (1968, pp. 7-9). Goodman claims that resemblance is neither sufficient nor necessary for PR to obtain. He understands resemblance and PR as relations and observes that resemblance between two objects is a symmetrical relation, whereas PR is not (if A pictorially represents B then B does not represent A, while if A resembles B then B resembles A) and also that it is reflexive, whereas PR is not. Resemblance, then, is not sufficient for explaining PR, because there are relevant differences in how the two relations obtain. Moreover, according to Goodman, resemblance is not necessary to explain PR, because it is intrinsically relative, and it is not possible to isolate aspects of resemblance that are more relevant than others for PR to obtain. This second claim is grounded in Goodman's nominalist ontology, according to which there is no aspect of an object that is more essential than others for grasping our concept of the object, since aspects vary from context to context. Goodman – assuming that representation is a form of denotation – also objects to the resemblance theory that it cannot explain why pictures of fictional objects should be understood in terms of resemblance, since they are devoid of denotation, i.e. they denote the empty set, and the empty set has no visual aspect a picture can be said to resemble to.

and in addressing strong criticisms against it ¹⁰⁵. In particular, it is widely agreed that Goodman's claims against the complete irrelevance even of our intuitions of visual resemblance (not just of the concept of resemblance) for an understanding of how pictures work should not be subscribed to ¹⁰⁶. We can accept that resemblance is not sufficient to explain depiction, but Goodman does not explain why we should not think that the fact that pictures *look like* what they depict (in a specific *visual* way) should not be constitutive of our understanding of depiction, although it cannot explain *everything* about depiction. However, Lopes and Gaiger have argued that, although Goodman was wrong in his claims about the irrelevance of visual resemblance for an understanding of depiction, he allowed perceptual discrimination to play a role in a theory of depiction and that he did not believe it is conventions and conventions only that have to explain how we understand pictures ¹⁰⁷.

¹⁰⁵ Peacocke (1987, p. 405) objects that Goodman cannot differentiate depiction from description, notwithstanding his detailed description of the peculiarities of the syntax and semantics of pictures. More recently, Hyman (2006, pp. 171-179) has argued: 1) that the systems of conventions described by Goodman do not exist in the practice of picture-making, whereas what exists is iconographic conventions and technical rules. Both these systems of convention cannot play the explanatory role Goodman assigns to what he believes to be pictorial conventions; 2) that Goodman's description of dense symbols systems does not work; 3) that if Goodman, as Peacocke has claimed, has to concede that pictures function in the same way as descriptions, "then these descriptions must be couched purely in terms of form and colour predicates" (179). According to Hyman this is a fatal concession for Goodman's theory, which is grounded in the nominalist idea that there are no aspects which are essential to the description of an object (in other words, that predicates are just labels).

¹⁰⁶ See in particular Budd (1993, p. 156); Spinicci (2008, pp. 67-82).

¹⁰⁷ Lopes (2000, p. 227) claims: "Goodman's is not a convention theory of how pictures represent. It accommodates and even invites a naturalized account of depiction, which draws upon the psychology of perception". Lopes insists on the fact that Goodman's should not be interpreted as a comprehensive theory of pictures, because it is a theory that seeks to give an answer to two questions only: the question of the distinction between the pictorial and the descriptive, and the question of the distinction between pictures and related symbols such as maps and diagrams. Such questions do not by any means exhaust the explanatory realm of a theory of pictures, and also of a theory of pictorial representation. In particular, according to Lopes, Goodman does not give an answer to the question of "what determines what scenes and objects each pictorial symbol represents", which is a crucial one for a theory of pictorial representation. Lopes is persuaded that a perceptual account can reply to the last question and be compatible with Goodman's theory on what distinguishes pictorial systems of representation. On a similar note Gaiger (2008, p. 79) claims: "Goodman's theory of art explains why perceptual discrimination plays a role in understanding pictures that it does not play in other, articulate symbol systems. Unlike perceptualism, however, which takes the experience of the viewer as primary, his theory is grounded in an analysis of the structural features of different symbol systems rather than the study of psychological effects". Hyman

Moreover, even if it can be argued that Goodman's description of pictorial systems of conventions does not grasp the essential features of pictorial conventions, it cannot be excluded that the project of describing systems of pictorial conventions would not make any good to a theory of depiction, as attempts by Flint Schier and John Kulvicki have shown ¹⁰⁸. Furthermore, as Dominic Lopes explains, Goodman's lesson is that "the point of contention is not whether pictures have to do with resemblance but whether this truth helps us to understand the kind of representation found in pictures" ¹⁰⁹. Lopes is persuaded, like Goodman, that appeals to resemblance, although maybe correct, cannot be of much explanatory value. According to Lopes, whereas resemblance-based definitions of pictures are appropriate, what should be avoided are resemblance-based explanations of depiction ¹¹⁰. Lopes suggests a reformulation of Goodman's claim "Investigations in structural linguistics in recent years need to be supplemented with an intensive examination of nonverbal symbol systems" as "Investigations in mind and cognition in recent years need to be supplemented with an intensive investigation of the arts as media for cognition" ¹¹¹. He believes that Goodman has set the ground for such an investigation, and that the result should be the thesis that "when we look at pictures and understand them correctly we characteristically have 'object-presenting experiences' – we see in pictures the scenes they represent. This phenomenon distinguishes pictures both from verbal descriptions and from

(2006) holds the opposite view, arguing that Goodman's view makes depiction entirely depend on convention (see note 102 above).

¹⁰⁸ Schier (1987); Kulvicki (2006).

¹⁰⁹ Lopes (2006, p. 160).

¹¹⁰ Lopes (2006, p. 161). This reading is supported by arguments put forward by Goodman and Catherine Elgin in their *Reconceptions* (1988), twenty years after the publication of *Languages of Art* (in particular see chapters 6 and 7).

¹¹¹ Goodman (1976, p. xi) in Lopes (2000, p. 227).

quasi-pictorial symbols such as maps and diagrams”¹¹². I shall now look at Lopes’ account in more detail, since it is his proposal that has attracted most attention in recent years as an alternative to both the experiential and the resemblance view on depiction.

In *Understanding Pictures* (1996), Lopes argues that for an appropriate understanding of pictorial representation it is crucial that we do not equate a picture’s subject with a picture’s content. Whereas a picture’s subject is the real-world entity represented by the picture, a picture’s content are the properties that the picture represents its subject as having, *that it ascribes to its subject*¹¹³. Every picture also has design properties, which are the visual properties *by means of which a picture represents its subject*, i.e. “a picture’s line, shading, colour, and textural properties”¹¹⁴. For instance, in a picture of Napoleon dressed as Roman Emperor the subject is Napoleon, whereas the content is a man dressed in a red toga, and the design properties are, for instance, the red used to depict the toga, and the shape of the man’s figure on the pictorial surface. According to Lopes, since a picture can misrepresent its subject, i.e. attribute to it properties it does not have, while remaining a picture of that very subject, it is a mistake to identify a picture’s content with its subject. Moreover, sometimes painters deliberately use misrepresentation in order to enhance the communicative power of pictures. Let me clarify this with another example: if in, say, a self-portrait by Matisse such as *Self-Portrait in a Striped T-shirt* (1906, fig. 3) part of the skin on the face of the painter is coloured in green, it is not correct to say that the subject of the picture is Matisse with green skin. The subject of the picture is Matisse, and conjectures

¹¹² Lopes (2000, p. 228).

¹¹³ Lopes (1996, pp. 3-4).

¹¹⁴ Lopes (1996, p. 5).

about the colour of Matisse's skin should only consider those colours in which human skin comes in the real world. Part of the content of the picture, i.e. the properties the picture represents the subject as having, is that the colour green is attributed to the boy's skin. And this is so because the picture is a picture of Matisse and a picture can (intentionally or not) misrepresent its subject.

On the basis of this distinction Lopes claims that the traditional resemblance theory of pictorial representations makes a fatal mistake, since it equates pictorial subject to pictorial content, given that it claims that the designs of a picture resemble the visual properties of a picture's subject. On the other hand, Lopes is persuaded that Hopkins' experienced resemblance view, although it does not equate subject and content, does not have the resources to explain how pictures come to have content in many cases ¹¹⁵. Lopes' alternative view is that, rather than understanding pictures by noticing resemblances between their designs and their subjects, "we notice resemblances as a result of understanding pictures" ¹¹⁶. How so? According to Lopes, portraiture provides the correct model for understanding pictorial representation. When we look at a portrait, say of a human figure, and understand it as a portrait, we do not just see its subject, but we recognize it as a real human being, who might be alive or dead. We see the human being in the portrait. According to Lopes, in every representational picture there is a subject we see in the same sense in which we see the portrayed subject in the portrait,

¹¹⁵ Lopes claims that we should treat cases that for Hopkins would be cases of misrepresentation or of imprecise depiction as cases where we experience a resemblance between picture and subject, although the resemblance we experience is not one in outline shape. Therefore he argues, *contra* Hopkins, that experienced resemblance in outline shape cannot explain certain cases of depiction (see Lopes, 2003, pp. 638-639 for a first formulation and Lopes, 2006, pp. 163-168 and Hopkins, 2006, pp. 154-159 for a more detailed exchange between the two). Moreover, Hopkins and Lopes disagree on the attribution of essentially visual character to pictures (essential for Hopkins, highly disputable for Lopes). See Lopes (1997); Hopkins (2000); Lopes (2002).

¹¹⁶ Lopes (1996, p. 17).

even though we do not need to be aware that we are seeing that very subject. In other words, pictures are essentially visual prostheses that allow the viewers to see real objects while looking at them. How is this possible?

Driving inspiration from Gareth Evans' *The Varieties of Reference* and sustaining his proposal with recent literature on picture perception, Lopes argues that pictures allow for a specific kind of recognition-based identification of their subjects, which happens at a sub-personal level ¹¹⁷. Evans shows how understanding certain categories of referring expressions consists in thinking of their referent on the basis of information derived from them. "On this model, pictures are part of an information system, individual pictures conveying perceptual information from their subjects. A picture represents an object only if it conveys information from it on the basis of which it can be identified" ¹¹⁸. Our visual apparatus is such that, in the presence of a picture, it is partially activated as if we were in the presence of the real subject the picture depicts. I shall not concentrate on this any longer, but it suffices to say that Lopes can also explain depiction of objects that do not exist in this way ¹¹⁹.

According to Lopes' proposal, even if it is true that the content of a picture can misrepresent the pictorial subject, it is also true that the content has to convey some information about the subject on the basis of which the subject can be identified. I take it that in the case of the green-skinned Matisse, for example, the content has to convey information that is sufficient to identify the picture as a portrait of Matisse. This means that we see the designs of a picture as making-up aspects of the pictorial subject. Only once we have recognized the subject we can judge over the similarity or dissimilarity between content

¹¹⁷ See Evans (1982, pp. 267-298); Lopes (1996, pp. 95-156).

¹¹⁸ Lopes (1996, p. 107).

¹¹⁹ Lopes (1996, pp. 197-208).

and subject. In other words, while it is necessary that the content of a picture embodies relevant information about the pictorial subject, it is not necessary that we consciously see the content as resembling the subject, even if this can be the case for certain pictures. This is why Lopes argues that recognition comes first in a theory of depiction. We do not need to see a picture resembling what it represents in order to identify its subject. All we need is an appropriate informative link.

As I have mentioned earlier, Lopes is persuaded that his account can give an answer to the question Goodman did not seek to answer (what determines pictorial content?), while maintaining Goodman's refusal to resort to both experience-based and resemblance-based theories of depiction. Does Lopes really accomplish the task he set himself? This is doubtful, since it can be argued that Lopes gives us an account of picture perception, while he does not give us enough reasons to believe that such an account is also the right account of depiction, i.e. an account that explains how pictorial content is determined. Hopkins has expressed a number of criticisms towards Lopes' postulation of certain recognitional abilities we are supposed to employ when looking at pictures, and he contends that the view does not have much to say about the differences there are between experiencing a picture and experiencing its subject ¹²⁰. Moreover, Bantinaki has observed that Lopes' perceptual account presupposes that "basic picturing", i.e. the depiction of objects that are so well known to the viewers that they only involve their recognitional abilities (such as photographs of people we know well), is purely perceptual and not governed by conventions, and that this claim is open to

¹²⁰ Hopkins (2003, pp. 666-669; 2006, pp. 156-157). Lopes has replied to Hopkins in his 2006 article.

objections ¹²¹. Discussing in more detail such objections to Lopes goes beyond the task of the present investigation, especially because I believe that other criticisms can be addressed against both Lopes and Hopkins at a more basic level, so that both accounts can be said to rely on disputable assumptions. In the next chapter I shall claim that Lopes' and Hopkins' understanding of resemblance in pictures is not appropriate for an analysis of depiction, and that also their conception of pictorial content can be disputed.

8. Plato's and Descartes' shadows

In order to drive a preliminary lesson from the story I have sketched we need to go back to the start and spend some more words on Plato. As I have stressed at various points in this chapter, Plato's claims are the kernel of the traditional resemblance view of depiction, despite the fact that Plato's argumentative goal was to condemn, rather than to praise, the art of picture making. As I have argued, Plato's conception is characterized by the idea that, in order not to deceive the viewer, pictorial surfaces ought to resemble the objects they represent rather than give us a truthful impression of such objects. This is an idea that has been widely criticized by contemporary theorists. As I have explained, accounts such as Hopkins' and Lopes' entail, *contra* Plato, that

¹²¹ Bantinaki argues: "Basic picturing, like other instances of pictorial representation, engages more than our recognitional abilities, as it presupposes knowledge of the practice of pictorial representation itself . . . for instance, the norm in black-and-white photography that colour is not to be taken into consideration. The difference between basic picturing and other instances of pictorial representation thus seems to be a matter of degree in the amount of external information required for correct interpretation, rather than, as Lopes suggests, a diversity in modes of identification. . . . [Moreover] one cannot know whether a picture is a case of basic picturing unless one has reliable grounds to believe that it is indeed a basic picture. Such grounds are often being given by information external to the picture, for instance, information relevant to the context of presentation or information provided by the title: it is possible that the same photograph, when encountered in a family album and when encountered in a gallery, in the one case is and in the other case is not a case of basic picturing." (2008, pp. 187-188).

resemblances are typically to be seen (or experienced) between objects *seen in* pictures and objects in the world. For Hopkins there are good reasons to postulate that when we look at a picture and identify its subject we see the pictorial content of the picture as resembling the subject in at least certain respects, although philosophers do not have all the resources to explain why this is so. According to Lopes, instead, it is recognition that explains resemblance: only once we have recognized the pictorial subject of a picture we can identify resemblances between pictorial content and pictorial subject. This view on resemblance entails that cases such as the gold leaf on the pictorial surface depicting gold are the exception rather than the rule in PR.

Claims such as Lopes' and Hopkins' are justified by endless observations concerning the fact that what counts for us to consider a picture mimetic is not so much that it shares properties with the object it represents, but rather that it gives us a persuasive pictorial rendition of such object, precisely the persuasive rendition that Plato criticized within the framework of his theory of knowledge. However, explaining that when we judge a picture naturalistic we do not need to appeal to objective resemblances does not *per se* exclude that there cannot be any objective resemblances a picture shares with the objects it represents pictorially. Therefore we should be cautious, and avoid jumping from the justified scepticism towards Plato's view on resemblance to the idea that whatever claim concerning objective resemblances between picture and depicted subjects should be rejected ¹²². I shall expand on this in the next chapter.

Another controversial view that remains on the background of much contemporary theorizing on pictures is Descartes' idea that pictures work like

¹²² On this see also Hyman (2006, pp. 66-70).

perceptual illusions. As I have tried to show in outlining Gombrich's, Wollheim's, and Hopkins' accounts, this idea is still at work in contemporary views, although in the more cautious formulation that pictures produce a *specific kind of experience* in the viewers. Should an account of depiction take this claim as a starting point? I shall discuss this in the next chapter.

Chapter Two

Resemblance and Pictorial Representation

When we look at certain pictures and claim that they resemble what they depict generally we mean that there are resemblances holding (or appearing to hold) between *objects we see in those pictures* and objects in the world. However, this does not entail that there cannot be objective resemblances between *marks and colours on a pictorial surface* and objects in the world. This, I believe, is a lesson we should derive from chapter one, which brings with it two questions: 1) can we prove that there are objective resemblances between marks and colours on a pictorial surface and objects in the world? 2) if yes, can we prove that they are relevant for pictorial representation to obtain?

So far we have seen that, if we hold that in order to understand depiction we should focus either on experienced resemblance or on the recognition of pictorial content, then objective resemblances between pictorial surface and depicted objects appear to be relevant to explain PR at best in a limited range of cases, such as when gold braid depicts gold or blots of paint depict blots of paint. Famous cases of whole pictures displaying this sort of objective resemblance are Jasper Johns' flag- and target-paintings, where strips and stars depict strips and stars and concentric circles depict concentric circles (see fig. 4). The same is true of pictures (or, more often, portions of pictures) that faithfully depict other pictures, such as Giovan Francesco Caroto's *Portrait of*

a boy with a drawing (1523, fig. 5), which represents a boy holding in his hands a stick-drawing of a human figure (possibly a self-portrait)¹²³.

In this chapter I shall give an exposition of the objective resemblance account of pictorial representation put forward by John Hyman and I shall compare it with other views on offer. Hyman is persuaded that we can give an appropriate account of PR in terms of objective resemblances holding between pictorial surfaces and objects in the world, without having to limit the explanation of PR to the cases where a picture can be said to be a replica of the depicted object. As we shall see, this is an account that imposes strong limits to the explanatory scope of philosophical theories of PR. However, I shall argue that, despite this, Hyman's is a proposal worth embracing. In order to sustain my reading I shall illustrate some of the ideas behind Hyman's account, as they can be traced from his writings. These are, in part, ideas that have been only cursorily mentioned by Hyman and that, I believe, are in need of more detailed illustration. I hope the following pages will help.

In the next section I shall illustrate what I believe to be the kernel of Hyman's understanding of pictorial resemblance. In the second section I shall argue that some writings of the later Wittgenstein offer an adequate background to understand Hyman's proposal. In the third section, I shall explain Hyman's anti-subjectivist stance. In the fourth section I shall illustrate Hyman's proposal and in the fifth section I shall defend it against some objections and alternative solutions.

¹²³ Note that these remarks do not imply that John's flag-pictures are replicas of flags or that the portion of Carot's painting is a replica of a stick drawing. In order for A to be a replica of B the two objects must share all their properties. This is not true of John's paintings and flags, because the brushstrokes and the material support of the paintings are properties flags do not

1. Resemblance in pictures

Hyman explains that the verb “represents” and the verb phrase “is a picture of”, when used in talk about pictures, sometimes express relations and sometimes not. He claims that only when they are used to express relations the sentences in which they appear can be continued with what Gilbert Ryle used to call a “namely” rider. For instance, of one of Cezanne’s Mount Saint-Victoire paintings it can be said: “It is a picture of a mountain, namely the Mount Saint-Victoire”¹²⁴. On the other hand, the “namely” rider is out of place if we describe a still life by the same painter: “it is a picture of an apple and a pear” cannot be completed by a “namely” rider if all we know of the painting is that it depicts an instance of the kind “pear” and an instance of the kind “apple”. What about the case of fictional characters? If I understand Hyman’s proposal correctly, we should treat them as follows. On the one hand, if, say, one considers the portion of Raphael’s *Madonna Sistina* that depicts two Cherubs, one can say “this is a picture of two Cherubs”. This case is analogous with the case of Cezanne’s still-life, because the picture depicts two instances of the kind “Cherub”, but no particular Cherub. On the other hand, if one considers Lorenzo Lotto’s *Annunciation* and says “this is a picture of a woman and an angel” then one can have the sentence followed by a “namely” rider: “namely, the Virgin Mary and Gabriel”. But what is it that, in both cases, allows one to say that the paintings depict Cherubs, Gabriel, and the Virgin Mary, given that we don’t know much about what was the real appearance of such characters (and given that they might not have existed at all)¹²⁵? If I

share and work as indicators of the pictorial character of such images. The same applies to Caroto’s *oil painting*, which depicts a *pencil drawing on a sheet of paper*.

¹²⁴ Hyman (2006, p. 65, note 10 p. 247). See also Ryle (1971, 2, pp. 250-7).

¹²⁵ “It is possible to argue either that fictional characters . . . exist or, alternatively, that they do not but this does not prevent them from resembling something. . . . The second option is to

understand Hyman correctly, it is at this point that we have to consider “to resemble” and “to be a picture of” not in the relational way, but as synonymous with “to share a property with”. Consider the sentence “SoHo is like a village”¹²⁶. This is a sentence that does not relate a particular to another particular (a village is a kind-term, it does not designate a particular). However, we understand what it means: it means that SoHo resembles a village. And if we know SoHo and know what villages look like we can make sense of this statement: SoHo is an enclosed area in Manhattan, where there are mostly late 19th century buildings, no skyscrapers, and a large number of small-size shops. In SoHo one can remarkably feel the spirit of a community. SoHo, then, has quite a few features in common with a village. SoHo shares some properties with villages. SoHo is like a village. Let us now go back to the paintings. According to my interpretation, for Hyman it makes sense to say that “the two agglomerates of marks and colours on the lower part of Raphael’s *Madonna Sistina* look like two Cherubs”, meaning that if we have seen such marks and colours and if we know something about the visual aspects that are traditionally attributed to the fictional figures “Cherubs” then we can see that there are some visual properties that Raphael’s picture and Cherubs (as we imagine them to

concede that fictional characters do not exist but to insist that they can still resemble things. According to this view, there cannot be predication without reference. . . . But reference does not require existence. What it does require is that the speaker be able to identify whatever she is referring to, with a gesture, for example, or by name, or by means of a description. And this is not ruled out if one of the things being referred to is a fictional character.” (Hyman 2006 n. 12 p. 248). Hyman notices that Saul Kripke goes instead for the first option, arguing that fictional characters are a kind of abstract entities, which exist in virtue of the thoughts and activities involving them in the mental and relational life of human beings (see Kripke, *Reference and Existence*, John Locke Lectures, Oxford University, 1973). Hyman explains: “philosophers associate existence with the denominable, the denumerable, and the nonfictional. But these concepts do not coincide, because fictional characters can be named and counted. For example, there are nine characters in *Uncle Vanya*, and all but one of them have names. Hence, in order to decide between the two positions we would need to decide which of these associations to give up” (Hyman 2006, n. 12 p. 249).

¹²⁶ Hyman (2006, p. 65).

look like) share ¹²⁷. Exactly the same is true in the case of the Archangel Gabriel and the Virgin Mary. It remains to see how we are supposed to determine which are the relevant visual properties that we can attribute both to pictorial surfaces and to Cherubs, the Archangel Gabriel, the Virgin Mary and so forth.

Hyman observes that against the traditional resemblance theory of depiction – according to which pictures depict what they depict because their marks and colours resemble the objects they depict – it is claimed that a picture which represents no particulars or which represents fictional objects cannot be said to resemble any object in the world. The objection is based on the assumption that resemblance has to be understood as a relation, “a way in which one thing can stand to another thing or several things can stand to one another” ¹²⁸. Such things have to be understood as particulars. Since kinds of things are not particulars and since fictional objects have no visual aspects – the objection goes – then pictures of kinds of things and of fictional objects cannot represent kinds of things and fictional objects by means of bearing visual resemblances to them. This claim is entailed by both Hopkins’ and Lopes’ proposals. As we have seen, Robert Hopkins struggles in order to secure PR to the artist’s intentions to represent a certain object and it is because of this argument that his theory has attracted much criticism. Also for Dominic Lopes depiction is always depiction of particulars, since depiction is essentially portraiture. I shall dedicate some further considerations to Hopkins’ view in

¹²⁷ To say it with Malcom Budd, this “must not be interpreted in such a way as to rule out the possibility of learning what a certain kind of thing looks like from a depiction of something of that kind. If you have no idea of what an aardvark looks like, you can acquire knowledge of its appearance from a depiction of one, and thereby gain the capacity to recognize an aardvark if you see one. But this is possible only if you are in some way informed that the animal you see depicted is an aardvark or you somehow work out that this is what it must be. Unless this is so, although you may be able to see an aardvark depicted, you cannot see that one is depicted” (1992, p. 174).

section three. Here it suffices to say that, if we accept Hyman's understanding of pictorial resemblance, then it does not seem so important that PRs be representations of particulars, or objects of a certain kind, or fictional objects, because if resemblance is understood as a property, then a picture can share resemblance properties with a variety of objects. In section four I shall illustrate Hyman's theory and its explanatory power and limits. But first, in section two, I shall look at the writings of Ludwig Wittgenstein in order to explain the theoretical presupposition underlying the idea that an understanding of depiction could and should be detached from the identification of represented particulars. If we accept (1) that there might be a way to secure PR to the presence of objective resemblances between pictures and depicted objects and (2) that resemblance in pictures is not to be understood as a relation between a picture and a particular object it depicts, and if, then, (3) we argue that PR is explained by certain visual properties shared by a given picture and a number of objects, what we are doing is detaching PR from a referential model. The later Wittgenstein famously held that language should be understood within a non-denotational framework. Moreover, throughout his writings, he compared language to pictures in various ways. I am persuaded that his views can help explaining how representation can be detached from reference in pictures.

¹²⁸ Hyman (2006, p. 64).

2. A Wittgensteinian foundation for a theory of PR

2.1 Pictures and sense in the *Tractatus*

In the *Tractatus*, *contra* Frege and Russell, Wittgenstein holds that while the meaning of names is explained by the fact that they stand for objects, that they, so to speak, point towards objects, propositions do not have meaning¹²⁹. Rather, they have *sense*¹³⁰. The concept of sense is introduced in order to explain a difference between names and propositions: if we do not understand what a name, say “king”, refers to, then we do not understand the meaning of the name, while if we do not know whether the state of affairs described by a certain proposition obtains or not, this does not imply that we do not understand the proposition. In fact, we can perfectly understand the proposition “the present king of France is bald” even if we do not know whether there is or not a king of France nowadays. And if it turns out that there is no king of France, this does not make the proposition “the present king of France is bald” non-understandable¹³¹. How to explain this peculiar property of propositions? According to the *Tractatus*, in order to understand a certain proposition we need to know what the names composing the proposition refer to, while we do

¹²⁹ “3.203 A name means *an object*. The object is its meaning; 3.143 Although a propositional sign is *a fact*, this is obscured by the usual form of expression in writing or print. For in a printed proposition, for example, no essential difference is apparent between a propositional sign and a word. (That is what made it possible for Frege to call a proposition a composite name.)” (Wittgenstein 2001a, pp. 15; 14).

¹³⁰ “3.14 What constitutes a propositional sign is that in its elements (the words) stand in a determinate relation to one another. A propositional sign is a fact”; “3.142 Only facts can express a sense, a set of names cannot” (Wittgenstein 2001a, p.14). See also the following remark from the *Notebooks* (November 2nd 1914): “Isn’t it like this: the false proposition makes sense like the true and independently of its falsehood or truth, but it has no reference?” (Wittgenstein 1979, p. 24e).

¹³¹ “4.024 To understand a proposition means to know what is the case if it is true. (One can understand it, therefore, without knowing whether it is true.) It is understood by anyone who understands its constituents” (Wittgenstein 2001a, p. 25). See also the *Notebooks* (30th September 1914): “A picture [i.e. a proposition] can present relations that do not exist! How is that possible? Now once more it looks as if all relations must be logical in order for their existence to be guaranteed by that of the sign” (Wittgenstein 1979, p. 8e).

not need to know whether the state of affairs it describes obtains or not. Wittgenstein embraces logical atomism, the view defended by Russell and Frege, who claimed that names refer to atomic objects, basic constituents of the world ¹³². At the same time, however, Wittgenstein goes beyond logical atomism in suggesting that the proposition has a sense, which is more than the sum of the meanings of its constituent parts ¹³³. According to Wittgenstein, in fact, propositions are not merely agglomerates of names, but they are agglomerates of *names that come in a specific order* ¹³⁴. In fact, the same names can be employed in building up propositions with different senses, provided that the position of the names changes from proposition to proposition. For instance, the sense of the proposition “The king of France defeats the king of Spain” is different from the sense of the proposition “The king of Spain defeats the king of France”, while the constituents of the two propositions are the same. The sense of the proposition, then, is not only determined by the meaning of each of its parts, but also by *the order* in which the parts come into the proposition. According to Wittgenstein, the order of the

¹³² 2.021 “Objects make up the substance of the world. That is why they cannot be composite” (Wittgenstein 2001a, p. 7). More precisely, for Wittgenstein it is facts that are the substance of the world, and facts are combinatory possibilities for objects (see *Tractatus*: 1). Wittgenstein did not seem to think of objects such as a “king” as if they were atomic objects. There is evidence that he tended to think of atomic objects as of what we would call *properties of objects*, like colour, and as of points in visual space. In a conversation with Desmond Lee in 1930/1 Wittgenstein is reported to have said: “Objects . . . is here [in the *Tractatus*] used for such things as a colour, a point in visual space etc. . . . ‘Objects’ also include relations” (*Wittgenstein’s Lectures, Cambridge, 1930-32*, ed. D. Lee, in Schroeder 2006, p. 50). According to the *Tractatus*, then, if *the complex of atomic objects* that compose the object “king” were to disappear, then we could not meaningfully speak of a “king” anymore. However, Wittgenstein’s ideas about *what* atomic objects should be were quite blurred, as recalled by Norman Malcolm in his *Memoir*: “I asked Wittgenstein whether, when he wrote the *Tractatus*, he had ever decided upon anything as an *example* of a ‘simple object’. His reply was that at that time his thought had been that he was a *logician*; and that it was not his business, as a logician, to try to decide whether this thing or that was a simple thing or a complex thing, that being a purely *empirical* matter! It was clear that he regarded his former opinion as absurd” (Malcolm 1958, p. 86).

¹³³ “3.141 A proposition is not a blend of words. - (Just as a theme in music is not a blend of notes.) A proposition is articulate” (Wittgenstein 2001a, p. 14).

¹³⁴ “3.14 What constitutes a propositional sign is that in its elements (the words) stand in a determinate relation to one another. A propositional sign is a fact” (Wittgenstein 2001a, p. 14).

parts of a given sentence is equivalent to the configuration objects assume in the state of affairs designated by the sentence, because propositions and reality share logical structure¹³⁵. This is a crucial point for the *Tractatus* and it is in order to clarify it that Wittgenstein resorts to an analogy between language and visual models.

Wittgenstein dedicates a whole section of the *Tractatus* to the concept of picture (§§ 2.1-2.225), where he puts forward the account that today is commonly known as the *picture theory of language* (PTL). As we have seen, in order to explain how we can understand the sense of propositions independently of knowing whether they are true or false, Wittgenstein argues that propositions, rather than merely refer to objects, *depict* (see e.g. § 2.16) states of affairs, i.e. arrays of objects that might be the case or not: “In a picture the elements of the picture are the *representatives* of objects” (2.131, my italics). A proposition shows the structure of the state of affairs it expresses, i.e. the way the objects composing such a state of affairs relate to each other. Wittgenstein calls this structure “logical structure”¹³⁶. Propositions and states of affairs, then, share logical structure. A proposition depicts a state of affairs: its components refer to objects, which are the elements of a certain state of affairs. As well as the objects composing a state of affairs “a” can be re-arranged to compose a state of affairs “b” (different from “a”), the elements of a picture “Pa” can be re-arranged into a new picture “Pb”, which depicts a state of affairs different from the one depicted by “Pa”.

¹³⁵ “3.21 The configuration of objects in a situation corresponds to the configuration of simple signs in the propositional sign” (Wittgenstein 2001a, p. 15).

¹³⁶ “2.18 What any picture, of whatever form, must have in common with reality, in order to be able to depict it -correctly or incorrectly- in any way at all, is logical form, i.e. the form of reality” (Wittgenstein 2001a, p. 11).

What is the reason why propositions and states of affairs share their logical structure? Wittgenstein argues:

3.1 In a proposition a thought finds an expression that can be perceived by the senses.

3.11 We use the perceptible sign of a proposition (spoken or written, etc.) as a projection of a possible situation. The method of projection is to think of the sense of the proposition.

3.12 I call the sign with which we express a thought a propositional sign. And a proposition is a propositional sign in its projective relation to the world ¹³⁷.

Propositions are a way of expressing thoughts ¹³⁸. Expressing a thought means conceiving of a possible state of affairs. This involves the establishing of a link between the logical structure of the state of affairs and the structure of the proposition that expresses the thought by means of which we conceive of the state of affairs. The link is established by shaping the structure of a proposition in such a way that it best re-presents the structure of the state of affairs it expresses. With another powerful visual similitude, Wittgenstein compares the sense of a proposition to the direction of an arrow: it is the act of thinking that decides upon the direction of the arrow ¹³⁹. It must be noted that the description of how the logical structure of states of affairs is reproduced in propositions does not involve a speaking and/or thinking subject *exercising a*

¹³⁷ Wittgenstein (2001a, p. 13).

¹³⁸ Not the only way, though, as it can be inferred from 4.014: “A gramophone record, the musical idea, the written notes, and the sound-waves, all stand to one another in the same internal relation of depicting that holds between language and the world. They are all constructed according to a common logical pattern. (Like the two youths in the fairy-tale, their two horses, and their lilies. They are all in a certain sense one.)”; and from 4.015: “The possibility of all imagery, of all our pictorial modes of expression, is contained in the logic of depiction”. (Wittgenstein, 2001a, pp. 23-24).

¹³⁹ “3.144 (Names are like points; propositions like arrows – they have sense)” (Wittgenstein 2001a, p. 14).

conscious will to reproduce the structure. Rather, it describes how thought operates through language, a condition common to every subject who is able to formulate a thought in verbal terms.

Apparently, Wittgenstein was prompted to establish the analogy between visual models and propositions when he came to know that in a lawsuit concerning a car accident in Paris a three-dimensional model of the scene of the accident (with miniature cars and dolls, etc.) had replaced the traditional verbal description of the case in court ¹⁴⁰. It is important to stress, however, that such a model is not what we would ordinarily call a picture and that the same is true of the *tableau vivant*, the other visual model Wittgenstein refers to in order to illustrate PTL ¹⁴¹. Both the car accident model and the *tableau vivant*, in fact, are three-dimensional visual models, significantly differing from pictures in that pictures are essentially two-dimensional representational media. As Severin Schroeder observes, two-dimensional pictures would not qualify as an appropriate visual model in Wittgenstein's sense, because it would be wrong to assume that for every picture representing a state of affairs S its component parts could be rearranged in a way such that the picture comes to represent a state of affairs T, where T is different from S ¹⁴². In fact, given that pictures are always pictures *from (at least) a point of view*, for many pictures it would not be possible to re-arrange, without any adjustment, the very same elements that compose a picture representing S, in order to represent T. The reason is that the spatial arrangement of T, as seen from a certain point of view, would be (in the large majority of the cases) different from the spatial arrangement of S, as seen

¹⁴⁰ See Wittgenstein (1979, p. 7e); Malcom (1958, pp. 68-69); Schroeder (2006, p. 56).

¹⁴¹ "4.0311 One name stands for one thing, another for another thing, and they are combined with one another. In this way the whole group--like a *tableau vivant*--presents a state of affairs" (Wittgenstein 2001a, p. 26).

¹⁴² Schroeder (2006, pp. 56-57).

from a certain point of view. On the contrary, *tableaux vivants*, as well as three-dimensional models of car accidents, provide an effective illustration of Wittgenstein's idea, because it is clear how their elements (such as puppets and mini-cars) can be re-arranged, without any adjustment, in order to get different representations. For clarity's sake, then, from now on I shall refer to what the *Tractatus* calls "pictures" as to "visual models" (unless otherwise indicated). It is likely, though, that Wittgenstein choose to talk about "pictures" because he wanted to stress the point that there is a sharing of logical form between states of affairs and visual models of them, given that two-dimensional pictures traditionally epitomize the objects that represent by means of *sharing visual aspects* with what they represent. This hypothesis is confirmed by a passage in the *Philosophical Investigations* where Wittgenstein seeks to characterize what eventually he had come to consider the *wrong* way to think about verbal description:

Thinking of a description as a word-picture of the facts has something misleading about it: one tends to think only of such pictures as hang on our walls: which seem simply to portray how a thing looks, what it is like. (These pictures are as it were idle.)

143

Nevertheless, it would be false to assert that from the *Tractatus* it emerges a conception of *two-dimensional pictures* that involves equating them to propositions. According to Wittgenstein, there are many ways of representing reality (i.e. expressing thoughts): notational systems like the musical one (see 4.014), but also pictures resembling in shape or colour what they represent (see 2.171 – there is no evidence to proof or disproof whether in this passage

Wittgenstein is thinking of two-dimensional pictures) ¹⁴⁴. As Wittgenstein explains in 4.0141, it is essential for an object to represent reality that it shares a resemblance with it and that there is a rule of correlation between it and what it represents ¹⁴⁵. The way propositions represent reality, however, is compared to the way three-dimensional models do that, and the comparison, as we have seen, only holds between propositions and three-dimensional visual models ¹⁴⁶. It follows that Wittgenstein might be said to have thought two-dimensional pictures to represent reality in some way, while he did not claim that two-dimensional pictures represent reality in the same way propositions do. If two-dimensional pictures are taken into account in the *Tractatus*, it is mainly insofar as they intuitively provide some means to characterize the three-dimensional visual models Wittgenstein is concerned with in the elucidation of PTL. It is only these three-dimensional models that are equated to propositions, though.

¹⁴³ Wittgenstein (2001b, § 291, p. 84e).

¹⁴⁴ For *Tractatus* 4.014 see note 18 above. See also 2.171 “A picture can depict any reality whose form it has. A spatial picture can depict anything spatial, a coloured one anything coloured, etc” (Wittgenstein 2001a, p. 11).

¹⁴⁵ “4.0141 There is a general rule by means of which the musician can obtain the symphony from the score, and which makes it possible to derive the symphony from the groove on the gramophone record, and, using the first rule, to derive the score again. That is what constitutes the inner similarity between these things which seem to be constructed in such entirely different ways. And that rule is the law of projection which projects the symphony into the language of musical notation. It is the rule for translating this language into the language of gramophone records” (Wittgenstein 2001a, p. 24). See also Kenny (1973, p. 58).

¹⁴⁶ This does not exclude that one might conceive of another model that respects all the relevant requirements for the analogy with propositions to hold, say a graph.

2.2. *The decline of the picture theory of language*

4.0312 The possibility of propositions is based on the principle that objects have signs as their representatives. My fundamental idea is that the ‘logical constants’ are not representatives; that there can be no representatives of the logic of facts ¹⁴⁷.

Not only propositions do not refer to objects, according to the *Tractatus*, but also logical constants do not: there are no things in the world such as *the* positive and *the* negative, which are referred to by logical constants $+$ and \neg ¹⁴⁸. It follows that the configuration of the state of affairs depicted by, say, the proposition “the cat is on the mat” is identical with the configuration of the state of affairs depicted by the proposition “the cat is not on the mat”. The two propositions, in fact, differ from each other only in so far as the first asserts that the cat is on the mat, while the second negates it. However, given that logical constants $+$ and \neg do not refer to any object, there is no difference between the configurations of objects (the states of affairs) depicted by the first and by the second proposition respectively. In other words, to the two sentences corresponds one and the same visual model ¹⁴⁹. This is made explicit in the following remark from Wittgenstein’s *Notebooks*:

If a picture presents what-is-not-the-case...this only happens through its presenting *that* which *is* not the case.

For the picture says, as it were: “*This* is how it is *not*” ¹⁵⁰.

¹⁴⁷ Wittgenstein (2001a, p. 26).

¹⁴⁸ According to Wittgenstein, = is not a logical constant because rather than claiming that, say, $a=b$, we should better use the same name for a and b , say a . And in such case we can make without the tautological assertion $a=a$.

¹⁴⁹ See Schroeder (2006, p. 86).

As we have seen, Wittgenstein claimed that propositions do not have meaning, while they have sense, and that their sense is given by the configuration of the objects in the state of affairs they depict. However, at § 4.0621 he also claims that the proposition “p” and the proposition “¬ p” have opposite senses, even if they depict the same configuration of objects ¹⁵¹. The fact that they have opposite senses is described in the above passage from the *Notebooks* by the similitude with the couple of opposite assertions “this is how it is” and “this is how it is not”. There is a *what* of the representation that is given by the logical structure of the proposition, but there is also a *how*. The *how* depends on the logical constants that figure in the proposition, and makes a relevant difference when it comes to determine what the sense of the proposition is. It seems that an awareness of the fact that language is always something that we use in context – a context in which we come to determine the *how* of the sense of a given proposition – begins to emerge from these considerations. Wittgenstein did not change his conception of the sense of a proposition at this stage, but he came to recognize that there was something more to language than reference (for names), and sense (of propositions), namely the way a given subject in a given context comes to think of the sense of a certain proposition. As a consequence, Wittgenstein was forced to admit that visual models correspond to elementary propositions only, while, when it comes to the semantics of truth-functions, PTL cannot be of much explanatory value ¹⁵². In the *Notebooks* he observed: “Isn’t it like this: The logical constants signalise the way in which *the elementary forms of the proposition* represent? .

¹⁵⁰ Wittgenstein (1979, p. 25e).

¹⁵¹ “4.0621 But it is important that the signs ‘p’ and ‘Pp’ can say the same thing. For it shows that nothing in reality corresponds to the sign ‘P’. The occurrence of negation in a proposition is not enough to characterize its sense (PPp = p). The propositions ‘p’ and ‘Pp’ have opposite sense, but there corresponds to them one and the same reality” (Wittgenstein 2001a, p. 28).

. . The way of representing does not portray; only the proposition is a picture”(31st October 1914, my italics) ¹⁵³.

Later on, in the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein came to reject PTL completely. A variety of considerations led him to conclude that there are further aspects of the way we articulate our thoughts through propositions – but also through other forms of expression – which cannot be accounted for by the idea that while expressing our thoughts we build up representations of states of affairs. As for verbal language, there are plenty of expressions, which employ vague terms and are nevertheless perfectly understood by the ones who utter them and – most of the times, at least – by the ones whom they are addressed to. For instance, the request: “stand roughly here!” ¹⁵⁴. While, in the *Tractatus* and in the *Notebooks*, Wittgenstein argues that the reason why a sentence like this makes perfect sense – at least to the speaker who utters it – is that the speaker knows exactly what she means when she employs the sentence, in the *Investigations* he renounces to the requirement of perfect determinacy of sense at least in the mind of the speaker ¹⁵⁵. Wittgenstein’s new proposal makes sense of the fact that, for instance, although we might lack a perfectly sharp idea of where we want our friend to

¹⁵² See Schroeder (2006, p. 87).

¹⁵³ Wittgenstein (1979, p. 22e).

¹⁵⁴ Wittgenstein (2001b, § 88 p. 35e), see Schroeder (2006, p. 135).

¹⁵⁵ In the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein argues that sense must always be determinate and that this must be evident in propositions: “3.23 The requirement that simple signs be possible is the requirement that sense be determinate”; “5.5563 All the propositions of our everyday language, just as they stand, are in perfect logical order” (Wittgenstein 2001a, pp. 15; 67). A few years later, Wittgenstein opts for a milder position: sense must be determinate at least in the mind of the speakers: “When I say, ‘The book is lying on the table’, does this really have a completely clear sense? (An EXTREMELY important question.) But the sense must be clear, for after all we mean *something* by the proposition, and as much as we *certainly* mean must surely be clear” (20th June 1915); “It is clear that *I know* what I *mean* by the vague proposition (22nd June 1915)” (Wittgenstein 1979, pp. 67e; 70e). In the *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein makes a more radical step and renounces to the requirement of determinacy of sense in the mind of the speaker: “Am I inexact when I do not give our distance from the sun to the nearest foot, or tell a joiner the width of a table to the nearest thousand of an inch? No *single* ideal of exactness has been laid down; we do not know what we are supposed to imagine under this

wait for us when we ask her to “stand roughly here”, this generally causes no trouble to her, who easily understands what we mean by that expression. Successful employment of vague expressions, then, shows that we do not even need to be completely clear ourselves about the *sense* of the propositions we utter in order to be effective in communication. Moreover, according to the later Wittgenstein also context-dependent aspects of linguistic utterances such as indexicals and the *force* of an order, as well as gestures for which there is no exact verbal equivalent, need to be taken into account if we want to understand how we come to express our thoughts ¹⁵⁶. These new elements of reflection stem from the new conception of the expression of thought that inspires the *Philosophical Investigations*: language (and other forms of expression of thought) came to be seen as activities, embedded in the acts and deeds that are performed through them. As for verbal expression, this left little room to the description of propositions in analogy with visual models, where propositions were seen merely to re-present the reciprocal positions of objects in the world.

head – unless you yourself lay down what is to be so called. But you will find it difficult to hit upon such a convention; at least any that satisfies you” (Wittgenstein 2001b, p. 36e).

¹⁵⁶ Wittgenstein’s thoughts about indexicals can be inferred from the following observation: “Once you know *what* the word stands for, you understand it, you know its whole use” (Wittgenstein 2001b, §2647 p. 79e). This describes exactly what happens every time we use an indexical: it is what we use the indexical to stay for that decides of the meaning of the indexical in a given utterance. As for Wittgenstein’s reflections on expressive aspects of linguistic utterances, see the following: “We name things and then we can talk about them: can refer to them in talk – As if what we did next were given with the mere act of naming. As if there were only one thing called ‘talking about a thing’. Whereas in fact we do the most various things with our sentences. Think of exclamations alone, with their completely different functions. Water! Away! Ow! Help! Fine! No!” (Wittgenstein 2001b, §2; § 27 p. 11e). See also Schroeder (2006, p. 131). In his *Memoir* Malcom reports: “Wittgenstein and P. Sraffa, a lecturer in economics at Cambridge, argued together a great deal over the ideas of the *Tractatus*. One day...when Wittgenstein was insisting that a proposition and that which it describes must have the same ‘logical form’, the same ‘logical multiplicity’, Sraffa made a gesture, familiar to Neapolitans as meaning something like disgust or contempt, of brushing the underneath of his chin with an outward sweep of the finger tips of one hand. And he asked: ‘What is the logical form of *that?*’ ” (Malcom 1958, p. 69). According to Malcom, this episode made Wittgenstein feel uncomfortable about his idea that a proposition and what it expresses must share their logical form. Malcom also reports that, according to G.H. von Wright, Sraffa and Wittgenstein did not use the term “logical form” on that occasion, but they used the term “grammar” instead.

The idea that we need a clear *Abbildung* of the world in order to think about it is then contested and finally abandoned by the later Wittgenstein. The idea that when we express such an *Abbildung* propositionally we re-present the world (we, as it were, make a portrait of it) is also abandoned. It seems, therefore, that the analogy between language and visual models has lost its power for Wittgenstein. However, as I shall argue, the criticisms to PTL addressed in the *Investigations* and in the *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology* provide Wittgenstein with the means of rethinking of the parallelism between verbal languages and visual models, rather than abandoning it. I shall argue that the new conception of language of the later Wittgenstein allows for a fruitful comparison between the way verbal language and many sorts of visual forms of representation (two-dimensional pictures included) work. Moreover, I shall claim that Wittgenstein's ideas are illuminating for the understanding of pictorial resemblance.

2.3 Pictures in the later Wittgenstein

In the following passage Wittgenstein shows how the picture/language analogy can be refashioned to better suit his new view:

291. What we call "*descriptions*" are instruments for particular uses. Think of a machine-drawing, a cross-section, an elevation with measurements, which an engineer has before him. Thinking of a description as a word-picture of the facts has something misleading about it: one tends to think only of such pictures as hang on our walls: which seem simply to portray how a thing looks, what it is like. (These pictures are as it were idle.)¹⁵⁷.

¹⁵⁷ Wittgenstein (2001b, p. 84e).

First of all, we need to stress that here “picture” definitely means “two-dimensional picture”, since Wittgenstein mentions those pictures that “hang on our walls”. More generally, the term “picture” – as it is employed in the *Investigations* – can be successfully applied both to bi-dimensional pictures and to the three-dimensional visual models mentioned in the *Tractatus*. The rejection of PTL, in fact, implies that visual models are not anymore conceived as if they were made of parts corresponding to atomic objects and as if the configurations of such parts re-presented the logical configuration of the depicted portion of world, a requirement that, as we have seen, two-dimensional pictures could not satisfy. The rejection of PTL, then, allows for bi-dimensional pictures as well as for three-dimensional models to qualify as “pictures” in the writings of the later Wittgenstein.

As for a reading of the above passage, two kinds of pictures are contrasted: on the one hand “technical” pictures, on the other hand pictures that merely reproduce the look of things – let us call them “ordinary pictures”. Portraits, Wittgenstein seems to imply, are the paradigm case of ordinary pictures, since they are primarily intended for the viewer to recognize the subjects they depict by their look. Technical pictures, instead, can perform a variety of uses, such as when a cross-section illustrates the interior of an object, or when an elevation with measurements conveys specific information concerning the dimensions of an object (an elevation is a scale drawing of the side, front, or rear of a structure). Therefore – Wittgenstein implies – technical pictures have a much stronger communicational potential than ordinary pictures have. From this passage, then, it emerges a detachment from the analogy between language and visual representations that had been put forward in the *Tractatus* – an analogy,

as I have argued, which we might say to be linked with the idea that ordinary pictures are paradigmatic for depiction. Moreover, it emerges a proposal for a new, more explanatory, analogy between pictures and language, this time modelled on technical pictures. While ordinary pictures “simply” show how things look, the role of technical pictures is eminently instrumental, and it can be understood only if we understand the uses we are supposed to make of those pictures and the way such pictures have been built-up. Language, according to the later Wittgenstein, is like an instrument for doing things in the world, rather than a device for producing models of it. Ordinary pictures, mere representations of the world, look “idle” if compared with technical pictures, because their communicative purpose is, in comparison, much more limited (or, at least, it is much less evident).

There is more room for pictures to illuminate the new conception of language that Wittgenstein defends in the *Investigations*, as the following passages show:

522. If we compare a proposition with a picture, we must think whether we are comparing it to a portrait (a historical representation) or to a genre-picture. And both comparisons have point.

When I look at a genre-picture, it ‘tells’ me something, even though I don’t believe (imagine) for a moment that the people I see in it really exist, or that there have really been people in that situation. But suppose I ask: “*What* does it tell me, then?”.

523. I should like to say “What the picture tells me is itself.” That is, its telling me something consists in its own structure, in *its* own lines and colours. (What would it mean to say “What this musical theme tells me is itself?”) ¹⁵⁸.

Again, Wittgenstein contrasts two kinds of pictures: portraits, and genre-pictures. He acknowledges that there are communicative functions portraits can perform (he calls them “historical pictures” to suggest – I guess – that they are used to refer to people and situations that have existed/occurred in the past), but he mostly concentrates on genre-pictures, i.e. depictions of fictional real-life scenes. He observes that we do not even need *to imagine* that the objects genre-pictures depict must exist or have existed in order to understand what they “tell” us. The reason of this is that pictures are, in themselves, meaningful: “What the picture tells me is itself”. We do not need to imagine that a picture refers to something that might exist (in some possible world) in order to understand it, because a picture is “*its own lines and colours*” and nothing more. It is interesting to notice that, in brackets, a new comparison is introduced, and that it is a comparison with a typical case of non-denotative form of expression, namely music.

The latter passages from Wittgenstein, I believe, are echoed in the following remarks from Hyman and, as I shall argue further in this chapter, lie in the background of Hyman’s proposal on depiction.

A picture is certainly an unusual object of vision. This is evident if one considers the question whether, when looking at a painting, one can see what it depicts. It would of course be misleading to report that one saw the Royal family on a trip to London, on the strength of a visit to the National Portrait Gallery. But this means only that to say that one can see what a painting depicts means that one can see the painting, and see that it is a painting of whatever it may be; and it would be a mistake to conclude from this platitude that the question is to be answered in the negative. For, without qualification, that would imply that the features of a depicted scene are inferred from

¹⁵⁸ Wittgenstein (2001b, pp. 120e; 121e).

the visible features of the painting, the disposition of pigments on the painted surface. And that is certainly false. . . . this is evident if one considers a pointillist painting that depicts a green lawn by means of a large number of tiny dabs of blue and yellow. Even without any knowledge of optics, I may infer from a close inspection of such a painting that it depicts a green lawn; but standing at a suitable distance, I can see that it does. In other words, the answer to the question whether, when looking at a painting, one can see what it depicts depends upon whether the “what” is construed as a relative or as an interrogative pronoun. If it is construed as a relative pronoun, then the answer is that one cannot; but if it is construed as an interrogative pronoun, then the answer is that one can. . . . A picture is an unusual object of vision not because it allows us to see what is not there to be seen, which is absurd, but because when looking at a painting, the natural answer to the question “What do you see?” is a description of the depicted scene, and not a description of the disposition of pigments. This is not simply because we have learned to assume that this is what the question is after. We can see what is depicted; but it is generally more difficult, and it may be very difficult indeed, to see how the pigments are disposed. In other words, it may be very difficult, even impossible, to give the other answer. Many geometrical illusions, which are akin to rudimentary pictures, depend upon this fact¹⁵⁹.

To sum up the main point in the above passage, the answer to the question: “can we see what a painting depicts?” has to be: “no”. We cannot see X itself in a painting of X, and this is evident by the fact that features of the depicted scene are not inferred from features of the painting. The right question – Hyman argues – is “can we see *that* a painting depicts?” and the obvious answer is “yes”. This, I believe, is also what Wittgenstein is trying to say when he claims that pictures *tell us themselves*. A further quote from the *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology* might help clarifying the point:

¹⁵⁹ Hyman (1989, pp. 42-43).

265. How about religion's teaching that the soul can exist when the body has disintegrated? Do I understand what it teaches? Of course I understand it – I can imagine a lot here. (Pictures of these things have been painted too. And why should such a picture be only the incomplete reproduction of the spoken thought? Why should it not perform the *same* service as what we say? And this service is the point.) [Cf. P.I. p. 178] ¹⁶⁰.

Here Wittgenstein claims that an analogy between pictures and “spoken thought” should not be based on the idea that pictures can, although incompletely, reproduce what is described by sentences (this is an idea that might emerge from his earlier criticisms against PTL, as we have seen), but rather on the idea that a picture and a sentence can “perform the same service”, i.e. can be used to the same end. The above passage, I think, might help illuminating the claim that what a picture tells us is just itself. Communicating, according to the later Wittgenstein, means articulating thoughts through instruments, which are capable of embodying meaning be they verbal sentences or pictures. The way instruments convey meaning is not reference to objects in the world; meaning is embodied by the features of the instruments themselves, i.e. by the way such features are employed to perform communicative acts relative to a context of use. This is what it means, for a verbal sentence, a picture, a gesture, to have sense. Wittgenstein does not claim that lines and colours are *all that a picture is about*, as well as sounds are not all that words (or even music) are about. Rather, he claims that the only way we can have access to the communicative content, which is conveyed by pictures and words, is by means of looking at them and understanding how they work in context and that this does not need to involve attributing to them

¹⁶⁰ Wittgenstein (1980, p. 54e).

any sort of fixed referential content. We have seen that for the later Wittgenstein it is crucial that communication is something that tolerates vagueness of reference and that it is not reference that explains semantics, while it is use that does. To illustrate this idea, Wittgenstein re-conceives of the analogy between visual models and language and emphasizes those aspects of pictures which can illuminate how the anti-denotational paradigm of meaning works. For instance, the fact that there does not need to be any particular object in the world (be it real or imaginary) that a genre-picture represents, and the fact that all we need to do in order to understand a picture is looking at its visual aspects and at the way they are employed in conveying sense.

To conclude, I hope to have demonstrated that the later Wittgenstein opts for a non-referential understanding not only of language, but also of pictures. I believe that if we accept Wittgenstein's views on pictorial content, then we can make more sense of the suggestion put forward by Hyman that resemblance in pictures should not be understood as a relation. As we have seen in section one, when we understand pictorial resemblance as a relation this implies that there is a particular that a picture is said to resemble to. When we understand resemblance as the sharing of a property, instead, we can think of pictures sharing visual properties with more than one object, and we do not need to single out the specific object a given picture resembles to (and, moreover, there might not be any such object). The second view can be better appreciated when combined with Wittgenstein's non-referential understanding of pictorial content. If "what a picture tells me is itself" then we should focus on the properties of pictures in order to describe their pictorial content, while we should not seek to *identify* the pictorial content of a picture in the way we identify particulars.

3. The anti-subjectivist stance

In the previous sections I have tried to elucidate two issues that, I believe, belong to the background of Hyman's proposal on PR: the conception of pictorial resemblance as sharing of properties between pictures and depicted objects and the non-referential understanding of pictorial content. Here I shall dedicate some further considerations to a third issue: Hyman's criticisms against the subjectivist views of depiction. At various points in chapter one I have stressed that contemporary experiential views of depiction have inherited the Cartesian belief that it is the experience pictures produce in their viewers that should be at the centre of a theory of PR. This is a general claim that requires some qualification. As we have seen, it has been argued (by Wollheim and others) that Ernst Gombrich held an illusion theory of PR very similar to the Cartesian one (pictures produce illusory perceptions in their viewers), but this is a reading of *Art and Illusion* I do not wish to endorse. However, that, as I believe, Gombrich did not claim that pictures produce visual illusions in the viewer does not mean that he did not think that pictures work essentially as perceptual stimuli that cause *a peculiar perceptual response* in the viewer and that this fact is crucial for an understanding of PR. This is enough to trace a link between Descartes and Gombrich. (As we have seen, according to Gombrich, the peculiar response consists in attributing a determinate meaning to an object with an intrinsically indeterminate meaning, i.e. the picture). Also Richard Wollheim's account can be linked to Descartes, since the former argues that we should look at the peculiarities of the seeing-in experience elicited by pictures in order to understand PR ¹⁶¹. Finally, Robert Hopkins'

¹⁶¹ Moreover, Hyman (1989) argues that Wollheim's account of PR presupposes a causal theory of perception, of the kind defended by Paul Grice and Peter Strawson, and he puts

view is indebted with Descartes for a similar reason, in that Hopkins characterizes the experience of PR as an *experience* of resemblance between pictures and depicted objects. But why tracing the link between contemporary theories and Descartes should be interesting? In the first chapter I have stressed that the Cartesian turn involved a detachment from the idea that objective resemblance is relevant for explaining depiction, and that such a detachment is typical of contemporary views of depiction. Moreover, I have argued that this is a questionable move, and in the next section I shall illustrate how an objectivist theory of resemblance can provide solid ground for a theory of depiction. That experiential theories disregard objective resemblances provides a negative reason to be sceptical towards them. A key feature of Hyman's discussion of the debate on PR is that also two positive arguments against the experiential view are put forward. First, Hyman argues, we should not confuse the perfectly acceptable idea that a picture is designed to produce a particular kind of experience in a spectator's mind with the claim – which is the kernel of every experiential theory – that “a painting counts as a picture . . . *because* it produces this effect”¹⁶². Holding the latter is equivalent to claiming that a wine that is designed to taste sweet in the mouth counts as wine because it produces this effect. This, clearly, is not correct. But this is also the kernel of Descartes' inheritance for contemporary debate on depiction. The second positive argument to criticize the experiential approach supports the claim that we should not give credit to the idea that pictures are “a kind of magic” – an idea suggested by the experience of many paintings, since depicted objects often appear to the viewer only if she stays at a certain distance from the pictorial

forward several arguments to reject such theory of perception and to show the consequences it bears upon Wollheim's proposal on PR.

¹⁶² Hyman (2006, p. 143).

surface, suggesting that the content of pictures is located in the spectator's imagination, which is prompted by a perceptual experience that occurs under certain circumstances (i.e. when the spectator looks at the painting from a certain distance) ¹⁶³. Another reason to believe that the imagination has to play a relevant role in explaining why a picture is a picture derives from the observation, *in se* correct, that the representational richness of pictures cannot be explained by means of resemblances only: "the main reason for the continuing appeal to subjectivism...[is] the thought that art colludes with human nature in more ingenious ways than the resemblance theory can acknowledge" ¹⁶⁴. Why should we reject these claims? Hyman's point is best illustrated by one of his examples. Think of Rembrandt's portrait of his patron, *Jan Six* (1654, fig. 6), which shows the man wearing a coat trimmed with gold braid. Of this picture it is correct to say that it is designed to produce in the viewer the effect of seeing that the golden brushstrokes depicting gold braid look like gold braid. However, the fact that the picture depicts gold braid "cannot be explained by defining this effect, because the effect itself can only be defined as the experience of seeing the brushstrokes on the painting's surface and seeing what they depict" ¹⁶⁵. Hyman here is contesting the explanatory power of the experiential view, arguing that it does not succeed in explaining what is at the roots of PR, i.e. brushstrokes and the fact that we see *that* they depict. These are the elements that we should take into consideration in order to define the experience of a picture, and not *what is defined by* the experience of a picture. Clearly, Hyman's claim depends on his ability to show

¹⁶³ Hyman (2006, p. 145).

¹⁶⁴ Hyman (2006, p. 146).

¹⁶⁵ Hyman (2006, p. 147).

that PR can be explained in terms of resemblance and within a non-referential paradigm. This issue shall be explored in the next section.

I shall now explain how I believe Hyman's point can be applied to Hopkins' account. I would like to show that Hopkins' theory fails exactly when Hopkins tries to detach the explanation of the effect of a picture on the viewer from the description of the marks and colours we see on the pictorial surface. This happens when Hopkins deals with those caricatures that can hardly be said to resemble in some respect the subjects they are caricatures of. As we have seen, Hopkins defines outline shape as an objective property of objects and he claims that we experience similarity in outline shape between pictures and the objects they depict. This view poses a problem for the understanding of those strongly anti-realistic caricatures of which it seems intuitively correct to say that they are not experienced as resembling in outline shape the subjects we find nevertheless normal to say they depict. Think of one of Steve Bell's drawings of George Bush with a cannon in place of his nose (see fig. 7). The outline shape of the part of the drawing that depicts Bush's nose reminds us of the outline shape of a cannon, while it does not remind us of the outline shape of Bush's nose. How is it that we see Bush in the depicted face then? According to Hopkins, this is so because what we experience the picture as resembling is precisely Bush with a cannon-nose, and this – I take it – happens because we are correctly interpreting the artist's intentions deliberately to misrepresent the picture's subject. In Hopkins' words, caricatures “are experienced as resembling, in outline shape, whatever it is that we see in them. Since *ex hypothesis* they misrepresent their objects, what we see in them is those objects with properties they do not actually enjoy”¹⁶⁶. According to

¹⁶⁶ Hopkins (2003b, p. 159).

Hopkins, it is crucial that we can identify the pictorial subject of any given picture, and experienced outline shape (along with other elements the philosopher is not in the position to explain) is crucial for this recognition. But how can we recognize the subject if it is distorted by the caricature? Why should we experience resemblance in outline shape even if there is no objective resemblance in outline shape between marks on the pictorial surface and depicted subject? According to Hopkins – I take it – it is our ability of grasping the painter’s intentions to misrepresent the pictorial subject that explains how we come to experience the picture as resembling the pictorial subject the author intended to depict. However, Hopkins stresses that it is not a task for a theory of depiction to explain why it is that we have one such experience, how it is that our grasping the painter’s intentions determines the content of our experience. Hopkins, then, detaches the definition of what it is to experience resemblance in outline shape from the objective description of the marks on a pictorial surface. For Hopkins the pictorial content of Bush’s cannon caricature is George Bush’s nose looking like a cannon, not an amount of lines and colours that looks partly like a face and partly like a cannon. The description of the marks on the surface does not seem to be playing a relevant role for Hopkins. Why should we accept Hopkins’ solution if, as Hyman argues, it is possible to show that basic resemblances between pictures and objects explain how pictures come to have content?

What Hopkins’ remarks on caricature also show, I believe, is how his proposal is tied to the referential paradigm. Namely, we need to grasp the artist’s intentions in terms of wanting to depict *a certain particular* in order to see that object in the picture. As I have explained above, it is possible to detach the understanding of basic pictorial representation from reference to depicted

objects. This is relevant for an evaluation of subjectivist theories of depiction because all such theories need to construe pictorial representation referentially. Hyman tells us that depiction consists in pictures basically depicting aspects of objects, whereas Hopkins tells us that depiction consists in pictures being experienced as resembling objects (i.e. particulars), and Wollheim tells us that depiction consists in us seeing objects *in* the pictorial space. Hopkins' explanation of caricature could not work outside the referential paradigm.

Another proposal that is tied to a referential paradigm is Dominic Lopes', since it construes depiction as portraiture. I shall not examine Lopes' proposal here, because it relies on a premise whose appropriateness in the context of an analysis of depiction I have already rejected. Namely, it is a working hypothesis for the present investigation that we should seek to understand if and how objective resemblances may have a role in the explanation of depiction. Lopes claims that resemblance may help defining depiction, but it would not help understanding it: basically, he claims that resemblance does not have explanatory value in a theory of depiction. Robert Hopkins, instead, acknowledges that there is an explanatory role for objective resemblance, although his theory is mostly concerned with the experience we make of pictures: it is because we know that there is an objective resemblance between outline shapes of objects as seen from a certain point of view and depicted outline shapes that we can claim that we experience pictures as resembling in outline shape the objects they depict. Moreover, I am interested in visual properties of objects, while Lopes is interested in visual perception of pictures. If the proposal I am defending is sound and if we agree that it explains enough about depiction, this might cast doubts on the opportunity of defining Lopes' an account of depiction: it could be an interesting account of certain

aspects of pictorial perception, but, according to my hypothesis, it does not have the conceptual resources to ground an understanding of depiction.

4. A basic resemblance account of PR

“There is a strict and invariable relationship between the shapes and colours on a picture’s surface and the objects that it depicts, which can be defined without referring to the psychological effect the picture produces in a spectator’s mind”¹⁶⁷. According to Hyman, this relationship is the key concept for an understanding of the pictorial content of PRs. This is an idea Hyman first articulated in his first book on the topic (*The Imitation of Nature*, 1989) and that he has subsequently refined in some articles and in a second book (*The Objective Eye*, 2006)¹⁶⁸. In a nutshell, Hyman argues that the marks on a picture’s surface always resemble aspects of objects in three objective respects that he calls *occlusion shape*, *occlusion size*, and *aperture colour*. As it should be clear by now, for Hyman there does not need to be any particular object or kind of object (real or imaginary) that a picture resembles to. A picture shares certain visual properties with a number of objects we have experience of/know about, therefore it can be said to resemble all such objects in certain respects. I shall now illustrate the three objective resemblance aspects that are relevant for PR to obtain, as described by Hyman.

Directly ahead of me, through the window on the far side of my desk, I can see the bare branch of a lime tree. If I close one eye and look straight at the tip of this branch, making sure that the window pane is perpendicular to my line of sight, the

¹⁶⁷ Hyman (2006, chap. 5, here p. 73).

¹⁶⁸ Hyman (2000; 2003a).

shape of the mark I would need to make on the windowpane in order to occlude the branch precisely is its occlusion shape, relative to my line of sight. Notice that this shape is relative to my line of sight and not to the particular position of my eye along it. The shape of the mark I would need to make in order to occlude the branch precisely will not change if I take a step back along this line. Its size will change of course but not its shape ¹⁶⁹.

This passage from Hyman (2006) should remind the reader of Hopkins' introduction of the concept of outline shape that I have discussed in chapter one. Hyman's "occlusion shape" and Hopkins' "outline shape" indicate one and the same aspect of visual objects. However, there is a difference between the general views of the two philosophers, a difference that Hyman's choice of the term *occlusion* should illuminate. Hyman argues:

the precise sense in which a picture can resemble a three-dimensional body in respect of shape is not difficult to explain because three-dimensional bodies have two-dimensional aspects or appearances, which inky marks on paper can record. For example, a circular tabletop has an elliptical aspect or appearance, when it is seen along an oblique line of sight. The difficult question is whether this aspect or appearance is in the visible object we perceive or whether it belongs to the beholder's share' ” ¹⁷⁰.

Hyman wishes to stress that the aspect is objective, therefore he resolves to call it "occlusion shape": occlusion is something we experience in the three-dimensional world, it cannot be confused with mere visual appearance. Hopkins' term "outline shape", instead, does not have an objective connotation. This is not surprising, since, as we have seen, for Hopkins what is

¹⁶⁹ Hyman (2006, pp. 75-76).

¹⁷⁰ Hyman (2006, p. 75). "The beholder's share" is an expression often used by Gombrich in *Art and Illusion*.

most relevant to an account of PR is our experience of pictures, rather than their objective features.

Let us now consider Hyman's argument for the reality of occlusion shape. The concept of occlusion shape stems from Euclid's *Optics*¹⁷¹. Euclid postulated a cone of rays connecting the eye with an object that is seen. The apex of the cone is in the eye and its base is on the visible surface of the object. Of course this cone of rays is an idealization, since the visible surface of an object may have any shape and the direction in which light travels is affected by refraction. However, it makes sense to claim that an object's occlusion shape is the shape of a perpendicular cross section of Euclid's visual cone. An object's occlusion shape, then, depends on the object's three dimensional shape and its orientation relative to a line of sight, i.e. the ideal line at the apex of which we find the eye of the viewer. An object's occlusion shape is also affected by refraction and reflection, but it is nevertheless real. It is not a shape the object appears to have, because it is two-dimensional while the object is three-dimensional and because the shape an object may appear to have can be distinguished from its occlusion shape (e.g. when the profile of a nose looks sharper because of the fact that the owner of the nose is wearing a hat). Given that pictures represent objects by defining their forms, pictures represent objects as having occlusion shapes. Furthermore, "since an object's occlusion shape is relative to a line of sight, to depict an object's occlusion shape is to depict the object relative to a line of sight"¹⁷². This is an implicit line of sight that is not depicted on the surface of a picture but is implicit in the way the object is depicted by a given picture. It is not the line of sight of an implicit spectator (since it is not depicted), and it does not have to be the line of sight of

¹⁷¹ See Hyman (2006, pp. 77-80).

an actual spectator (the line of sight of an actual spectator may differ from it, e.g. the occlusion shape of a sphere is circular relative to every line of sight, but if the spectator looks at such an occlusion shape from an eccentric line of sight then the shape looks elliptical to her). Occlusion shape, then, is real and not relative to a point of view the viewer of the picture is required to assume when looking at it ¹⁷³. On the basis of this explanation, Hyman claims that there is an occlusion shape principle that governs pictorial representation. “If O is a depicted object and P is the smallest part of a picture that depicts O...the occlusion shape of O and the shape of P must be identical” ¹⁷⁴. Hyman also stresses that “the occlusion shape principle does not enable us to infer what kind of object is depicted from the shape of the mark that depicts it” ¹⁷⁵. This fact is famously exemplified by the duck/rabbit image, which shows how a rabbit and a duck can present the same occlusion shape. Resemblance in occlusion shape, then, does not bring the viewer to identify a particular or a kind of object as the pictorial content of a given picture, while it allows her to say that the picture resembles in occlusion shape a number of objects, i.e. all those objects that share the property of being suitable for presenting a certain occlusion shape when seen under some line of sight. As I have stressed before, resemblance is not understood as a relation between picture and represented objects, while it is understood in terms of shared resemblance properties, which are objective properties of the picture and of the depicted objects.

Compared to the manifold of observations Hyman dedicates to the concept of occlusion shape, his explanation of the concept of occlusion size

¹⁷² Hyman (2006, p. 80).

¹⁷³ Anamorphosis is the exception, because it prescribes that the spectator looks at the picture along a specific line of sight (see Hyman 2006, p. 94).

¹⁷⁴ Hyman (2006, p. 81).

¹⁷⁵ Hyman (2006, p. 81).

sounds rather dry. This is because occlusion size is strictly related to occlusion shape: “the concept of occlusion size is similar to the concept of occlusion shape, except that occlusion shape is relative to a line of sight, whereas the occlusion size of an object will vary depending on the position of the eye along this line” ¹⁷⁶. It follows that, according to the relative occlusion size principle, “if O1 and O2 are two depicted objects and P₁ and P₂ are the smallest parts of an orthomorphic picture that depict O1 and O2, the relative occlusion size of O1 and O2 and the relative size of P₁ and P₂ must be identical” ¹⁷⁷.

Hyman’s introduction to the claim that pictures resemble in colour the objects they depict is much more detailed. The claim that the colours on a pictorial surface resemble the colours of the objects the picture depicts is suitable of various formulations. The simple objective view is that the colours of the pigments on a pictorial surface P must be the same as the colours of the objects depicted by P, in order for it be correct to claim that P resembles in colour the objects it depicts. There are strong reasons to reject the simple view, according to Hyman. The first is given by the fact that the introduction of the pictorial technique of shading “changed the relationship between a colour represented in a picture and the colour on the picture’s surface that represents it” ¹⁷⁸. How so? What we intuitively consider a monochromatic portion of a picture (for instance, a yellow square in Vermeer’s *View of Delft*) is often the result of a variety of colours accurately put together and blended by ambient light. A shaded picture is a picture that seeks to represent the monochromatic colour of an object it depicts by means of the careful blending of a variety of colours, not just with a single nuance. To understand how a shaded picture

¹⁷⁶ Hyman (2006, p. 98).

¹⁷⁷ Hyman (2006, p. 99).

¹⁷⁸ Hyman (2006, p. 101).

works we need to distinguish between *aperture colour* and *surface colour* of a picture. The surface colour of a (commonsensibly considered) “monochromatic” portion of a picture is the colour we intuitively attribute to such portion. The aperture colour of a “monochromatic” portion of a picture can more easily be observed in non-standard conditions, with the help of some device that prevents the viewer from seeing the changes ambient light imposes on the colours on the surface of the image, e.g. a cardboard tube we can look through. With the help of one such device we can see that our “monochromatic” colour is actually a fine-grained mix of several areas painted in a variety of colours. Not all pictures have different aperture and surface colour, but many do, because they make use of the technique of shading. This is why it is wrong to claim – without any further qualification – that pictures resemble in colour the objects they depict. The second reason to reject the simple view is given by those pictures, such as pointillist paintings and Byzantine mosaics, that make use of optical fusion to blend different colours on their surface. It would be wrong to claim that the colours of a picture displaying optical fusion resemble the colours of the object it depicts, because the transition from a colour to another in pictures displaying optical fusion is sharp, a fact that generally does not find correspondence in the colour properties of the objects such pictures depict¹⁷⁹.

Despite the fact that the simple view ought to be rejected, Hyman believes that there is room left for claiming that a picture objectively resembles in colour the objects it depicts. Only, this claim should be qualified as follows: a picture objectively resembles the objects it depicts *in aperture colour*, while it does not need resembling them in surface colour, although this may happen

¹⁷⁹ Hyman (2006, pp. 102-104). In the first part of the book Hyman has established that colours

when aperture colour and surface colour are one and the same colour, e.g. in paintings that do not employ shading or optical fusion, such as ancient Egyptian paintings. This is a rather counterintuitive claim. Much trouble, again, is given by the fact that we tend to think of pictures depicting particulars or objects of a certain kind, and therefore we seek to describe pictures by means of the visual properties we would attribute to the objects they depict. However, if we accept the view that “what a picture tells me is itself”, then it follows that we should not seek to describe the pictorial content of a given picture by means of properties we would find it normal to attribute to the object we say the picture represents. This point is easier to grasp in the case of occlusion shape. If I look at a picture x and am prompted to say that it depicts a sphere, it might be that what I am seeing on the pictorial surface is an ellipsis. If the pictorial content of the picture is an ellipsis, this does not prevent the picture from depicting a sphere. The pictorial content is about the picture itself, while the identification of the object we say the picture depicts depends on the viewer’s perceptual skills, her knowledge of pictorial conventions, and the context of use of the picture (I shall come back to this in section five). In the case of colour, if I look at a yellow square on the surface of a picture that employs the technique of shading, then the colour content of such squared part of the surface is the sum of the aperture colours of its various portions. That, because of context and conventions, we can say that the square is a wall, and that we generally describe objects that appear to us fairly uniform in colour by means of attributing to them a single colour (in this case “yellow”), is another story. It does not concern the basic pictorial content of the picture, but the claims that we make about objects we find it natural to describe a picture’s pictorial

content in terms of. But what we find natural to say about pictorial content does not need to be the best objective description of pictorial content. This is the sense of those remarks by Hyman I have quoted while commenting on Wittgenstein's conception of PR. Hyman stresses that there is indeed a sense in which pictures can be compared to illusions (although it is different from the Cartesian sense):

A picture is an unusual object of vision not because it allows us to see what is not there to be seen, which is absurd, but because when looking at a painting, the natural answer to the question "What do you see?" is a description of the depicted scene, and not a description of the disposition of pigments. This is not simply because we have learned to assume that this is what the question is after. We can see what is depicted; but it is generally more difficult, and it may be very difficult indeed, to see how the pigments are disposed. In other words, it may be very difficult, even impossible, to give the other answer. Many geometrical illusions, which are akin to rudimentary pictures, depend upon this fact¹⁸⁰.

That we find natural to say that, for instance, a certain caricature depicts George Bush, does not need to be the best objective description of the pictorial content of such picture, since what is typical of pictures is that they prompt the viewers to describe them in terms of descriptions of depicted scenes, rather than in terms of descriptions of dispositions of pigments and shapes. However, this does not make the pigments and shapes on the surface of a picture less real. Hyman's thesis is that they are also relevant to understand the basic determination of pictorial content. What is crucial about objective resemblances is that they determine the set of objects a given picture can be said to pictorially represent: the same picture can pictorially represent a variety

of objects, because many objects have similar occlusion shape, occlusion size, and aperture colour. It is obvious that the fact that, while looking at certain pictures, we can say that they represent specific subjects, can only seldom be explained by means of basic resemblances only, while it often has to involve reference to conventions and techniques that painters have adopted in different cultures and at different times. Objective resemblance properties are properties that connect a picture to a number of objects, and it is not possible to reach a more fine-grained understanding of pictorial representation in terms of resemblance properties. What is crucial for this account, as I have explained in section one, is that Hyman does not explain basic resemblance in terms of a two-place relation between a picture and a particular object (or an object of a certain kind). For every pictorial representation there is a heterogeneous set of objects that can be represented by the picture: “a theory of depiction...purports to define the relationship between the visible object depicted and the marks and colours on a picture’s surface and not the relationship between these marks and colours and the person, object, place, or event, if any, that is portrayed”¹⁸¹.

To sum up, according to Hyman, the necessary condition for pictorial representation is the presence of basic resemblances between pictorial surface and aspects of the visual world. Pictures resemble physical objects in colours, occlusion shapes, and relative occlusion sizes they depict and “the painter is solely concerned with representing what...can be represented by representing what can be seen”¹⁸². This allows for a picture to represent one thing by representing another, because the realm of “what can be represented by representing what can be seen” is broader than the realm of what can be seen.

¹⁸⁰ Hyman (1989, p. 43).

¹⁸¹ Hyman (2006, p. 71).

¹⁸² Hyman, *The Objective Eye*, pp. 62-63.

This is why, for instance, Matisse's painting of a man (fig. 3), where the colour green is used to paint the man's face, is not the painting of a man with green skin, while it is a painting that has such-and-such basic pictorial content (thereby included a round shape partially coloured in green), and that represents a man by means of its basic pictorial content. Not all the properties of the basic pictorial content of a picture need be the properties that we ascribe to the particular object or kind of object the picture might depict.

Hyman illustrates his view with a variety of examples taken from art history. He concentrates on figurative art in order to show how we can distinguish between objective resemblances and effective pictorial artifices and conventions. If we want to understand how pictorial representation works, we often have to take into account the "tricks" painters have devised in order to suggest resemblance to the represented subject beyond the level of basic objective resemblance aspects¹⁸³. Hyman provides several examples to clarify

¹⁸³ Resemblance in occlusion shape between pictorial surface and depicted objects is capable of explaining a number of facts about pictures, according to Hyman. First, "the occlusion shape principle implies that whatever a picture depicts, it depicts relative to an implicit line of sight" (Hyman 2006, p. 82). The selection of a certain line of sight is crucial for the representational power of certain pictures. Hyman considers the case of Giotto's experimentation with the subversion of the usual correlation of *en face* view and majesty in the fresco *The Betrayal of Christ* at the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua (ca.1305). Here, Christ is shown with his profile facing Judas' one, but this does not diminish the majesty of the subject, since it succeeds in stressing the pathos of the scene (the confrontation between Christ and the betrayer) and it is also reminiscent of profiles of august figures on coins and medals, thereby succeeding in re-introducing a regal element into the representation. Second, there are pictures where novel views of objects are combined with established lines of sight (Hyman 2006, pp. 83-89). Among Hyman's examples we find again a work by Giotto, the *Dormition of the Virgin* (ca. 1310), where two oblique views of the same subject (a mourner) are combined to provide an original frontal view, with the effect of producing a vertical axis that cuts the figure in two. That two oblique views are combined means that the same objects is represented via the combination of two of its possible occlusion shapes. Third, "the lines of sight associated with distinct parts of the depicted scene can be coordinated or played off against each other", such as in Masaccio's *Trinity* (ca. 1425), where the architectural background is depicted as seen from below, while the figures of the Father and the Son are shown frontally and without foreshortening. Finally, "whatever a picture depicts, it depicts as visible, but it may not depict it as actually being seen. When it does so, an implicit point of view is embodied in an implicit spectator, who may or may not be represented, and who may be an individual or a type" (p. 89). Here, a famous example, also mentioned by Richard Wollheim in *Painting as an Art*, is Renoir's *La Loge* (1874), where the direction of the gaze of the depicted woman tells the viewer that she is looking to her left, thereby including into the picture an implicit spectator, positioned to the left of the depicted woman. The viewer is left to imagine that the implicit spectator is looking at

this point, and a particularly striking one is Velasquez' *Las Hilanderas* (1657, fig. 8). In this painting we see a spinning wheel and “the shimmering highlights on [its] spoke float in the space within its rim” to a fantastic naturalistic effect¹⁸⁴. In order to point out Velasquez' great rendition of the movement of the wheel we say that the depicted spinning wheel resembles a real one. However, there is nothing on the surface of the painting that is moving, which, instead, is what happens to a real spinning wheel while it is being used. What we see is a pictorial artifice, a convention that we are happy to consider realistic and find more compelling than alternative renditions of the same subject. This, though, does not rule out the fact that the depicted wheel resembles a wheel in basic resemblance aspects and that if basic resemblances to a wheel were missing *Las Hilanderas* could not represent a wheel pictorially.

5. The basic resemblance account of PR: limits, criticisms, and replies

It is evident that the basic resemblance theory of PR has limited explanatory power. Hyman acknowledges that his is by no means “a comprehensive theory of pictorial art” and that “nothing beyond the basic representation of visible objects falls within its scope”. He also stresses that it is a theory of basic depiction, and not a theory of portraiture, and that it is not a theory of pictorial perception and/or artistic perception¹⁸⁵. Why, then, should it be worth holding such an account, despite its explanatory limits? The reason is that, unlike other accounts, the basic resemblance theory does not bring with it

the woman through a pair of opera glasses, just like the man depicted on the back of the woman appears to do.

¹⁸⁴ Hyman (2006, p. 203).

some misconceptions that, as I have tried to show, have deeply influenced debate on depiction. First, it does not subscribe to misleading criticisms to the idea that a picture's marks and colours can resemble objects in the world. Second, it does not understand PR as a form of illusion. Third, it does not construe depiction conventionally. Fourth, it does not need to postulate recognition abilities for pictures whose existence and way of functioning can hardly be demonstrated. Fifth, it makes sense of the fact that resemblance between an object and another object does not necessarily have to be understood relationally.

The basic resemblance account of PR shows a striking minimalist character, also when considered as *just an account of pictorial content*. Hyman acknowledges that there are many questions his proposal leaves unanswered. However, he also argues that they are not philosophical questions. Namely, he claims that it is science that has to explain the connection between seeing that a painting depicts an object O and our ability of recognizing O, the depiction of textural qualities, of depth, of solidity, the pictorial representation of the direction and quality of light, and several other optical effects, such as those that allow the painter to depict haze, or to render the bright look of colours under a certain light ¹⁸⁶. Many of these questions, on the contrary, are at the kernel of experiential approaches to PR. As we have seen, Hyman rejects subjectivist views. However, he also acknowledges that a compromise must be reached between the objectivist and the subjectivist:

The subjectivist will have to acknowledge that the occlusion shape principle and the other basic principles of pictorial art relate the surface and the content of a picture

¹⁸⁵ Hyman (2006, pp. 71-72).

without referring to its psychological effect. And the advocate of the resemblance theory will have to concede that these same principles indicate the limit of any definition we could give, of the visible relationship between the marks on a picture's surface and the objects they depict ¹⁸⁷.

It is not clear whether these considerations leave room for other philosophical views (especially for experiential views) to implement the basic resemblance account, provided that the constraints it imposes are accepted. The exploration of such argumentative strategies is not of my concern here and I am not aware of any contribution that has pursued this goal so far. As we shall see, the second part of my investigation is dedicated to the analysis of the current state of accounts of abstract pictures within the debate on PR and to the defence of the claim that Hyman's basic resemblance account can provide an effective framework for the understanding of abstract pictures. I hope that my investigation will succeed in showing that the explanatory realm of the basic resemblance account of PR is not as narrow as one could judge it to be, and as Hyman himself has claimed so far.

I shall now consider some objections that have been addressed against Hyman, and show that his theory has the resources for rejecting them. First, if one were to attack Hyman's proposal while defending Dominic Lopes' take on PR, one could claim, with Catherine Abell, that the basic resemblance theory violates what Lopes calls "the independence constraint" ¹⁸⁸. The idea behind the independence constraint is that, when we say that a picture resembles its subject, our claim can be grounded on the detection of two different kinds of

¹⁸⁶ Hyman (2006, pp. 149-151).

¹⁸⁷ Hyman (2006, p. 147).

¹⁸⁸ This claim is part of Catherine Abell's argumentative strategy in her 2009 paper. For the independence constraint see Lopes (1996, pp. 16-19).

resemblance between picture and represented object: on the one hand, resemblances whose identification is independent from the viewer's awareness of what the picture represents, on the other hand resemblances whose identification is not independent from such awareness. According to Lopes, resemblance theories cannot indicate a set of independent resemblances that invariably (i.e. independently of the picture's style) allow the viewer to see why a picture depicts a certain subject and, therefore, they fail. This, Abell stresses, is true also of Hyman's theory. On the contrary, I think the objection misses the point, since for Hyman it does not make sense to think of resemblances between pictures and objects as properties that allow the viewer to single out the particular or the kind of object that a picture might depict. As we have seen, Lopes puts a lot of weight on the idea that the traditional resemblance view wrongly identifies the pictorial content of a picture with its subject, given that it claims that the designs of a picture resemble the visual properties of a picture's subject¹⁸⁹. Lopes argues, instead, that it is because we recognize pictorial subjects that we can attribute to them the properties pictorial designs attribute to pictorial content. According to Hyman, whereas for certain pictures it makes perfect sense to say that designs on their surfaces resemble their subjects (e.g. when gold leaf depicts gold), it is generally not correct to ask a theory of depiction that it also account for the relation between pictorial designs and pictorial subject (provided that there is one) in terms more specific than the sharing of certain visual properties (i.e. basic resemblance properties) allows to describe. This is because pictorial representation is not modelled on portraiture, while it is explained by basic resemblances between a

¹⁸⁹ As I have explained in chapter one, for Lopes a picture's subject is the real-world entity represented by the picture, whereas a picture's content are the properties that the picture

given picture and a variety of visual objects. The reason why we should favour Hyman's account over Lopes' is that it relies on assumptions that can be demonstrated: from the previous sections it should be clear how basic resemblance aspects are determined and which are Hyman's philosophical presuppositions. On the contrary, Lopes needs to postulate visual-recognition abilities whose existence is anything but certain and that make his account substantially dependent on scientific research.

Catherine Abell has also argued that Hyman cannot explain the depiction of non-existent objects, because "it is hard to make sense of the claim that Escher's drawings depict the impossible things they do because they would resemble those things, did they exist. By contrast, it makes perfect sense to say that we experience the drawings as resembling things that could not exist"¹⁹⁰. The point, for Hyman, is that we do not need to postulate things or kinds of things that exist in the real world or in some fictional world and that are the objects pictures basically pictorially represent. Moreover, a picture can figuratively represent X while pictorially representing Y, i.e. it can pictorially represent an object and represent another object in another essentially visual way (as I have said, the realm of "what can be represented by representing what can be seen" is broader than the realm of what can be seen). Furthermore, a picture need not be produced according to a single projective schema. Escher's pictures such as *Relativity* (1953, fig. 9) make perfect sense as basic pictorial representations of a number of objects seen from different angles. The problem is that when we look at them we see unitary pictures and we are prompted to interpret them as depictions of unitary scenes. A picture of an

represents its subject as having, *that it ascribes to its subject*. Every picture also has design properties, which are the visual properties *by means of which a picture represents its subject*.

¹⁹⁰ Abell (2009, p. 189).

impossible object is a picture that basically pictorially represents two or more possible objects seen from different angles and merged together, so that we interpret the picture as the image of a single impossible object.

Another objection addressed by Abell is that Hyman cannot explain pictorial misrepresentation ¹⁹¹. A typical case of misrepresentation are those highly anti-naturalistic caricatures I have considered above while addressing Hopkins' view, such as Steve Bell's drawings of George Bush with a cannon-nose (fig. 7) or, more recently, of David Cameron with a condom-head. Neither Cameron has a condom-head nor Bush has a cannon-nose, but we easily identify them as the subjects Bell's caricatures represent. How so? According to Abell, who develops on an argument previously put forward by Robert Hopkins, in order to explain caricature Hyman should adopt a counterfactual solution: he should claim that Bush's caricature represents Bush *as if* his nose were shaped like a cannon ¹⁹². But this, Abell argues, would not explain why we understand the caricature as depicting Bush rather than any other person or thing. The objection seems to overlook the point that for Hyman a picture can visually represent X while pictorially representing Y ¹⁹³. In other words, according to Hyman *visual* representation through pictures is not exhausted by *basic pictorial* representation. The Bush caricature represents a figure that has the outline shape of a man (among other things), except for the part that is usually occupied by the nose, which is replaced by a form that has the outline shape of a cannon (among other things). That we can say that the picture's subject is Bush – I take it – depends on the following facts: 1) we know how Bush looks like and identify certain of his features in the caricature. These

¹⁹¹ Abell (2009, p. 189).

¹⁹² Hopkins (1994, pp. 434-435).

¹⁹³ Hyman dedicates only a note to caricature (2006, n. 15 p. 252).

features need not be basically pictorially represented by the picture, but they can otherwise be visually represented by it; 2) we can guess some reasons why Bell might have wanted to represent Bush with a cannon-nose. To formulate a hypothesis it is sufficient to know that the caricature was made in 2003, at the beginning of the Second Iraq War. This information allows us to trace links between what we identify as the basic pictorial content of the picture and its subject. Therefore, that the picture has a certain basic pictorial content is relevant for us to understand its subject.

Recently, in an unpublished discussion that took place at a conference, Robert Hopkins has raised the objection that Hyman cannot explain the difference between a pictorial representation of X and a picture that non-pictorially represents X¹⁹⁴. I believe that also this objection is misplaced. If a picture pictorially represents X it has to bear basic aspects of resemblance to X. As for a picture that non-pictorially represents X things are more nuanced than Hopkins seems to believe. Hyman, in fact, allows for visual representation through pictures not to be exhausted by pictorial representation, although basic pictorial representation has to play a role in the determination of the picture's subject. For instance, it is relevant for the description of the qualities of Bell's caricatured subjects that we are asked to associate their noses to cannons and their heads to condoms. On another hand, when a picture non-visually represents X while pictorially representing Y, the features of Y are not to be read as visual aspects that the picture attributes to X, although in a connotative way (the caricature, instead, is a case of connotation). We need to decode the representation in, for instance, symbolic, metaphoric, expressive terms, but this goes beyond a theory of pictorially represented content.

¹⁹⁴ The European Society of Aesthetics Conference, Udine, 25th May 2010.

Finally, Anthony Savile has argued that the basic resemblance theory does not explain cases such as the one when on the bricks of an old building figures are depicted whose outlines are irregularly marked because of the irregularity in the shading of the bricks¹⁹⁵. If I understand Savile correctly, he believes that in a case like this we could describe the depictive content of the picture in two alternative ways: 1) if we were looking at the building from distance so that we would see the depicted figures without noticing the irregularities in their outlines, we would say that the picture's pictorial content is regularly-shaped figures, and that the subject of the picture is also regularly shaped figures; 2) if we were looking at the building from nearby, noticing the irregularity in the outline shape of the depicted figures we would say that the outline of the depicted figures is irregular although the picture depicts regularly-shaped subjects. According to Savile – I take it – provided that we had no reasons to think that the picture on the wall is meant to depict irregularly shaped figures, in this case we would consider what Hyman would call the “occlusion shape” of the depicted figures as an *apparent* occlusion shape (i.e. as the occlusion shape of the depicted figures as we see them when we are at a certain distance from the wall, rather than as their actual occlusion shape). This would discourage us from subscribing to Hyman's claims on the objectivity of the basic resemblance in occlusion shape that a picture bears to the objects it depicts. My reply to this objection is that it is part of the relevant information we need to rely on when looking at a picture that we know something about its style and support and about the limits they impose on its look. If the picture is depicted on bricks, we should take into account that a certain irregularity in the contours would be difficult to avoid. Therefore, in

¹⁹⁵ See Savile (2007, pp. 434-435).

Savile's example we have a picture that basically depicts the regular occlusion shapes of certain objects within the limits of its support and style of production. Only if it were clear that the picture were deliberately depicting the shapes of the objects as irregular we would have a good reason to claim that its basic pictorial content is irregularly shaped objects.

As I have stressed, the basic resemblance theory of PR requires us to renounce to the idea that we can, for every PR, explain identification of depicted subjects with the resources of a theory of pictorial content only. On the other hand, the basic resemblance theory allows for an objective foundation of the phenomenon of PR. Moreover, I believe the basic resemblance theory has a strong explanatory power when applied to the realm of abstract painting. My investigation in the next two chapters shall deal with this last issue.

Chapter Three

Four Available Accounts of Abstract Pictures: A Critical Examination

There are various uses of the adjective “abstract” in relation to pictures. A picture can have an abstract *subject* if it is said to represent some immaterial object. For instance, in the Christian tradition, the Holy Spirit is often represented by a dove. However, an immaterial object, an abstract object, cannot be identified with the pictorial content of a picture, i.e. the content that is visually represented for the beholder to look at, since an immaterial object does not have visual features. In the above example, the Holy Spirit is symbolically represented through the picture, not pictorially so. A picture, then, can symbolically represent an abstract subject. A picture can also be said to have abstract *elements* itself. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, “to abstract” means “to withdraw, deduct, remove, or take away (something)”. If we keep in mind this definition, we can easily see that in order to represent objects and scenes pictures need to abstract from a variety of elements that characterize the realm of our experience, such as the third dimension, movement and the succession of events in time. From this point of view, pictures are themselves intrinsically abstract representations.

There is a use of the expression “abstract picture”, however, that is much more widespread than the others. According to this use, “abstract picture” is, roughly, intended as synonymous with the expression “non-figurative picture” and it refers to pictures which have been produced within the practice of art in

the West since the beginning of the XX century. This is the acceptance of “abstract picture” I shall concern myself with. If a non-figurative picture is an abstract picture, it seems that it is figuration the “something” some abstract pictures abstract from ¹⁹⁶. What does it mean to abstract from figuration? In certain cases, abstract pictures are abstractions from subjects that could be rendered figuratively. This is famously the case for many of Kandinsky’s earlier abstract landscapes, where we can observe that the painter progressively explored new ways to make the landscape less and less evident to the viewer, in order to maximize the viewer’s attention to the disposition of marks and colours on the pictorial surface. The same is true of Mondrian’s so-called “tree-series” (figs. 10-15), where the painter progressively abstracts from the representation of trees. Do non-figurative paintings with a non-abstract pictorial subject pictorially represent it? Often, the term “abstract picture” is considered as synonymous with “non-representational picture”, where a non-representational picture is a picture that does not *pictorially represent*. This leaves open the opportunity for the picture to e.g. symbolically, indexically, metonymically, conventionally represent something. Are there good reasons to claim that at least some abstract pictures do not represent in the pictorial way? These are some of the questions that will animate the discussion in this chapter and in the next one.

What is certain is that the label “abstract picture” originated in the context of avant-garde visual art in the late XIX and early XX century. It can be said that the many forms avant-garde visual art took all had a common goal:

¹⁹⁶ Kirk Varnedoe has warned us against the use of “abstract” in its acceptance of non-figurative, non-representational when it comes to contemporary art. Abstraction, Varnedoe argues, suggests derivation from something else, second-orderness, but it is not clear why we should understand abstract art as merely reductive, disregarding its productive and innovative character (Varnedoe 2006, p. 47).

to make an art which made it difficult, or impossible, or meaningless, to easily trace the story that went from the presence of a certain (kind of) object in the world and the representation of it through a visual art medium. I think that the best way intuitively to express the difference between a figurative and an abstract painting is to say that while, when looking at a figurative painting, we find it natural to describe the painting in terms of the objects it depicts, when looking at an abstract painting we believe that we can faithfully describe what we see only in terms of the aspect of the marks and colours we see on the pictorial surface.

The problem is to understand how a theory of PR should accommodate such intuition. In this chapter I shall examine four proposals for the understanding of abstract pictures. Two of them have been put forward in books that have become classics in the analytical literature on depiction: Richard Wollheim's *Painting as An Art* and Kendall Walton's *Mimesis as Make-Believe*. The other two express research methods that significantly overlap with the analytical one. On the one hand, some essays by Clement Greenberg, which provided a powerful paradigm for the understanding of abstract painting from a modernist point of view. On the other hand, Lambert Wiesing's *Bildtheorie* – as applied to abstract pictures – a work that brings together historical, phenomenological and semiotic studies on pictures in a systematic fashion. Both Greenberg and Wiesing have definitional ambitions (What is a picture? What is pictorial art? What is pictorial abstraction?) that are akin to the object of the present enquiry and more generally to the questions crucial for the analysis of PR as it has been shaped within the analytical debate. Another, more prosaic, reason why I have decided to look also outside the boundaries of the analytical debate is that no analytical philosopher seems to

have dedicated much attention to abstract pictures. With a philosophical debate we can date back to the publication of Nelson Goodman's *Languages of Art* in 1968, we have to wait until 1989 for the first paragraphs on abstract pictures to be written by Richard Wollheim in *Painting as an Art*. Moreover, philosophers who are presently engaged in the debate on depiction – especially Dominic Lopes and Robert Hopkins – openly endorse what I have called a “referential” approach to depiction, i.e. they tie pictorial representation to the identification of a depicted particular. This obviously excludes abstract pictures from the domain of pictorial representation ¹⁹⁷. Since I am inclined to rule out a referential approach to PR, I have been seeking for alternative proposals for an understanding of abstract pictures.

1. Richard Wollheim and the emergence/recession criterion

In *Painting as an Art* Richard Wollheim argues that PR is always connected to a visual phenomenon, seeing-in, that happens in presence of a

¹⁹⁷ This is Dominic Lopes describing the aim of his *Understanding Pictures* (1996): “A guiding principle of this book is that pictures come in many varieties, and this diversity is something which a theory of picturing must take into account. But, in apparent violation of this principle, I am proposing to limit my discussion to what are commonly called ‘figurative pictures’. ... In overlooking abstract pictures I do not mean to endorse the view that abstract pictures are not representational. It is true that abstractions do not represent objects and scenes as do still lives or landscapes, but abstractions may represent in other ways. Pictures such as Rothko’s coloured clouds or Rorschach ink-blots may *express* subjective psychological states – of anxiety, exhilaration, conflict, mystical union, and the like. Others *make manifest* features of the process of their production, as Pollock drip painting manifests the direction and force of the artist’s movements, the liquidity and stickiness of the paint, and the effects of gravity. Expression and manifestation are species of representation in so far as they draw our attention to features of the world – subjective mental states in one case and processes of making in the other. ... By no means do I reject the principle that a complete account of pictures should explain abstract pictures as well as figurative ones. I merely restrict myself to the less ambitious task of attempting to explain pictures that, like descriptions (though in their distinctive way), represent objects, properties, or states of affair” (pp. 5-6). And this is Catherine Abell in a recent article: “Depiction is the form of representation that distinguishes figurative from abstract paintings. Both abstract and figurative paintings can represent: a slash of red paint may symbolize lust, and a painting of a lamb may symbolize Christ. However, all and only figurative representations depict. . . . Accounts of depiction attempt to specify the

variety of objects, such as clouds, paintings, walls. Seeing-in has a special phenomenology: “When seeing-in occurs, two things happen: I am visually aware of the surface I look at, and I discern something standing out in front of, or (in certain cases) receding behind something else”¹⁹⁸. The “something”, which is discerned, is the representational object of PR: for there to be pictorial experience such an object (i) must be perceived while paying simultaneous attention to the pictorial surface and (ii) must be collocated in a spatial dimension as a consequence of the experience of discerning “something standing out in front of, or . . . receding behind something else”. This definition has interesting consequences for abstract pictures, as the following passage shows:

Abstract art, as we have it, tends to be an art that is at once representational and abstract. Most abstract paintings display images: or, to put it another way, the experience that we are required to have in front of them is certainly one that involves attention to the marked surface but it is also one that involves an awareness of depth. In imposing the second demand as well as the first, abstract paintings reveal themselves to be representational, and it is at this point irrelevant that we can seldom put into adequate words just what they represent¹⁹⁹.

With reference to the two passages I have mentioned, Wollheim’s argument can be summed up as follows:

(P1): for a picture to be a pictorial representation, the experience it elicits in a standard observer must include a sense of depth, which has to occur while the observer is looking at the marked surface of the picture;

relation between picture and object in virtue of which the former depicts the latter” (2009, p. 183).

¹⁹⁸ Wollheim (1987, p. 48).

(P2) when we experience depth in a picture we see something standing out in front of something else or receding behind something else;

(P3): several abstract pictures elicit such an experience of depth in the viewers who focus their attention on the pictorial surface;

(C): it follows that those abstract pictures meet the requirements for pictorial representation.

(P1) expresses Wollheim's claim that representational character is an aspect of pictures we discover by means of "thematization" (this is Wollheim's term) of the pictorial surface ²⁰⁰. According to Wollheim, thematizing the pictorial surface consists in attending to it while being guided by the goal of acquiring content or meaning. This way we establish a form of contact with the picture's maker, because we, so to speak, set ourselves on the traces of his intentions of communicating a given content *through* the picture. Recognition of figures is just one of the ways in which thematization may occur: for instance, we can also thematize concepts, or material aspects of a painting. The last two cases are more apt to describe what might happen with certain abstract pictures. We might grasp an artist's intention to represent some concept through, say, a geometrical abstract picture, or to represent some concept by making the viewer focus his attention on the material character of the painting. In all those cases, Wollheim argues, for us to thematize a certain pictorial surface it is essential that we have a specific experience of depth while looking at the picture: i.e. the experience of seeing an element of the picture emerging from the pictorial surface or receding behind it. For a better understanding of Wollheim's argument, we can split (P1) in two separate premises:

¹⁹⁹ Wollheim (1987, p. 62).

²⁰⁰ Wollheim (1987, pp. 20-25).

(P1a): for a picture to be a pictorial representation, the experience it elicits in a standard observer must include a sense of depth, which has to occur while the observer is looking at the marked surface of the picture;

(P1b): in order to grasp the representational character of a picture an observer must *thematize* the pictorial surface, i.e. seek to establish a contact with the picture's maker by means of grasping his intentions of communicating a given content *through* the picture.

According to Wollheim, then, the distinction between figurative and abstract pictures does not correspond to the distinction between representational and non-representational pictures, because there is an aspect of our experience of real objects, events, or scenes, i.e. a certain experience of depth, that is also part of our experience of certain, although not all, abstract pictures. The fact that an image triggers an experience of depth – consisting in seeing something emerging from or receding behind its pictorial surface – is then Wollheim's criterion for an image to be a pictorial representation. Let us call it the "emergence/recession criterion". Wollheim brings two examples to illustrate his point: on the one hand Hans Hoffmann's *Pompeii* (1959, fig. 16) on the other hand Barnett Newmann's *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* (1948, fig. 17). The first painting can be seen as an agglomerate of overlapping rectangles and is therefore said to be an abstract picture that triggers an experience of depth. The second painting presents some thin lines sharply cutting through what would otherwise look like a single monochrome surface. This is said to be an abstract picture that does not trigger an experience of depth²⁰¹.

Wollheim's account presents a general problem: as Jerrold Levinson and John Hyman have pointed out, it is difficult to understand what it means to

²⁰¹ Wollheim (1987, p. 62).

have access to the painter's intentions by means of looking at the picture that the painter has produced²⁰². Therefore, we might reject (C) claiming that (P1b) is false. I shall not pursue this strategy here and shall limit my analysis to the considerations Wollheim dedicates to abstract pictures. It might be, after all, that they illuminate a relevant aspect of those images, and that the validity of them does not entirely depend on (P1b). A different theory of pictorial experience – let us call it (P1b*) - might be addressed, while maintaining that what is crucial for such an experience is that a sense of depth is triggered in the viewer by the picture, in the specific way described in premise (P2). This way C could be derived by (P1a), (P1b*), (P2) and (P3).

The trouble is that, as John Hyman has observed, (P2) does not describe an experience that necessarily has to take place when we are aware that a picture represents certain objects²⁰³. For example, in the case of a stick-drawing of a human figure on an otherwise blank sheet of paper (fig. 18), we have a figure that is not shown in depth and a ground that is not the background of the depicted scene, since it does not contribute to the content of the picture. The ground, in fact, is certainly part of the surface of the picture *qua* object, but there are no clues that prompt us to consider it as part of the depictive content of the picture. If the stick-figure is painted on a ground, but without a background, then it is not represented as if it were occupying a three-dimensional space. Therefore we have a representational picture that, in Wollheim's words, does not set up an emergence/recession dynamics and, therefore, a picture that does not trigger a sense of depth in the viewer. To reformulate the point in more general terms, I argue that it is possible to represent *aspects of objects* pictorially and at the same time not to represent

²⁰² See Levinson (1998, pp. 231-32); Hyman (2006, pp. 137-138).

objects as occupying a three-dimensional space. It follows that at least certain PRs do not trigger an experience of depth in the viewer. Given that there are representational pictures that do not trigger an experience of depth, then, Wollheim's emergence/recession criterion is not successful in discriminating between pictures that are representational and pictures that are not. We cannot use the emergence/recession criterion to argue that those abstract pictures which do not trigger a sense of depth in the viewer are not pictorial representations.

A case analogous to the stick drawing in my previous example is that of a silhouette image on a blank sheet of paper, such as the silhouette portrait of Jane Austen (fig. 19). Again, we have a figure that is not shown in depth on a ground which is not the background of the picture (this does not rule out that there are certain silhouette figures which are clearly shown in depth, e.g. fig. 20). Compare this example with the case of a painting that shows only the surface of a wall and a shadow projected on it. The painting is the two-dimensional representation of a two-dimensional surface with a shadow projected on it. If we are given sufficient contextual clues (e.g. if the picture renders the irregularity of the pigmentation of the wall) we understand that the picture depicts the surface of a wall with a shadow projected on it. I do not know if this entails that we *perceive* depth in the painting, or that some emergence/recession dynamics is put into play, however I acknowledge that it is enough to prompt the thought that what the painting shows *is a three-dimensional object with a shadow projected on it.* This is what makes the shadow-on-a-wall case different from the silhouette and the stick-drawing I have considered above. Of course we can think that the stick-drawing is shown

²⁰³ Hyman (2006, p. 134).

on a white *background*, but this would not improve our understanding of the pictorial content of the picture, therefore we do not have a good reason to attribute a background to the picture. The same is true of the Jane Austen silhouette. In the case of the shadow on the wall, instead, it is relevant for our understanding of the pictorial content that we understand it as the representation of a three-dimensional object, i.e. a wall.

To sum up, we have seen that tying PR to the presence of the emergence/recession dynamics is not a good strategy, because there are PRs that do not make use of this dynamics. It follows that we cannot exclude certain abstract pictures from the realm of PR on the ground that they lack an emergence/recession aspect. I claim, then, that Wollheim's account of abstract pictures is not satisfactory.

2. Clement Greenberg: abstract pictures and the figure/ground dynamics

Modernist Painters is the 1960 essay by American art critic and theoretician Clement Greenberg which is widely considered one of the most accomplished examples of modernist art criticism, because it identifies the defining character of modernist art and seeks to describe the logic of its development (the latter is a controversial attempt that is now widely rejected and which, at the same time, has granted to the essay much of its fame²⁰⁴).

²⁰⁴ For a recent and detailed analysis of Greenberg's work see Jones (2005). I agree with those who, like Jones, criticize Greenberg's attempt to trace the logic of development of modernism, but here I shall not concern myself with Greenberg's understanding (or misunderstanding) of the history of modern and contemporary art. What I am interested in is the fact that Greenberg had to provide a definition of pictorial art in order to articulate his thesis on modernist art, and that this definition allowed him to trace interesting links between traditional figurative art and abstract art. Greenberg provided a definition of what it is to be a picture, and on the basis of such definition argued that some abstract paintings are proper pictorial art. This is akin to my

With “modernist art” Greenberg refers to all those works of art which show a preoccupation with stressing what is peculiar of the art form they are exemplars of, especially as a reaction against the assimilation of art to entertainment – a conception that, according to Greenberg, became widespread with the Enlightenment ²⁰⁵. Greenberg’s definition, of course, presupposes that it is possible to identify one or more aspects that are peculiar to a certain art forms only. According to Greenberg, in the case of pictorial art the defining characters are “the flat surface, the shape of the support, the properties of pigment” ²⁰⁶. For the moment, I shall not concern myself with the doubts that the idea of identifying once and for all the defining character of a given art form might raise. I shall assume that Greenberg has a point here, and evaluate his claims without contesting this presupposition.

According to Greenberg, modernist pictorial art, broadly conceived, is all the pictorial art that stresses the flatness of the surface, as opposed to the pictorial art that concentrates on sculptural and illusionistic effects (the Venetians as opposed to Michelangelo, David as opposed to Fragonard, the Impressionists as opposed to *Salon* painters and so on) ²⁰⁷. There is, however, a narrower sense in which “modernism” designates the art that makes the stressing of the defining elements of its form *its main concern and very theme* ²⁰⁸. This is a tendency that strongly emerged with avant-garde art and was a dominant character of much XX century art. In *Modernist Painters* Greenberg seeks to explain what it is that makes also paintings that cannot intuitively be

concern in this chapter, and it is the reason why I have decided to examine Greenberg’s argument in a research otherwise dedicated to philosophical-analytical studies on the topic of depiction.

²⁰⁵ Greenberg (1960, p. 774).

²⁰⁶ Greenberg (1960, p. 775).

²⁰⁷ Greenberg (1960, p. 774).

²⁰⁸ Greenberg (1960, p. 775). Greenberg explores this topic also in *Avant-Garde and Kitsch* (1939) and *Towards a New Laocoon* (1940).

distinguished from decorative patterns, or from meaningless flat surfaces, belong to the realm of modernist pictorial art. In trying to elucidate where the boundary between pictorial and non-pictorial art is to be traced, then, Greenberg further refines his requirements. Here are Greenberg's remarks on "borderline" paintings:

Modernist painting in its latest phase . . . has abandoned in principle . . . the representation of the kind of space that recognisable, three-dimensional objects can inhabit . . . [However], The first mark made on a surface destroys its virtual flatness and the configuration of a Mondrian still suggests a kind of illusion of a third dimension. Only now it is a strictly pictorial, strictly optical third dimension ²⁰⁹.

It must be noted that a few lines below Greenberg qualifies the concept of "strictly optical third dimension" as the illusion (triggered by modernist paintings) of a space "into which one can only look, can travel through only with the eye" as opposed to the "illusion" triggered by traditional paintings, "an illusion of space into which one could imagine oneself walking" ²¹⁰. After this clarification, Greenberg's claim that Mondrian's paintings suggest "a kind of illusion of *a third dimension*" (my italics), might sound rather odd (see, for instance, fig. 21). If we cannot imagine ourselves walking in the space represented by a Mondrian, then there is no illusion of a third dimension, although there can be representation of a purely bi-dimensional space. Here we have reached a crossroads. If we do not want to reject Greenberg's proposal because of the inconsistency I have pointed out, then we need to settle for a charitable interpretation. There are two ways to be charitable towards

²⁰⁹ Greenberg (1960, pp. 775-777).

²¹⁰ Greenberg (1960, p. 777).

Greenberg: a) we may decide not to give relevance to his claim that Mondrian represents a space that can only be *looked at*, and to accept instead his claim that Mondrian gives us a different form of “illusion” of third dimension in his paintings; b) we may decide not to give relevance to Greenberg’s claim that Mondrian’s is an “illusion” of the third dimension, and to stress instead his claim that the space depicted by Mondrian is purely optical. The former reading has been suggested by Jason Gaiger in a recent publication²¹¹. In what follows I shall illustrate Gaiger’s reading and argue that there are reasons to be sceptical towards his interpretive proposal. Then, I shall explore the latter reading, and argue that, if we do not have compelling reasons to reject Gaiger’s interpretation of Greenberg, we nevertheless are not in the position to decide which of the two readings we should endorse. I shall then explain why I believe such remarks are relevant to the present investigation.

Gaiger’s interpretation is grounded in the analysis of another of Greenberg’s essays, published in 1958: *The Pasted Paper Revolution*. Here Greenberg concentrates on the contribution that the introduction of collage in the synthetic phase of cubism brings to the definition of modernist pictorial art (see, for instance, fig. 22). Greenberg argues:

The strips, the lettering, the charcoaled lines and the white paper begin to change places in depth with one another, and a process is set up in which every part of the picture takes its turn at occupying every plane, whether real or imagined, in it. The imaginary planes are all parallel to one another; their effective connection lies in their common relation to the surface; wherever a form on one plane slants or extends into another it immediately springs forward. The flatness of the surface permeates the

²¹¹ Gaiger (2009, chap. 6).

illusion, and the illusion re-asserts itself in the flatness. The effect is to fuse the illusion with the picture plane without derogation of either – in principle ²¹².

Gaiger stresses how this passage allows to see that for Greenberg “the breakthrough of the collage technique lies not in the emphasis on surface pattern for its own sake – something that would be indistinguishable from a merely decorative design – but in the dynamic tension that is set up between the picture surface and the representation of depth . . . This new and powerful ‘fusion’ of the literal, physical surface of the picture with the depicted content simultaneously mobilizes and undermines what for Greenberg remains the one indispensable condition of pictorial representation – the establishment of a figure-ground relationship” ²¹³.

Gaiger stresses that for Greenberg the establishment of a figure-ground relationship is a necessary condition for a two-dimensional surface to be considered a picture. He argues that Greenberg “makes the working out of the relationship between the materiality of the picture surface and the representation of depth central to the development of modernist painting” ²¹⁴. That the representation of depth is central is Gaiger’s interpretation of Greenberg’s (1960) claim that “the first mark made on a surface destroys its virtual flatness and the configuration of a Mondrian still suggests a kind of illusion of a third dimension. Only now it is a strictly pictorial, strictly optical third dimension”, and of Greenberg’s (1958) passage I have quoted above, where Greenberg says that a “dynamic tension . . . is set up between the picture surface and the representation of depth”. According to Gaiger, Greenberg’s suggestion is very akin to Richard Wollheim’s idea of twofoldness as the

²¹² Greenberg (1958, p. 63).

defining character of pictures, because Greenberg stresses that it is crucial that the viewer be aware of a tension between the pictorial surface and the representation of depth²¹⁵.

I am sceptical towards this reading because I believe that, whereas, as we have seen above, we have good reasons to think that Wollheim's twofoldness concept applies to the dialectic between figure and *background* of a pictorial scene, we might interpret Greenberg's remarks as concerning the dialectic between "figure" (i.e. pictorial content) and *ground* of a picture (*qua* material object). Whereas the ground is a property of the material support of a picture, the background is a property that the representational content of a picture might or might not have. The background, in fact, is the background of the scene represented by a picture representing a three-dimensional scene. But, as we have seen in the previous section, a picture does not need to represent objects including a background²¹⁶. Under this reading, when Greenberg stresses that we need to distinguish between figure and ground in order for a surface to be a picture, he might be stressing that we need to consider the surface as hinting at something else by means of its visual properties, in order for it to be considered a picture, and that he is showing how cubist collages rely on this. However, this does not necessarily mean that Greenberg is claiming that all pictures, cubist collages and Mondrian's grid paintings included, need to set up a dialectic between figure and *background* in order to be considered pictures, and

²¹³ Gaiger (2009, p. 128).

²¹⁴ Gaiger (2009, p. 130).

²¹⁵ Gaiger (2008, p. 131).

²¹⁶ The distinction between a picture's depictive content and its ground is a distinction between an aspect of the picture *qua* three-dimensional object and an aspect of the picture *qua* image. Whereas the ground belongs to the picture *qua* object (the pictorial medium), the depicted content is the content of the image. We can always describe a picture as an object that has a flat side on which we see certain marks and/or colours, that is as having a side that works as a ground for an image, no matter the kind and quality of the marks and/or colours that are visible on such ground.

especially a dialectic of the kind described by Wollheim. Let us go back to Greenberg's words and apply to them the new reading I have sketched:

The strips, the lettering, the charcoaled lines and the white paper begin to change places in depth with one another, and a process is set up in which every part of the picture takes its turn at occupying every plane, whether real or imagined, in it . . . The flatness of the surface permeates the illusion, and the illusion re-asserts itself in the flatness. The effect is to fuse the illusion with the picture plane without derogation of either – in principle.

Greenberg says that the flatness of the surface “permeates the illusion”, that the two are fused together. What does this mean? “Illusion”, I believe, may refer to the dimension of the imagination a picture asks the viewer to enter, the pictorial scene a picture asks the viewer to picture herself. According to this reading, what is peculiar about the pictorial scene in Cubist collages is that it is purely two-dimensional (“the imaginary planes are all parallel to one another”). How would Cubist collages achieve the effect of representing a purely two-dimensional scene? Here, I believe, our understanding of Greenberg's use of the term “depth” is crucial. My suggestion is that what “changes places in depth” are the multiple layers applied on the surface of the collage, and not imagined forms in the pictorial scene. Greenberg, then, may be saying that the surface of the collage is multi-layered and therefore three-dimensional and, at the same time, he may be claiming that the surface of the collage is very democratic, in that “every part of the picture takes its turn at occupying every plane, whether real or imagined, in it”. As a consequence, he may be stressing that, despite its three-dimensional character, the surface of the painting does not establish any hierarchy of planes, and, therefore, it does not allow for

ascribing depth to the pictorial scene it depicts. The impossibility of establishing a hierarchy of planes on the pictorial surface would allow for the attribution of flatness, of two-dimensionality, to the pictorial scene²¹⁷.

The reading I have outlined supports interpretive hypothesis b), according to which, from Greenberg's remarks on Mondrian it can be deduced that Greenberg did not believe "late modernist paintings" to trigger an experience of depth in the viewer and/or to make the viewer think about a three-dimensional scene, since Greenberg characterized them as fostering the illusion of a purely optical space. According to this reading, then, Greenberg would allow for images that do not represent objects in the three-dimensional space to be considered pictures. The "purely optical third dimension" would be a dimension of the imagination: the picture would ask the viewer to imagine a space that can only be looked at, as if the three-dimensional had been reduced to the two-dimensional, instead of asking her to imagine a three-dimensional scene that she could describe in terms of her ordinary experience of the world. This reading is sustained by the observation that, in order to establish a figure/ground relation of the kind mentioned by Greenberg in his essay on collage, we only need to treat a suitable object as a picture, i.e. as a two-dimensional surface with marks and colours on it, and to regard such marks and colours as conveyors of pictorial meaning. This can be done in the case of

²¹⁷ A reading of Mondrian's grids that firmly stresses their flat character has been suggested by John Golding: "Mondrian made full use of the grids or scaffoldings of high Analytic Cubism, but put them to new ends, right from the start. He was not concerned with opening his subjects into the space around them and then in exploring the tactility, the palpability of this space; ... Mondrian wanted, on the contrary, to destroy the distinction between figure and ground, between matter and non-matter. The planes into which he dissolves the image and the space that surrounds it are invariably strictly frontal, and they reaffirm the flatness of the pictorial support. Although these planes hover and hang in front of and behind each other, they do not slide in and put of space as happens in contemporary canvases by Picasso and Braque. Similarly, lights and darks are not angled against each other to produce a sensation of volume and depth; and the blacks of Mondrian's scaffoldings already begin to read as dark elements in their own right" (Golding, 2000, p. 20).

collage, in the case of Mondrian, even in the case of a drip painting by Pollock, as I shall argue in chapter four. However, this does not imply that we have an experience of depth when looking at such paintings. The case of the recognition of a figure/background relation within a pictorial surface is different. If we identify a figure/background relation on a pictorial surface, this means that we have a good reason to describe the pictorial content of the picture in terms of a three-dimensional pictorial scene, to which we can attribute a background. In this case a sense of depth, or maybe an act of imagining depth, has to be taken into account.

The interpretive hypothesis I have sketched out is meant to illustrate that Greenberg's passages on Cubist collages and Mondrian's grids might be given a reading that would bring to conclusions incompatible with the ones Gaiger drives from them. I doubt that there is a way to settle the disagreement between Gaiger and me. What the introduction of an alternative explanatory hypothesis is supposed to stress is that we should be cautious in adopting a definitive reading of Greenberg on the question of where the distinction between pictorial and non-pictorial should be traced. The fact that Greenberg's remarks are difficult to interpret does not make them less interesting in the context of the present discussion: Greenberg shows us where to look at, although we may need to find elsewhere the arguments to decide how to interpret what he has made us turn our gaze towards.

3. Kendall Walton: imagination and self-reference in abstract pictures

In *Mimesis as Make-Believe* (1990), Walton argues that Kasimir Malevich's *Suprematist Painting* (1915, fig. 23) is a representational image, neither because it depicts recognizable figures (a rectangle, a trapezoid, etc.) nor because it elicits an experience of depth, but rather because "the painting is a prop; it makes it fictional in games of make-believe played by viewers that there is a yellow rectangle in front of a green one"²¹⁸. Being a prop in a game of make-believe, according to Walton's main thesis, is the key feature that explains how an object can be said to represent something.

Walton's general theory of fiction takes as its paradigm the phenomenon of substitution. The concept of a game of make-believe expresses the idea that what makes something a substitute is what we do with it and our cognitive stance towards it. The child playing hobby-horses is playing a game of make-believe with relatively simple rules. A broomstick is a horse, because it possesses certain features, and the rules of the game mandate players to imagine that anything with those features is a horse. The game makes it fictionally true that there is a horse and that anyone standing astride it is riding it. Having explained why fictions depend on make-believe, Walton goes on to argue that representations are fictions. Some games of make-believe, such as hobby-horses and mud pies, involve props. A prop in a game of make-believe is an object that, according to the rules of the game, prompts a particular imagining. The broomstick is a prop in the game of hobby-horses, because the game mandates that it be imagined to be a horse. Representations, including pictures of all kinds, are objects that have been designed specifically to serve as

²¹⁸ Walton (1990, p. 56).

props in highly specialized, complex games of make-believe. These games consist in rules which – in the case of pictures – ask viewers to imagine certain propositions: according to Walton that is precisely what we do when we grasp a picture’s meaning or enjoy a work of literature. *Suprematist Painting*, then, is a picture in that it dictates imaginings to the viewer according to pictorial rules of make-believe. How so?

[When looking at Malevich’s *Suprematist Painting*] we “see”, in the upper part of the canvas, a diagonally positioned yellow rectangular shape in front of a horizontal green line (or elongated rectangle), and that in turn in front of a large black trapezoid oriented on the opposite diagonal. This is how we see the painting, not how it is. Actually the yellow, green, and black are all on (virtually) the same plane; there are not one but two horizontal green shapes, separated by a corner of the yellow rectangle; and the black is not a trapezoid but a complex shape surrounding an assortment of rectangular areas. To see the painting this way is, in part, to imagine (nondeliberately) a yellow rectangle in front of an elongated green one, and so on. And this is how the painting is supposed to be seen; imagining the yellow in front of the green is prescribed by virtue of actual features of the canvas. . . . But if *Suprematist Painting* is representational, there will be few if any paintings that are not. Any “nonfigurative” or “non-objective” painting that is to be seen in some figure-ground configuration will qualify. So, probably, will any design making use of what Gestalt psychologists call *closure*: such a design will mandate our imagining a square, for example, when it contains only hints of one. Jackson Pollock’s dripped and splashed paintings may turn out to generate fictional truths about drippings and splashings . . . I do not find these conclusions distressing. They underscore easily overlooked but important similarities which supposedly “non-objective” works do indeed bear to obviously representational ones ²¹⁹.

²¹⁹ Walton (1990, p. 55).

Walton claims that, although the canvas is obviously flat, the specific characters of the marks on it determine a figure/ground configuration that dictates the viewer to imagine certain elements of the picture as being in front of certain others. The painting, then, prescribes us to imagine that its elements are situated in a three-dimensional space. The painting is, in Walton's jargon, capable to be used as a prop in a game of make-believe.

According to Walton, if there is some figure/ground dialectic on a pictorial surface, then we are asked to imagine that the elements on the surface of the picture inhabit a three-dimensional space, and this act of imagining signals that we are looking at a pictorial representation. Is "ground" here to be considered the ground of the picture *qua* object or the background of the pictorial scene? From Walton's comments on Malevich, one could infer that Walton identifies "ground" with "background". But what about Walton's Pollock example (consider, for instance, fig. 24)? It is not clearly understandable what Walton has in mind here, because Pollock's paintings can hardly be understood in terms of a figure/background dynamics. However, I believe that my above discussion of Wollheim and Greenberg provides counterexamples that undermine whichever view Walton might be suggesting we take on Pollock. If he were pointing out that we need a figure/background distinction in order to imagine a pictorial scene, we could reply that in the case of the stick drawing or the silhouette I have considered above we do not have any such distinction, although we are happy to say that when we look at the stick-drawing and at the silhouette we are looking at a PR. If Walton were pointing out that we need to think of a figure/ground distinction to grasp Pollock's drip paintings then we might concede this point, but Walton would have to admit that we can trace the same distinction for all paintings, included flat, uniform canvases, because the

figure/ground distinction concerns the pictorial content of a picture and its material support. Therefore, Walton would not have provided a criterion for excluding at least certain abstract pictures from the domain of pictorial representation. I am persuaded that Walton would not be willing to accept such consequence, because otherwise it would be difficult to understand why he insists on the importance of effects such as closure, or overlap of pictorial plans – effects that are by no means displayed by all abstract pictures – in order for the pictorial representational imagining activity to succeed. Walton, however, does not bring this argument any further, and – as far as I know – his writings leave my question unanswered.

There is a more general criticism against Walton's view which is widely accepted and that, as I shall argue, is also relevant in order to frame Walton's considerations on abstract pictures appropriately. It has been claimed that if Walton manages to give an account of what it means to use pictures as props in games of make-believe in his book, he is however not at all clear about what should be distinctively *pictorial* about such use. He might have given an account of pictorial imagination, but he has not given an account of PR. Dominic Lopes claims that Walton makes sense of the fact that pictures can be used to represent in many ways (i.e. they can serve as props in a variety of imaginative games), while he is not concerned with what it is that explains when a picture depicts, i.e. pictorially represents. Lopes observes that cases of imagining dictated by pictures to the viewer who is looking at them significantly differ from paradigm cases of imaginative substitution, where imaginings are much more vivid and articulated ²²⁰. Malcom Budd made similar remarks, noticing that Walton "ties the spectator's awareness of what is

²²⁰ Lopes (1996, pp. 88-92).

depicted too loosely to the character of the picture surface, and...it does not capture the experiential nature of the awareness of what is depicted”²²¹. I shall quote again from Walton, because I think the following passage may cast further light on this very point, as I shall try to explain in my commentaries.

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. This distinguishes *Suprematist Painting* from *La Grande Jatte* [a pointillist figurative painting by George Seurat] and aligns it with dolls and sculptures. We are not to imagine anything of *La Grande Jatte* or its parts, but we are to imagine of a doll that it is a baby and (I presume) of a bronze bust of Napoleon that it is (part of) Napoleon. But in each of the latter two cases the object of our imaginings is imagined to be something very different from what it is, something which (arguably) it *necessarily* is not. A moulded piece of plastic, for example, is imagined to be a flesh-and-blood baby. The yellow rectangle in *Suprematist Painting*, however, is imagined to be what it is: a yellow rectangle. It is also imagined to be related to other things in ways in which it isn't actually – to be in front of a horizontal green rectangle, for instance . . . figurative paintings ‘point beyond’ themselves in a way that *Suprematist Painting* does not. *La 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 the canvas; *Suprematist Painting* calls merely for imaginative rearrangement of the marks on its surface²²².

Walton here argues that there is a difference between the sort of thing we are required to imagine about abstract pictures and the sort of thing we are required to imagine about figurative pictures, no matter the fact that we can call certain abstract pictures “representational”. The difference is that, whereas a

²²¹ Budd (1992, p. 275).

painting like *La Grande Jatte* induces and prescribes imaginings about things external to the canvas, a painting like Malevich's, or one of Pollock's drip paintings, only prescribes imaginings about parts of the work itself. The problem, again, is that we don't know much about how we are supposed to understand those imaginings. Is there anything distinctively pictorial about them? According to Walton, the element of pictoriality is given by the fact that it is the marks on the pictorial surface that trigger imagination, giving shape to its contents. Moreover, in the case of figurative paintings, appropriate imaginings are the ones taking place in make-believe contexts, where a fictional scene is built up thanks to pictorial props. This view might be plausible. However, it is not uncontroversial that it can be extended to non-figurative pictures. In the case of non-figurative pictures the rules of the game of make-believe seem to be much less clear, since unambiguous links to real scenes and objects are generally and deliberately avoided. On the basis of what can Walton claim that abstract paintings dictate imaginings about their own elements? And even if we were to accept this thesis, is it possible to demonstrate that such imaginings are distinctively pictorial, in a way that consistently links them to the imaginings related to the experience of figurative pictures? I could not find answers to my questions in Walton's writings.

To sum up, I have underlined some difficulties in interpreting the passages that Walton dedicates to abstract painting. On the more charitable interpretation, it seems that for Walton it is because we can trace a distinction between the foreground and the ground or background of a picture that we can make pictorial props work in pictorial games of make-believe, and it seems that this distinction can be traced also for certain abstract pictures. As for the

²²² Walton (1990, pp. 58-59).

character of the games of make-believe, Walton's suggestion is that they are about objects external to the painting (be they real or fictional) in figurative pictures and about the elements of the painting itself in the case of abstract pictures. The last one is a claim that, as it shall emerge in the next section, Walton shares with Lambert Wiesing and to which I shall come back in chapter four.

4. Lambert Wiesing and the epistemological difference of abstract pictures

Analytical literature on pictorial representation mostly looks at the philosophy of language and mind for inspiration. There are also theories of images and representation that emerge from different philosophical traditions, though. Phenomenology, in particular, provides a number of accounts, among which the best known is probably Merleau-Ponty's²²³. Here I shall consider some arguments from Lambert Wiesing's *Die Sichtbarkeit des Bildes*, another work in the phenomenological tradition, which, tracing back to Merleau-Ponty, puts forward some arguments that are especially pertinent to my discussion.

Wiesing's central claim is that the distinctive character of pictures is the pure visibility of their content (*reiner Sichtbarkeit*): pictures make it visible what can only be seen, since pictorial subjects lack any other character experiential objects have²²⁴. Pictures, in other words, purify their subjects from all their qualities, except visible qualities. This, however, seems hardly to apply to abstract pictures. Since they do not imitate any visible reality, abstract pictures do not seem to have an object of experience to operate a reduction

²²³ Merleau-Ponty (1964 and 1968).

from (this, at least, is true of those abstract pictures that are not abstracted from any visible subject). It can therefore be doubted whether abstract pictures are at all pictures. Facing this problem, Wiesing looks at some of Merleau-Ponty's remarks on abstract art, especially at the claim that abstract pictures can be considered as a form of phenomenological reduction operated with the means of painting, i.e. the result of a transcendental enquiry into the conditions of possibility of an image²²⁵. Abstract pictures do not just abstract from visible qualities of representational objects, rather, they abstract from the objects themselves, which is why they acquire transcendental character. Why, then, should we call them pictures? Merleau-Ponty suggests – although in quite obscure metaphoric terms – that two kinds of considerations allow for considering abstract pictures as pictures. First, in abstracting from pictorial objects, an abstract picture retains the *infrastructure* that makes a picture possible²²⁶. However, such an infrastructure is not to be regarded as *mere* infrastructure, as Merleau-Ponty's second point seeks to explain, if we follow the reading suggested by Wiesing²²⁷. Namely, for an abstract picture to be a picture, it is crucial that, in showing the means of the practice of painting, the picture acquires a subject. And, for an abstract picture, the subject happens to be pictorial infrastructure itself. To sum up, according to Wiesing, non-abstract pictures reduce qualities of represented objects to mere visible qualities. Merleau-Ponty goes a step further, arguing that abstract pictures operate at a higher level of reduction, which leaves a picture deprived of any representational object whatsoever, making it into the bare recipient of a

²²⁴ Wiesing (2008, pp. 154-167)

²²⁵ Wiesing (2008, pp. 228-235); Wiesing quotes Merleau-Ponty on this point: "*De quoi meme l'art abstrait parle-t-il, sinon d'une certaine maniere de nier ou de refuser le monde?*" (1997, p. 89).

pictorial infrastructure, i.e. visible qualities that are not attributable to any object other than the picture itself. Such an infrastructure, however, is not just present, but it is *exhibited* and constitutes therefore a new kind of pictorial content.

According to Wiesing, following Merleau Ponty it can be said that an abstract picture is to be considered a picture for reasons that are *genetic* in character, since it shows forms that can also be used to make a picture that has a non-abstract object²²⁸. Abstract pictures, in other words, make visible what, with Frege, we would call the “how” of pictures, without transforming the “how” into a “what”. This fact differentiates them from those pictures that have an object and are about images (e.g. Velasquez’ *Las Meninas*, that depicts a canvas, a mirror, and the reflection of the canvas on the mirror). The point about abstract pictures is that they do not have any object, in the sense of a representational subject other than the pictorial surface itself. They only have *Sinn*. *Sinn* is what they thematize, a content that should not be understood with reference to any object external to the picture. This also means that abstract pictures are intrinsically a *parasitic phenomenon*, because they depend on pictures that have an object in order to be understood as pictures²²⁹. It is because they abstract from what we know to be the objects of non-abstract pictures that we can understand how abstract pictures happen to exhibit pictorial infrastructure itself as their content. This is a logical distinction: while we can think about abstract pictures only if we have the concept of pictures with an object, we can think about pictures with an object independently on

²²⁶ According to Wiesing, to express this concept Merleau-Ponty uses a metaphor: “*le peintre jette les poissons et garde le filet*” (1997, p. 66).

²²⁷ See Merleau-Ponty (1997, p. 67).

²²⁸ Wiesing (2008, p. 231).

²²⁹ Wiesing (2008, p. 233).

having an understanding of abstract pictures. It is the logic of production of abstract pictures that explains their epistemology.

Wiesing compares abstract pictures to the imitative formulae used by actors to practice pronunciation rules, such as “rhubarb rhubarb”²³⁰. In the context of a theatrical exercise “rhubarb rhubarb” does not designate a vegetable, it does not mean what it says, but it is rather a depiction of the language. It does not have a “what” (a referent), but it shows the “how” of certain words, namely the ones where the sounds composing “rhubarb” appear. “Rhubarb” looks like a word because it has maintained the aspect of a word although it has lost reference. Similarly, according to Wiesing, abstract paintings look like pictures because they have maintained the “infrastructure” of pictures, i.e. they are composed of marks and colours on a two-dimensional surface.

I disagree with Wiesing on the abstract picture/“rhubarb rhubarb” expression analogy, in that I believe there is no proper analogy between the two concepts. Namely, while, in the case of “rhubarb”, we can imagine a “coming back” of the word to a referential dimension, we cannot do anything of the like when we are dealing with abstract pictures. In this case there is no way we can bring the painting back to figuration without altering its structure, and while changing only contextual conditions. Therefore, it does not seem correct to treat pictorial infrastructure (the equivalent of “rhubarb rhubarb”) as if it could refer or not refer to something other than itself, depending on context. If we settle for the view that an abstract painting is, like “rhubarb rhubarb” in the pronunciation exercise, deprived of reference, we cannot think of a case where we can bring back a subject to the abstract painting, whereas we can think of a case when we go back to using “rhubarb” with its referential

²³⁰ Wiesing (2008, p. 253).

meaning. If pictorial infrastructure is to be considered the pictorial content of abstract pictures, then, this must be for reasons other from the taking place of a self-referential exercise of the “rhubarb rhubarb” kind. These remarks, of course, are not enough to reject Wiesing’s view on abstract pictures, but they point out that there might be a misleading aspect in the analogy between pictorial reference and linguistic reference. Wiesing’s is an account that is very respectful of the idea that PR should be understood in analogy with linguistic representation, within a referential paradigm. According to Wiesing, namely, a picture’s pictorial content is the object/scene it makes reference to, and an abstract picture is a picture that takes itself as its pictorial content, i.e. it is self-referential. From the argument I have put forward in chapter two it should be clear that I believe there are reasons to be sceptical towards an account that construes PR in analogy with linguistic reference. I do not wish to attack Wiesing on this ground, however. Rather, I am interested in stressing two more points, which shall find more detailed discussion in chapter four.

First, it is relevant for the current investigation that, of the four accounts considered so far, Wiesing’s is the only one that undoubtedly does not suggest that the representation of depth should be the requirement that an image should satisfy in order to be a PR. This, as we shall see, is a character that my own proposal on abstract pictures shares with Wiesing’s. Second, I believe Walton and Wiesing make some similar claims about abstract painting: according to Wiesing, abstract pictures are pictures because they are meditations on their own constitutive elements. According to Walton, abstract painting that is pictorial representation is abstract painting that dictates imaginings about the elements of painting itself. I shall comment more extensively on this point in

chapter four, with reference to Clement Greenberg's modernist paradigm for the understanding of abstract painting.

Chapter Four

Abstract Pictures and Pictorial Representation: A Proposal

1. Content, embodiment, and PR

In this section I shall introduce the main elements of the explanatory proposal that is put forward in this chapter, which concerns the criteria for the attribution of PR-character to abstract pictures. In chapter three I have distinguished between two binomials: on the one hand, figure and background of a pictorial scene depicted by a picture; on the other hand, pictorial content and ground of a picture *qua* material object. I have argued, *contra* Wollheim, that we should not endorse the view that the distinction between figure and background is *crucial* for an understanding of PR. I believe, instead, that the distinction between pictorial content and ground is *relevant* for an understanding of PR. When we distinguish between pictorial content and ground on a certain two-dimensional surface, there are two claims we imply: first, that we have at least one good reason to consider the two-dimensional surface a PR, otherwise we would not attribute *pictorial content* to it; second, but – from a logical point of view – prior to the first claim, that we have a good reason to consider the two-dimensional surface a representation, otherwise we would not consider it a *pictorial* representation. Whichever our understanding of PR, we have intuitive reasons to attribute pictorial content to figurative pictures, because their representational nature is evident to us: we are prompted to describe them in terms of something else, something that they depict.

Things, however, are more complicated in the case of abstract pictures, because we do not have intuitive reasons to attribute pictorial content to them. Are there good reasons attribute pictorial content to (at least certain) abstract pictures, i.e. to consider them PRs?

Pictures are representational by definition, they are two-dimensional surfaces used to hint at something else. The first distinction to be traced when considering abstract pictures, then, is that between proper abstract pictures, which represent, and abstract patterns, which do not represent. An abstract pattern (for instance the geometrical pattern on a rug) is not a picture because it is not used to hint at something else, in any way (pictorial or not) ²³¹. When I use the term “abstract picture” (or “abstract image”), then, I do not refer to abstract patterns of which we do not have any reason to think that they are used to hint at something else. However, images can represent in ways other than the specifically pictorial one (they can, in Peirce’s jargon, be indexes, or symbols). As we have seen in chapter three, Richard Wollheim (followed by Kendall Walton) and – according to Jason Gaiger’s reading – Clement Greenberg, argued that depictive content should be attributed to those abstract images which allow for a distinction to be traced between a figure on the foreground and a background, both conceived as elements of a pictorial scene that is represented. Against this view, I have argued that this is not a compelling description of what constitutes the essential character of the pictorial content of a PR, since there are PRs that do not allow for a distinction between figure and background of the pictorial scene: they do not allow for the

²³¹ Of course we can think of a situation in which we could use the object-rug to symbolise something else, but this would not turn the rug into a picture, provided that the visual aspect of its geometrical pattern were not relevant to the understanding of the symbolism.

identification of a background, although we are happy to attribute pictorial content to them.

In chapter two I have illustrated John Hyman's proposal, according to which the pictorial content of a PR consists in basic resemblance aspects (occlusion shape, occlusion size, and aperture colour). This proposal does not entail that we should be able to trace a distinction between figure and background in order to claim that a picture is a PR. Now, if we turn to abstract images, it is clear that all of them can be said to share visual properties with objects in the world and that such properties are captured by Hyman's basic resemblance aspects. This, of course, does not provide a sufficient reason to consider all of them PRs. It is context that decides of the pictorial character of a surface, whereas it is basic resemblance properties that provide the best objective description of the basic pictorial content of the PR. After all, every two-dimensional surface in the world can be considered as sharing basic resemblance aspects with other objects in the world, but we do not consider every two-dimensional surface a PR, neither we consider every two-dimensional surface a representation. In this section I shall explain why I believe we can find a good reason to consider an abstract picture a PR, no matter its showing a figure and background dialectic or not. In order to ground my proposal, I shall refer to a well-known conception of art objects, articulated by Arthur Danto.

In *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (1981) and, more recently, in another essay, Danto claims that in order to be an artwork an object must have two properties: content and embodiment²³². With "content" Danto means *intentional* content: unlike lamps, roads, or ice-creams, artworks are *about* things. Danto's second condition for a work of art to be a work of art is

²³² Arthur Danto (1981 and 2000).

embodiment, which can be better understood in contrast with other notions of art. For instance, according to Hegel, art is intrinsically symbolic: its content is external to rather than embodied by the art-object. Or, according to Croce, art is ultimately a mental state or event, one that can be expressed or embodied materially but need not be. By contrast, for Danto embodiment is an essential condition of an artwork, something without which an object (or event, or state of affairs) could not be a work of art. The embodiment condition enables one to distinguish among different kinds of artworks with the same contents. For example, it is conceivable that a painting and a piece of music could have the same content, e.g. that both could be about nothing. Without the embodiment condition, there would be no way of distinguishing them as different artworks. Moreover, the two conditions differentiate artworks from objects that are not artworks. Without the content condition, Danto would be unable to distinguish certain kinds of artworks from mere objects, e.g. Duchamp's *Fountain* from an identical-looking mundane urinal. And without the embodiment condition, Danto would be unable to distinguish artworks from mental states and mental states from artworks. According to Danto, what is peculiar about works of art is that they are not transparent representational media: in other words, the art-medium is relevant for characterizing the content it conveys. This is what the embodiment condition seeks to express. Danto's famous example is Warhol's *Brillo Box*, which differs from the Brillo boxes on the supermarket shelves because its appealing and joyful look, which recalls the colours of the American flag, allows Warhol to use it to embody a certain content: namely, to ironically allude to the American dream. On the contrary, the Brillo boxes on the shelves do not allude to anything, do not represent anything, do not embody any content.

Before explaining how Danto's conception of art can be linked to my argument I shall need to make two clarifications. First, it could be observed that Danto's conditions are conditions for an object (or event, or state of affairs) to be a work of art, whereas I am concerned with the distinction between images that are PRs and images that are not, independently on their belonging or not to the realm of art. So it may not be clear how Danto's discourse should be linked to mine. My reply to this observation is that it is an empirical truth that abstract images (not mere abstract patterns, but objects to which a representational character is attributed) are art, or at least that they are produced as candidates for artistic appreciation. This is because there is no pragmatics of abstract images outside the domain of art and/or of candidates for artistic appreciation. Therefore, it is legitimate to think that Danto's claims about art may illuminate an aspect of abstract images. Moreover, even if Danto might not have provided sufficient conditions for an object to be a work of art, we only need him to have provided necessary conditions for the sake of this argument. I am confident that content and embodiment provide at least necessary conditions for an object to be an artwork. Therefore, if we say a) that an abstract image is art and b) that art is characterized by content and embodiment, we can conclude that an abstract image is characterized by content and embodiment.

We usually consider abstract images art (no matter if good or bad art), or candidates for artistic appreciation. But should we consider them PRs? If we follow Danto, we can see that, if abstract pictures are art, then they have intentional content. Moreover, they must embody such content in specific ways. This is, I believe, the argumentative passage where Danto allows us to hypothesize that it might be correct to attribute pictorial content (understood in

terms of basic resemblance properties) also to *certain* abstract images that are not characterized by a figure/background dialectics²³³. The following are the main elements of the hypothesis I shall try to articulate and defend in this chapter. (1) Pictorial content is what Danto would call the “intentional content” of PRs, and it is embodied in a distinctively pictorial way, i.e. in terms of basic resemblance aspects. (2) Distinguishing between pictorial content and ground amounts to indicating the intentional content of a PR; (3) We can attribute pictorial content to an abstract image, provided that we have a good reason to claim that (at least part of) the intentional content of the abstract image is embodied in a way that is distinctively pictorial. (4) We can deem PRs all those abstract images that allow for this kind of attribution. (5) This argument cannot be generalized to all abstract images, because it depends on there being a good reason to consider their representational character as distinctively pictorial.

2. PR: the case for abstract pictures

John Hyman’s basic resemblance theory of PR concerns “basic representation”²³⁴, i.e. the pictorial representation of aspects of objects that constitutes the basis for depiction. Hyman observes that “the fact that the resemblances we tend to be struck by when looking at pictures are only perceptible once we have already perceived what they depict does not imply that these are the only resemblances that exist”, and that “if the pictorial content of a design can be explained by resemblances in form and colour between parts of the surface and the objects they depict, it does not follow that

²³³ Danto does not need to endorse the view I suggest, because he claims that abstract images have content, but he does not offer an argument to determine whether, at least for certain abstracts, this content is distinctively pictorial.

we should expect these resemblances to strike us”²³⁵. In Velasquez’ *Las Hilanderas* (fig. 8) it is the resemblance between the depicted wheel and a spinning wheel that strikes us, but the wheel is not spinning and the basic pictorial content of the part of the picture that depicts the wheel (i.e. its basic resemblance properties) is not something to which, *as such*, we pay much attention (and this is crucial for the painting to succeed, otherwise we would not see the wheel as spinning). It follows that Hyman’s theory can be interpreted as implying a distinction between two kinds of visual features: 1) “basic resemblance features”, constituting the basic pictorial content of pictures and 2) “attributed visual features”, i.e. the visual features that, in the case of a figurative picture, we attribute to the object we find it natural to say the picture depicts (in the case of Velasquez’ wheel, the visual features of a spinning wheel). Hyman claims that “the painter is solely concerned with representing what can be seen or what can be represented by representing what can be seen”²³⁶. My reading is that “what can be seen” is basic pictorial content, whereas *part* of “what can be represented by representing what can be seen” are “attributed visual features” (“what can be represented by representing what can be seen” are also things that do not have a specifically visual character, such as emotions, metaphors, etc.). Hyman does not claim that in order for a picture to be a PR we need to ascribe to it both kinds of visual features. According to Hyman, 1) is necessary for PR to obtain, while 2) is not. A picture can depict material objects, visible objects (e.g. the sky), unfamiliar kinds of objects: “at the limit, we may be forced to describe it more or less purely in terms of colour and form – for example, as grayish-pink and yellow and shaped like a piece of

²³⁴ Hyman (2006, p. 64).

²³⁵ Hyman (2006, pp. 67-68).

²³⁶ Hyman (2006, p. 63).

molten wax”²³⁷. It is meditation on this point that originally inspired my proposal.

I claim that there is no need for us to limit the basic resemblance account to figurative pictures only. The resemblance theory concerns basic visual representation through bi-dimensional supports: abstract and figurative pictures, then, can both be said to be representational, because both of them present basic representational content, i.e. basic resemblance features. At least certain abstract pictures can be said to share basic resemblances with objects in the world they do not *portray* (where “to portray *X*” is a way to represent it *by means of representing what can be seen* on a pictorial surface).

It is crucial to notice that the fact that a two-dimensional marked and coloured surface basically resembles a number of objects in occlusion shape and size and aperture colour is not a *sufficient* condition for PR or for representation to obtain. We need to have *good reasons* for considering a two-dimensional surface a representation, and for considering it a *pictorial* representation. First, there has to be a reason to use the surface to hint at something else. However, representing something by means of a two-dimensional surface does not by itself guarantee that the two-dimensional surface should count as a picture. We could use a two-dimensional surface to represent something in a completely conventional way and the marks and colours on the surface would not make any difference to what we would represent with it. For instance, I could use the pictures hanging in my bedroom to represent the main cities of Veneto, assigning to each of them a perfectly conventional meaning. The picture representing Venice would not even need be the representation of a city in order to represent Venice. The two-

²³⁷ Hyman (2006, p. 64).

dimensional surface itself would not have to be a picture in this example. Also a blank piece of paper hanging on the wall of my room could do the job.

On the contrary, when we say that a two-dimensional surface is a PR, then we are assuming that its pictorial features matter to what it represents. However, also this refinement is not yet sufficient to understand when and why we treat an object as a PR, as a picture that pictorially represents. This is because a picture can represent in ways other than pictorially, thanks to its configurational features, e.g. it can metaphorically or synaesthetically represent something thanks to its colour. I believe that there is no perceptual feature of a two-dimensional representational surface that *by itself* is sufficient to determine whether the surface is a *pictorial* representation or not. The use we make of a given two-dimensional object is crucial for understanding it as a PR, contextual aspects have to be taken into account. Contextual aspects include e.g. the collocation of the two-dimensional object, its context and way of production, its title or lack thereof. However, that there are contextual elements does not mean that in order for an object to be a PR all that matters is context. What matters is context and the configuration of the surface, and this is what allows for distinguishing an abstract image that is used to represent something in a non-pictorial way from an abstract image that is used to represent in a pictorial way. Borrowing Danto's words, basic pictorial content is *embodied* by basic resemblance aspects in PRs. I believe the basic resemblance account put forward by Hyman has the resources to succeed in illuminating how this happens also in the case of abstract pictures. When we make a picture we have to deal with the ability of two-dimensional surfaces to hint at occlusion shapes and sizes and aperture colours of objects. Basic resemblance properties are features of the pictorial configuration of a two-dimensional surface that we are

extremely good at detecting and exploiting in order to hint at other objects. However, we can detect, explore and exploit basic resemblance features in ways that do not necessarily lead to figurative representation. In fact, we can also explore representational ambiguities through “abstract” pictures.

I shall try to clarify my proposal with two examples. First, I claim that Barnett Newman’s *Abraham* (1949, fig. 25) *pictorially represents* something because it basically resembles objects in the visual world in respects that are relevant for determining its embodied content. This leaves untouched the fact that it is not a *portrait* of Abraham, while we would call it a portrait of *Abraham* if it were a (successful) *figurative* representation of Abraham. In a nutshell, *Abraham* is a PR, but it is not a portrait of Abraham, although the fact that it is a PR is relevant to understand why it nevertheless *represents* Abraham. The reasons to deem *Abraham* a PR (i.e. to claim that the way it embodies its content is distinctively pictorial) should be understandable from critical analyses of the painting, for example the one provided by Yves-Alain Bois ²³⁸. Bois explains that Newman was keen on stressing the unique character of *Abraham*, the first painting to be painted totally and only in black and that, at the same time, is not a uniform black monochrome. Bois also elucidates how the sheer blackness of the painting relates to its title. Namely, there is a tragic character to the colour black that evokes tragic figures such as Abraham. Moreover, Abraham was the first patriarch, and Newman intended his painting to be the progenitor of a new generation of paintings. Finally, Abraham is portrayed in the Bible as the first iconoclast, so the title puts the content of the picture in relation to the gesture of the painter who has renounced to figuration. On the basis of these elements, we are certainly

²³⁸ Bois (2004).

allowed to say that *Abraham* is a representation. The black painting is meant to evoke certain aspects of the biblical figure of Abraham. But do we have any elements to claim that *Abraham* is a *pictorial representation*? After all, *Abraham* could be a black two-dimensional surface that is used to represent Abraham in a non-pictorial way. *Abraham*, however, is not just a two-dimensional surface, but it is a *painting*. It is a painting because it was Barnett Newman's intention that it belonged to the history of painting, as it is revealed by the stress the painter put on it being the first completely black painting in history. The fact that it is a painting gives relevance to its basic resemblance features, because basic resemblance features provide the raw matter for the uses we normally make of paintings as paintings, i.e. *they basically embody the content of paintings*. The visual aspects of *Abraham* relate to the painterly tradition in a way that makes us understand the reason why *Abraham* can count as a PR that represents Abraham, although it does not portray Abraham. The blackness of *Abraham* matters to its being a PR of some otherwise unidentified black object that is used to represent Abraham, although it cannot *portray* Abraham. That the picture has basic pictorial content matters to the representation of Abraham because we understand why the picture represents Abraham only if we understand that the picture is meant to count as a painting, and especially as the first black painting in history (a *painting* and not a mere monochrome surface) i.e. that it is meant to relate to the tradition of painting, a tradition where paintings are normally understood as PRs.

My second example concerns those abstract pictures that seem to allude to a certain object or kind of objects, although they do not secure identification of a depicted subject. I believe that there are abstract pictures that not only present basic visual resemblances to a certain set of heterogeneous objects, but

also are such that it makes sense to say that by means of basically resembling such objects they allude to a certain object or kind of objects which is part of the heterogeneous set. (This is what normally happens in the case of figurative representation; according to my theory, however, it is also true of some abstract pictures. The difference between the two cases is that whereas for figurative representation it is necessary that the subject is identified in order to have an appropriate understanding of the picture, in the case of abstract pictures it is interesting that the subject remains, so to speak, in disguise). An example, I believe, is provided by Mondrian's "tree series" (some paintings in the series are those in figs. 10-15). The "tree series" is a large group of paintings of trees that, departing from figurative representation, progressively reach more and more abstract levels of representation. In the case of the pictures where we easily see trees, we are able to do that because we distinguish the marks and colours making up the trees from the marks making up their surroundings (i.e. the marks depicting other elements in the depicted scene). In the case of the pictures where we do not see any tree, there are conflicting elements among the marks and colours on the pictorial surfaces, which prevent us from isolating tree figures from other elements in the pictorial scene, although we can make sense of the idea that such paintings may allude to trees. According to my proposal, in both cases it is true that the pictures basically pictorially represent those objects and scenes that are characterized by certain occlusion shapes, aperture colours, and relative occlusion sizes. That we say that the pictures belonging to the first group have an identifiable visual subject, i.e. a tree, while the pictures belonging to the second group don't, depends on the way pictorial conventions, traditions, and the psychology of vision co-operate to allow us to easily see a tree while looking at the pictures in the first group, so that for us it

is natural to describe them as tree-pictures, rather than as a pictures presenting such and such marks and colours on their surface.

In the next section I shall seek further to qualify my proposal with reference to Pollock's drip paintings and to Clement Greenberg's considerations on Pollock's art.

3. Decoration, painting, and PR

Clement Greenberg has arguably been the most influential American art critic during the 1950s and 60s and he is known for having canonized American abstract expressionism as the most relevant artistic movement in post-second World War times. Moreover, Greenberg sought to establish some guidelines for the production of new art, according to the principles he judged most appropriate to reflect crucial issues and aspects of his time and society²³⁹. Therefore, not only he provided an analysis of XX century art, but he also sought to influence its development from within. This is why, in examining his conceptions, attention must be paid in order to distinguish his claims about what he thought contemporary art to be from his claims about what he wished contemporary art to be like. As I have mentioned in chapter three, Greenberg argued that good contemporary art was the art that concentrated on what was proper of each art form only: especially on flatness, in the case of painting. Moreover, Greenberg thought that contemporary painting was developing towards a more and more definite assertion of its essential character, flatness, and that the logic of this development could be described. This is what Greenberg *wished* good contemporary pictorial art ("modernist" art) to be like.

²³⁹ See, for example, Greenberg (1960).

Greenberg's essentialist conception has attracted much criticism, and rightly so. His view, namely, implies that all contemporary painting that does not concentrate on flatness –and/or that stresses qualities that paintings share with other art forms – is not good contemporary pictorial art (it is not “modernist” art). This, obviously, is an extremely narrow way of conceiving of art, which is why Greenberg's theory has been widely criticized by art critics and historians from the 60s onwards. However, this does not mean that Greenberg's insights should be rejected overall. Jason Gaiger has interesting remarks on the relevance of Greenberg for an understanding of some forms of contemporary pictorial art ²⁴⁰. He observes that Greenberg's criticism qualifies as a re-thinking of the formalist view famously endorsed by Roger Fry and Clive Bell at the beginning of the XX century, according to which all artworks must be evaluated for their exploitation of the formal characters of their medium only, rather than for their representational, narrative and, in some cases, anecdotal qualities. Gaiger stresses that, while formalism doesn't offer a reliable strategy for art criticism overall, since it underestimates the value of representational issues in art and the complex interplay between formal and representational aspects of works of art, it nevertheless constitutes a powerful instrument to understand the main problems of those artists who definitely shared a preoccupation with formal aspects as a means to deploy in order to pursue a renewal of artistic practice. According to Gaiger, this is true especially of Greenberg's version of formalism, since he, *contra* Fry and Bell, is not committed to the hardly defensible claim that formal values are the central ones in the whole Western artistic tradition, while, on the contrary, he stresses the importance of form for XX century art only, and indicates specific

²⁴⁰ Gaiger (2008, pp. 124-131).

historical reasons for this. Greenberg, namely, argues that the preference accorded to formal values is the consequence of a reaction against the predominance of narrative values in most of XIX century art, which led to an underestimation of the specific qualities of pictorial art, such as two-dimensionality, pigmentation, and the form of the support. In a nutshell, although not all contemporary art is “modernist”, and, arguably, not all *good* contemporary art is “modernist”, for those works of art which gave much importance to formal values Greenberg’s criticism is likely to succeed in illuminating their relevant features.

I shall now look at Greenberg’s famous essay on *The Crisis of The Easel Picture* (1948), which I consider especially relevant for the purposes of the present investigation. Greenberg comments on the innovative tendency displayed by several influent American artists at the end of the 1940s, especially by Jackson Pollock ²⁴¹. The innovation, according to Greenberg, could be qualified as a rebellion against the easel picture, the traditional small/medium size support for paintings, a rebellion that eroded from the inside each one of the aspects of an image which could have possibly been related to the multi-faceted tradition of figurative painting.

The easel picture subordinates decorative to dramatic effect. It cuts the illusion of a box-like cavity into the wall behind it, and within this, as a unity, it organizes three-dimensional semblances. . . . [the] new tendency in painting . . . appears in the all-over, “decentralized”, “polyphonic” picture that relies on a surface knit together of identical or closely similar elements which repeat themselves without marked variation from one

²⁴¹ Greenberg (1948, pp. 154-157).

edge of the picture to the other. It is a kind of picture that dispenses, apparently, with beginning, middle, end ²⁴².

Greenberg describes Pollock's "all-over" abstract pictures as working against the "illusion" carefully prepared by their ancestor, the figurative easel picture, which looks like a box inserted in the wall behind it. "All-over" pictures look flat, instead, which is why they determine the "crisis of the easel painting", the traditional medium of pictorial art. In what exactly do Pollock's works differ from "late modernist paintings" such as Mondrian's, which, according to Greenberg – as we have seen in chapter three – are still linked to the tradition of the easel picture? Greenberg argues that there is a similarity between "post-easel images" (such as Pollock's drips) and Mondrian's grids and Cubist collages, in that they all exhibit a "lack of explicit oppositions" on their surfaces ²⁴³. However, "no matter how shallow the picture becomes, as long as its shapes are sufficiently differentiated in terms of light and dark, and kept in dramatic imbalance, it will remain an easel painting" ²⁴⁴. This, according to Greenberg, is what happens with Mondrian's grids and Cubist collages, while it is not true of Pollock's drip-paintings, where "every element and every area of the picture [is] equivalent in accent and emphasis" ²⁴⁵. In conclusion, Greenberg comments:

The very notion of uniformity is antiaesthetic. Yet many "all-over" pictures seem to succeed precisely by virtue of their uniformity, their sheer monotony. The dissolution of the pictorial into sheer texture, into apparently sheer sensation, into an accumulation of repetitions, seems to speak for and answer something profound in contemporary

²⁴² Greenberg (1948, pp. 154-155).

²⁴³ Greenberg (1948, p. 155).

²⁴⁴ Greenberg (1948, p. 155).

sensibility. . . . The “all-over” may answer the feeling that all hierarchical distinctions have been, literally, exhausted and invalidated; that no area or order of experience is intrinsically superior, on any final scale of values, to any other area or order of experience²⁴⁶.

Nevertheless, Greenberg’s judgement on the pictorial character of Pollock’s paintings is positive:

Though the “all-over” picture will, when successful, still hang dramatically on a wall, it comes very close to decoration – to the kind seen in wall paper patterns that can be repeated indefinitely – and insofar as the “all-over” picture remains an easel picture, which somehow it does, it infects the notion of the genre with a fatal ambiguity²⁴⁷.

This, I believe, is because Greenberg is persuaded that the “all-over” paintings manage to say something about contemporary world *in a painterly way*, i.e. that they allude, in a distinctively pictorial way that shows their link to the tradition of the easel picture, to themes such as the concept of relativity, the democratization of life and values, the repetition intrinsic to the mechanical means of production that are so characteristic of contemporary world. And what is distinctively pictorial about Pollock’s drips, according to Greenberg? It is, I take it, the fact that these paintings “accept” (almost tragically) the extreme consequence of the development of the modernist logic of painting, i.e. the reduction of painting to pure flatness. This is why Greenberg argues that Pollock’s paintings, instead of collapsing into decoration (i.e. into an art form different from the pictorial: the worst sin, according to Greenberg’s conception of modernism!), keep alive a dialectics between the decorative and

²⁴⁵ Greenberg (1948, p. 156).

the pictorial²⁴⁸. This reading, I believe, is confirmed by Greenberg's remarks on the conscious and controlled character of Pollock's pictorial production, in contrast with the characterization of it as instinctive, primitive art given by authors such as Harold Rosenberg²⁴⁹. Pollock constructed his works carefully, in the way painters construct paintings – Greenberg stresses – he did not merely perform acts on the canvas and/or did not produce his patterns while being “out of control”.

Although I agree with Greenberg on the characterization of Pollock's drips as paintings, I do not wish to share his argument for this claim. I believe the proposal I am seeking to sketch in this chapter may provide a better explanation of the pictorial character of Pollock's drips, an explanation that would not require us to commit to Greenberg's view on the logical development of modernist pictorial art. Before proceeding with the illustration of my proposal, I would like to make a further point concerning the interpretation of Greenberg's claims on Pollock. Coherently with his reading of

²⁴⁶ Greenberg (1948, p. 157).

²⁴⁷ Greenberg (1948, p. 155).

²⁴⁸ Charles Harrison holds a similar view on the borderline character of Pollock's paintings: “It is true that Pollock's paintings are terminal in this sense at least: they seem to deny the possibility of remaining within the technical boundaries of painting and of doing as much again. Or rather . . . what they seem to rule out is the possibility of sustaining the same intensity of intention *without at the same time incorporating the means of its deflation*. Standing in front of these paintings you immediately register the artist's fear of his own possible fraudulence and vulgarity; the fear that what he was making was mere decoration; that his drawing would not prove significantly caused; that the psychological content with which he invested his work would not be recoverable from its surface; that his paintings would prove lacking in cultural staying power, empty, absurd – as some of the last of them must unquestionably seem should the protection of his name be removed from them” (2001, p. 68).

²⁴⁹ Rosenberg (1952), see also section 4 below. John Golding agrees with Greenberg on this point: “In latter years Pollock was somewhat distressed when the automatic aspect of his work was over-emphasized at the expense of its formal properties, and certainly as each painting progressed his working methods seem to have become slower and more deliberate, and the gestures, the mark-making more conscious, the dripped accents more refined and more sparingly applied. The artist's method of working on the floor obviously allowed for greater control in the application of ribbons of wet, runny paint. It also did away with the associations implicit in the artist's first mark. Faced with a bare, upright canvas, a painter's first instinct is generally either to trace a horizontal, which immediately implies a horizon, or else a vertical, which on a large canvas invokes body imagery or a subliminal human presence” (2000, p. 137).

The Pasted Paper Revolution – which I have considered in chapter three – Jason Gaiger suggests that the reason why for Greenberg Pollock’s drips do not wholly qualify as easel paintings is that they do not represent or suggest a third dimension ²⁵⁰. This, according to Gaiger, is what their “all over”, quasi-decorative character amounts to. I agree on the fact that Pollock’s drips are conceived by Greenberg as not evoking a third dimension, since it can hardly be said that a drip painting “cuts the illusion of a box-like cavity into the wall behind it, and within this, as a unity, it organizes three-dimensional semblances”. However, as I have argued in chapter three, I believe that we do not have enough elements to decide whether the representation (or evocation) of depth really is what characterizes Mondrian’s grids and Cubist collages as opposed to Pollock’s drips and other “post-painterly abstractions”. Does my scepticism on this point amount to an incapability of understanding Greenberg’s claims on Pollock’s “all-over” paintings in *The Crisis of the Easel Painting*? I do not think so. As I have claimed in chapter three, we should not take it for granted that Greenberg’s concerns in analyzing abstract painting where so akin to the ones of the present investigation (and of Gaiger’s investigation, for that matter). That Greenberg indicated the features of modernist art does not turn his essays into an investigation on the character of PR, although there are relevant issues that his analysis shares with enquiries on the character of PR. However, this does not imply that Greenberg’s claim cannot be used to illuminate aspects of abstract pictures outside the context of his enquiry. This is the task I have set myself for the remaining part of this section.

²⁵⁰ Gaiger (2008, pp. 132-133).

According to Greenberg, there is an aspect “all-over” pictures share with decorations: the uniformity of their design, their “sheer monotony”. Greenberg says that notwithstanding this character “all-over” pictures should not be considered mere decorations. I believe that these claims illuminate why, within the explanatory framework I have put forward, we have good reasons to deem “all-over” pictures PRs. First, it must be noted that Greenberg does not claim that Pollock’s drips seek to symbolize something, to set up analogies with something, or to evoke something: he limits himself to stress that they have a monotonous visual character, and he implies that their visual monotony is significant for determining their representational content, because of his conception of the evolution of modernist painting towards more and more flat surfaces. The drip-paintings, as it were, pictorially mimic the “all-over” character of decoration, which is why they are *almost* decorations, but not quite so. One could say that these paintings are images that represent monotony and repetition thanks to their decorative character, but not in a pictorially representational way. My claim is that it matters that the drip-paintings are PRs, i.e. that it matters that we consider the marks on their surfaces as their basic pictorial content, because otherwise we could not see the element of extenuation in them, the fact that flatness and repetition is all these images are meant to leave *to painting*, since painting is an art that is traditionally conceived as relying on PR (since paintings are traditionally easel-pictures which represent three-dimensional pictorial scenes by means of basic resemblance aspects they bear to them: they “organize three-dimensional semblances”, in Greenberg’s jargon). It is important to notice that my claim does not need to come together with a theory according to which it was *necessary* that Pollock’s drips left only flatness to painting in order for them to

be proper modernist art. My view implies that it is for contextual reasons, and not for essentialist reasons connected to the development of modernist art (*contra* Greenberg), that we should consider Pollock's drip paintings as paintings, and therefore as PRs. The contextual reasons are given by the fact that these paintings pictorially embody a meditation on the boundaries between representation and absence thereof.

Greenberg observed that in the drip-paintings Pollock is struggling against the "easy" aspects of painting-making: he disagreed with those who claimed that Pollock's works were spontaneous and almost performance-like in character. More recently, Timothy Clark has claimed that Pollock's technique "disqualified certain kinds of painterly habits and know-how, or made them damn difficult; it put the painter literally out of reach of his skills, his 'touch', his distinctive handling. This was important because Pollock *was* skillful, perhaps even facile, and facility was the enemy"²⁵¹. Clark has also observed that figuration, the traditional mark of paintings, re-emerges in Pollock's cut-out paintings (see fig. 26), produced in the last phase of his career, and that the cut-outs should perform, as it were, the task of warning the viewer: " 'Likeness is easy,' says the hobby-horse head. 'It happens without us even meaning it.' ... 'To avoid likeness as you do is just *bravura*, the last kind that modern painting allows itself and as meretricious as all the rest" (see fig. 27)²⁵². I believe Clark's remarks may allow us better to understand the PR-character of the drip paintings. With the drip paintings and the cut-outs Pollock explores the limits of pictorial art and especially of the fact that it is part of our dealing with pictures that we describe them in terms of something else, since they are representations. He strives to make the description of the pictorial content of

²⁵¹ Clark (1990, p.189).

the picture in terms of something else *almost* unavailable with his drip-paintings, and later, by re-affirming figuration in the cut-outs, he acknowledges the inevitability of representation within an art that is meant to remain pictorial. Pollock famously claimed: “I am very representational some of the time and a little all of the time”²⁵³.

My last remarks in this section are dedicated to the relation between painting and decoration. I believe that my proposal can also illuminate some aspects of this topic. According to Greenberg and, more generally, to proponents of a modernist approach to the arts, tracing the boundary between painting and decoration is crucial for an understanding of pictorial art²⁵⁴. In other words, the moment pictorial arts starts being decorative it loses its status of art that is genuinely pictorial. I am not interested in embracing or rejecting this view here. However, I would like to stress the following point: the view I have sketched out does not imply that decorative character and PR-character can never go together. PR is a defining feature of images that are paintings, but the realm of PR is broader than the realm of paintings and it also encompasses some objects to which we attribute exquisitely decorative character. Such objects are those decorations that differ from purely abstract decorative patterns in that they display PR: embroidered roses on tablecloths, sewed leaves on curtains, and so on.

²⁵² Clark (1990, p. 218).

²⁵³ Selden Rodman, *Conversations with artists*, New York 1957 p. 82, quoted in Golding (2000, p. 140).

4. A (very limited) vindication of Ernst Gombrich on abstract painting

Ernst Gombrich earned his reputation as a detractor of abstract art, and especially of abstract painting, thanks to *The Tyranny of Abstract Art*, an article he published in 1958, and to several controversial remarks on modernist art, which are spread through his wide *oeuvre*²⁵⁵. In the 1958 article he first refers to the original wave of abstract art that swept across Europe at the beginning of the XX century. Gombrich explicitly mentions Piet Mondrian and Vasilij Kandinskij. However, he does not address any criticism towards those artists. Rather, he complains about the increasing fashion of abstraction in art after Second World War, a tendency he considers not to be animated by the frank research of a new kind of purity in art, typical of those first explorers of abstraction. He claims that, rather, such fashion is reducible to an “unthinking acceptance of mere taboos”, and to the unmotivated dismissal of figurative painting as a complacent practice lacking faithfulness to the aims of “pure” art²⁵⁶. A few years later, commenting on his article in the introduction to *Art and Illusion*, Gombrich argues that the reason why XX century art has often experienced a shift from the figurative to the abstract can be indicated only if the reasons of the predominance of figurative painting in Western art have been previously understood²⁵⁷. *Art and Illusion* is partly dedicated to the search for

²⁵⁴ On the same point see Harrison (1993, chap. 3) and Hamilton (2009).

²⁵⁵ Gombrich (1958). Other relevant remarks by Gombrich on abstract art can be found in the following publications: “Experimental Art” in 1949: pp. 429-463; “A Story Without End”, in 1949: pp. 465-502; *Art and Illusion* (1960: pp. 6-7; 23; 87; 140-141; 243); “Illusion and Visual Deadlock” in 1963: pp. 151-159; “The Use of Art for the Study of Symbols”, *American Psychologist*, 20 (1965); “The Dread of Corruption”, *The Listener* (15 February 1979); “The Priority of Pattern”, *The Listener* (1 March 1979); “The Tree of Knowledge”, *The Listener* (8 March 1979); *The Sense of Order* (1979); “Image and Word in Twentieth-Century Art”, *Word and Image* (1985, 1, pp. 213-241); “The Twentieth Century” in *The Preference for the Primitive* (London: Phaidon 2002).

²⁵⁶ Gombrich (1958, p. 146)

²⁵⁷ Gombrich writes: “That the discoveries and effects of representation which were the pride of earlier artists have become trivial today I would not deny for a moment. Yet I believe that

those last reasons. Gombrich's central thesis is that the history of figurative art in the West can be described as the history of a constant experimental search for new representational tools, in order to produce a specific kind of psychological experience in the viewer, the experience of interpreting pictorial marks as depicting objects. Producing figurative pictures, then, can by no means be reduced to copying from the visual world; rather, it is better described as the development of various psychological experiments where patterns of lines and colours happen to be interpreted as figures. Therefore, the art of making figurative pictures cannot be dismissed as the mere art of reproducing the three-dimensional world on a two-dimensional pictorial surface; on the contrary, its experimental nature makes it into the best instrument to understand how we tend to react when faced with whatsoever image. This is why figurative art proves to be an essential tool for every artist who wants to get a deeper understanding of how pictorial art works, "modernist" artists thereby included. According to Gombrich, it is at the same time essential for there to be PR and a requirement that most two-dimensional supports marked with signs and colours easily satisfy, that an image allows the viewer to identify a represented object or kind of object. This is a phenomenon, which encompasses the experience of the whole realm of figurative images, from naturalistic pictures to caricatures and cartoons. Gombrich – like other authors I have considered in my investigation – believes that the widely documented fact that we easily recognize figures in patterns of lines and colours on a two-dimensional surface is crucial for explaining what it is to

we are in real danger of losing contact with the great masters of the past if we accept the fashionable doctrine that such matter never has anything to do with art. The very reason why the representation of nature can now be looked upon as something commonplace should be of the greatest interest to the historian" (1960, pp. 6-7).

produce and to experience a picture, and for defining what a PR is. This is why he harshly criticizes those artists engaged in the production of abstract images who seem to avoid taking into consideration this crucial fact about pictures.

Here, I shall consider Gombrich's understanding of abstract images, independently from the acceptance or the rejection of his theory of PR. I have already rejected his view in chapter one, but this does not make Gombrich's remarks on abstract painting less interesting. More precisely, as we shall see, I do not wish to endorse Gombrich's view on abstract painting, although I believe there is an element in it that is sound and that can cast some more light on my proposal. Gombrich's view on abstract images can be better grasped from the following passage:

In cubism even coherent forms are made to play hide-and-seek in the elusive tangle of unresolved ambiguities.

It is important to distinguish these contradictions from non-figurative art. . . . [Unlike in cubist painting, in abstract art] There is no possible test by which we can decide which reading to adopt. . . . The function of representational clues in cubist paintings is not to inform us about guitars and apples, nor to stimulate our tactile sensations. It is to narrow down the range of possible interpretations till we are forced to accept the flat pattern with all its tensions.

Even non-objective art derives some of its meaning and effects from the habits and mental sets we acquired in learning to read representations. Indeed, we have seen that any three-dimensional shape on the canvas would be illegible or, which is the same, infinitely ambiguous without some assumptions of probabilities that we must bring to it and test against it.

The painter who wants to wean us from these assumptions has perhaps only one way open to him. He must try to prevent us from interpreting his marks on the canvas as representations of any kind by compelling us to . . . read his brushmarks as traces of his gestures and actions. This, I take it, is what the "action painter" aims at. He wants to

achieve an identification of the beholder with his Platonic frenzy of creation, or rather with his creation of a Platonic frenzy. It is quite consistent that these painters must counteract all semblance of familiar objects or even of patterns in space. But few of them appear to realize that they can drive into the desired identification only those who know how to apply the various traditional consistency tests and thereby discover the absence of any meaning except the highly ambiguous meaning of traces²⁵⁸.

Two elements of Gombrich's passage are of particular interest to me. The first one is the claim that it proves very difficult to produce an image, which is not figurative at all. We generally tend to recognize figures on a two-dimensional surface. This, according to Gombrich, is because we naturally organize the visual stimuli we receive from the world in order to recognize objects. Given that Gombrich indicates the production of a figurative image as the criterion for there being PR, cubism turns out not to be proper "abstract art", since it remains representational in character. Therefore, it is not against cubism (and other companion avant-garde movements) that Gombrich addresses his complaints concerning the "tyranny" (or the "vogue") of abstract art. Rather, he is thinking of American post-war action painting, epitomised by Jackson Pollock's drip-paintings. In a nutshell, Gombrich's view on abstract art is that it is very difficult to produce real abstract art, because in so far as there is figuration there is also PR, and abstraction is to be defined as the opposite of PR.

In the above passage, Gombrich comments negatively on artists depicting abstract images in the 50s (especially American "action painters") since "few of them appear to realize that they can drive into the desired identification only those who know how to apply the various traditional consistency tests and

²⁵⁸ Gombrich (1960, pp. 242-244).

thereby discover the absence of any meaning except the highly ambiguous meaning of traces”. This is one among several suspicious remarks by Gombrich on action painters, and it is sustained by the reference to Harold Rosenberg’s description of post Second World War abstract artists as engaged in a solitary, desperate fight against the tradition of Western pictorial art. Rosenberg conceived of abstraction as of the performance of an unmediated, supreme Act, and of abstract art as of a collection of events, rather than as of an activity of picture making ²⁵⁹. Following Rosenberg, but leaving aside his existentialist tone, Gombrich describes a “true” abstract image as the sum of the traces of the gestures made by the artist, who is absorbed in the activity of marking the pictorial surface. Since the result of such activity is an image that inhibits each attempt of attributing to it a given content by means of recognition of objects represented by the image itself, such image is said to refer to something outside itself in a modality different from the representational one, namely, as sum of the traces of the artist’s gestures. According to the famous Peircean trichotomy, then, representational images are “icons”, since they represent by means of resemblance (which, in Gombrich’s version, is substituted by resemblance between mental states), while abstract images are “indexes”, since they merely figure as the causal product of the painter’s activity and can therefore perform the role of indicators of such activity only. However, it is worth noticing that Gombrich’s abstract/representational opposition is not merely the result of his reading of Rosenberg and, maybe, of his dislike of modernist art. Rather, Gombrich is compelled to defend this point because of the theoretical kernel of his very theory concerning the production of images and the development of

²⁵⁹ Gombrich refers to Rosenberg (1952) in his footnote to the passage I have quoted (1960,

representational styles ²⁶⁰. As argued in chapter one, in fact, Gombrich holds that producing a pictorial representation is a matter of “making and matching”: the painter “makes”, i.e. depicts, a certain configuration of signs and colours on a two-dimensional surface and verifies whether such configuration is capable of yielding pictorial recognition, i.e. of “matching” the visual experience of real objects. The story of the development of different pictorial styles is the story of several different experiments in “making and matching”, oriented by the interest of the painter and his public. This theory is openly indebted with Karl Popper’s description of the scientific method as a procedure of “conjecture and falsification” and is indicative of Gombrich’s attempt to building an empiricist account of art making and art history, as an alternative to the historicist orthodoxy, which had been dominating Western theories of art for a long time ²⁶¹.

To return to the analysis of Gombrich’s passage, here we see the author drawing the consequences of his theory of “making and matching” and labelling abstract images as non-representational, since they seem deliberately to inhibit the very process by means of which representational art has had the opportunity of flourishing across the centuries. The “making and matching” theory, then, is not only a means for describing the activity of image making, while it also provides the grounds on which, according to Gombrich, we have reasons to doubt about the legitimacy of the ascription of “truly” abstract images to the realm of genuine *pictorial* art. I am inclined to think that it is this idea, rather than an unqualified, possibly conservative, dismissal of abstract art

footnote to p. 244).

²⁶⁰ For an articulated defence of this claim see Jones (2005, pp. 97-142).

²⁶¹ The major source of inspiration for Gombrich is Popper’s *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*, while the “making and matching” method is explained in Popper’s *Conjectures and Refutations*, published little time after *Art and Illusion*. On the relevance of Popper for the

and preference for naturalistic paintings, that motivates Gombrich's criticism towards modernist painting. According to my interpretation, Gombrich condemns the "fashion" of abstract art because it compels artists to adopt the "new" abstract style of painting (and to reject the figurative tradition) as a new style of *painting*, while not requiring them to devote any consideration to the problem of identifying what does it mean to produce a painting. This is a question that, according to Gombrich, can be answered only by appealing to the "making and matching" theory, and, therefore, by making sense of the centrality of the history of figurative painting for the understanding of how pictorial practices work. According to Gombrich's description, artists obeying to the "fashion" of abstract painting consider it to be the state-of-the-art style in the tradition of Western pictorial practice, and they carry on the desire of radical renewal and critical engagement towards tradition, which was the peculiar mark of avant-garde art. But, in so doing, they miss a crucial point: since they – unlike avant-garde painters (who, according to Gombrich, mostly don't happen to go beyond the boundaries of genuine pictorial art, since they often retain some sense of figuration) – depart from the "making and matching" strategy for pictorial production and end up producing a kind of object which differs from a painting. Therefore, they have no right to claim that they are pursuing the goal of a renewal of pictorial art from within.

This is not to say that Gombrich dismissed abstract painting *as an art*. He dismissed it as *pictorial art*. This is why, in describing Pollock, he prefers to mention the gestural and decorative character of his canvases. These may well be artistic features but, according to Gombrich, they do not define genuine

architecture of *Art and Illusion* see Sheldon Richmond, *Aesthetic Criteria: Gombrich and the Philosophies of Science of Popper and Polanyi* (Amsterdam-Atlanta: Rodopi, 1994).

pictorial practice ²⁶². The following passage from *The Sense of Order* – Gombrich’s 1979 essay on decorative art – may help illustrating the point. Gombrich claims:

It is the advantage of the concept of projection that we do not have to ask too insistently where in pattern designs geometrical motifs end and representational ones begin. The very names we tend to give to some basic configuration indicate that there is a no man’s land between abstract and figurative design. We speak of star-shapes, of wavy lines, vortices, radiating forms, of networks, chequerboard patterns, egg-and-dart, rosettes, without implying any representational intention . . . Our response to different decorative styles is governed by the way we read their motifs ²⁶³.

Gombrich here admits that the limit between representational and non-representational art does not always coincide with the limit between figurative and non-figurative art. It may be that sometimes our activity of projection fails of making sense of patterns of figures as of *figures*, exactly because they are presented in a pattern. Gombrich labels this experience as one of detection of peculiar decorative styles.

It might be speculated that from Gombrich’s tendency towards equating abstract art to decorative art a stronger criticism of abstract art *as an art* may issue: Gombrich may have thought that, since artists following the fashion of abstract art fail in engaging with the proper tradition of their artistic practice, they end up producing scarce results. However, nothing in his discourse seems to exclude that well-conceived abstract “painting” may find a better collocation in the realm of decorative art (or of some new kind of art that shares significant

²⁶² Gombrich declares: “only the 20th century has witnessed the final elevation of pattern-making into the autonomous activity of ‘abstract art’” (1979, p. vii).

²⁶³ Gombrich (1979, p. 158).

aspects with decoration). The trouble is that most abstract “painting” is ill-conceived as painting. Nevertheless, it is understandable that Gombrich may have looked without favour at what seems to be an intrinsic limit of the practice of abstract “painting”: i.e. the fact that, in its search of purity, this quasi-pictorial activity ends up with a long list of taboo techniques and a small bunch of authorized pictorial practices. This lack of variety may turn into a lack of meaning and interest and Gombrich may have worried about this. His point would not be difficult to grasp: understanding what nowadays leads artists to produce, for instance, monochromes which looks undistinguishable from monochromes produced by other artists over the last century is anything but unproblematic²⁶⁴.

It should be clear that Gombrich’s considerations on the non-painterly character of Pollock’s drip paintings are at odds with my view, and that they depend on Gombrich’s criterion for PR to obtain, which I have rejected in the first part of this work. However, I believe there is an interesting insight in Gombrich’s analysis of abstract paintings, and that his view should not be completely dismissed and/or considered prejudiced. The insight concerns the “making and matching” process, which, no matter the theory of PR we want to endorse, surely tells us something about how figurative paintings are produced. In a nutshell, Gombrich argues that abstracts such as Pollock’s are not paintings because they are not engaged with the “making and matching” process, which is crucial for painterly art. I agree that this process is crucial for traditional painterly art, but I claim, *contra* Gombrich, that Pollock is engaged with “making and matching”, although, as it were, negatively. As we have seen in the previous section, we have evidence that in his drip-paintings he struggled

²⁶⁴ See Danto (1981, chap. 1).

to avoid facility, i.e. figuration, as well as mere repetition and decoration. Within my explanatory framework this provides another good reason for claiming that Pollock's drip paintings are firmly inscribed in the painterly tradition, that they strive to be seen as *paintings* that seek to avoid figuration and representation of three-dimensional space, and that therefore they qualify as PRs. Moreover, I believe Gombrich is right in stressing that, from an evaluative point of view, sometimes abstract painting runs the risk of becoming a "fashion" which does not show research and positive engagement with the pictorial practice. However, *contra* Gombrich, I believe that this means that there can be abstract paintings that are not in *interesting* dialogue with the painterly tradition, not that lack of innovative engagement with the painterly tradition suffices for depriving them of PR-character.

5. Abstract painting, self-reference, and painterly tradition

According to the proposal I have sketched out in this chapter, certain abstract paintings can be considered PRs insofar as we have good reasons to attribute to them pictorial content because of the way they thematically engage with the painterly tradition, i.e. with visual aspects of paintings (understood as a variety of objects belonging to the same kind, namely "painting"). I do not wish to generalize this view to all abstract images. I am perfectly happy with the idea that there are abstract images we find it relatively easy to consider PRs because they retain some of the elements of traditional figurative paintings, such as a dynamics between foreground and background. What I have tried to stress is that there being such a dynamics is not *the* criterion for an abstract image to be a PR.

One might think that I am suggesting that the basic pictorial content of those abstract paintings which do not allow for a distinction between foreground and background are the very elements of such paintings: i.e. that the basic pictorial content of Pollock's *Autumn Rhythm* or of Newman's *Abraham* basically depicts, respectively, the very drips on the surface of *Autumn Rhythm* and the very black surface of *Abraham*. In other words, such borderline case of PR would be self-referential cases of PR. This proposal would probably be faithful to Clement Greenberg's ideas about modernist painting as a form of self-meditation and reduction of pictures to their essential components.

This, however, is not the proposal I am putting forward here. I believe we should understand as purely self-referential only those works of art of which we can soundly say that what they basically pictorially represent is their own elements and nothing else. On the contrary, it is a central claim of the analysis of certain borderline abstract paintings I have put forward in the previous sections that such paintings basically pictorially represent visual aspects of paintings, i.e. of a variety of objects that belong to the painterly tradition. According to my hypothesis, the content Pollock's *Autumn Rhythm* pictorially represents are not the drips on its surface themselves, while it is pictorial aspects that may be in principle common to many pictures. In so doing, the drip paintings embody a meditation on the painterly tradition, its essence and its limits. Similarly, the basic pictorial content of Barnett Newman's *Abraham* is a black surface, but we do not necessarily have to understand it as the surface of the painting *Abraham* itself. It is a surface that depicts a new family of paintings we can imagine, of which Newman wanted *Abraham* to be the progenitor.

For a better understanding of my point, it may be useful to recall some remarks by Lambert Wiesing I have analysed in chapter three. As we have seen, Wiesing claims that abstract paintings are essentially self-referential. It is my opinion that his remarks do not capture a general truth about abstract paintings (moreover, I am generally sceptical about the very idea that a general truth about the representational content of abstract paintings can or should be captured). According to the proposal I have sketched, which is anti-referentialist in character, Wiesing would be right if we could prove that the basic pictorial content of abstract pictures is never used to represent something else in a pictorial way (this, of course, leaves untouched the fact that Wiesing is right within his own framework, which, as I have argued, is referential: the only safe reference we can secure to abstract paintings is reference to their own elements). If we could prove that the basic pictorial content of abstract paintings is never used to represent something else in a pictorial way, then we could claim that the only representational content attributable to abstract paintings is their basic pictorial content *as such*. However, I have pointed out a number of ways in which the basic pictorial content of abstract paintings is used to pictorially represent things other than itself. In other words, I have tried to illustrate how abstract paintings can be used to represent things other than their own elements in a way that remains distinctively pictorial²⁶⁵.

²⁶⁵ To my claims one might object that, when we argue that the pictorial content of certain abstract paintings is other paintings, we are not in the position to distinguish between the painting that represents and the painting(s) that is/are represented. Therefore, the argument would actually show that if an abstract painting represents other paintings that cannot be distinguished from it, then it is a *replica* of such paintings, and therefore it does not qualify as a PR. This is because for an object pictorially to represent something it must be possible to distinguish the object that represents from the object that is represented. I believe the objection is misplaced, in that it misrepresents the character of the basic pictorial content of abstract paintings such as *Autumn Rhythm* and *Abraham*. Think of Leonardo's *Monna Lisa*. A replica of *Monna Lisa* is a painting that is virtually indistinguishable from it. This, I believe, is not what happens in the case of the abstract paintings I am considering, because these paintings are not meant to point out to any particular painting or kind of painting they would not be distinguishable from. They are pointing out to aspects of a variety of paintings (possible

There is a fact that I believe is typical of all abstract paintings, though. It does not concern their basic pictorial content, while it concerns the requirements for them to be understood as paintings by a suitably informed viewer, i.e. their epistemology. The basic requirement for the understanding of abstract paintings is that they are understood as works intrinsically related to painterly art that is not abstract. In making this claim I agree with Wiesing, who argues that our understanding of abstract paintings as paintings depends on our understanding of figurative painting²⁶⁶. However, I believe that in sharing Wiesing's claims on the epistemology of abstract painting I do not need to commit myself to Wiesing's claims on what constitutes the pictorial content of abstract paintings. Wiesing's account is rooted in the modernist critical tradition, which understands abstraction as reduction: namely, Wiesing argues that abstract paintings depend on figurative paintings to be understood because they reduce figurative paintings to their infrastructure. I claim, instead, that abstract paintings depend on figurative paintings to be understood, but not because of their being the result of a process of reduction from figurative paintings. The reason why their epistemology depends on the epistemology of figurative paintings is instead that they critically engage with the activity of representation-making, since they make the "infrastructure" of the PR-character of paintings less obviously representational. This, however, leaves untouched the fact that the "infrastructure" for PR is provided by basic resemblance aspects in both abstract and figurative paintings.

paintings, not necessarily actual ones), while they do not commit themselves to a full visual determination of the look of the paintings they basically pictorially represent. They could be compared to paintings that reproduce the nose and the mouth depicted on the *Monna Lisa*, but not the whole painting.

²⁶⁶ Harrison (1993, chap. 3), on a similar note, has claimed that the attribution of artistic character to abstract paintings depends on the attribution of artistic character to paintings that are not abstract (the same claim has more recently been defended by Hamilton, 2009).

Conclusions

In a 1995 article, in his 1998 book *Picture, Image and Experience*, and again in a 2003 article, Robert Hopkins challenged those intentioned to put forward a theory of depiction. Considering that, in order to avoid the confusion caused by the multi-disciplinary character of research on depiction and the multi-faceted interest philosophers take into images, some agreement is needed about what a philosophical theory of pictorial representation is supposed to explain, Hopkins indicates six explananda, and argues that competitors should either provide an explanation for them or clarify why and how they should be replaced by other explananda ²⁶⁷. To make some conclusive remarks on my investigation I shall now clarify how I believe the basic resemblance theory put forward by John Hyman is capable of, on the one hand, providing reasons to replace the first of Hopkins' explananda with a new one, and, on the other hand, explaining the remaining five – provided that they are partially reformulated. For simplicity's sake I shall quote from Hopkins' shorter, 2003 version of the six explananda and alternate the quotes with my description of how the basic resemblance theory replies to/reformulates each of them. Here is Hopkins' first explanandum:

First, there is no bare depiction of particulars: anything depicting a particular must depict it as having certain properties. Moreover, depicted properties are always relatively determinate: one cannot, for instance, depict something as simply having a shape: some more determinate shape than that must be ascribed.

The first question is the one on which Hopkins' and Hyman's views diverge substantially, as it should be evident from my analysis in chapters one and two. According to Hopkins, PRs depict particulars and, in so doing, they must ascribe determinate properties to them. As I have stressed on several occasions, Hopkins adopts a referential paradigm for depiction, while Hyman opts for an anti-referential framework. This obviously brings the two authors to disagree on the question of *what* a PR basically depicts. In chapter two I have sought to cast some light on the reasons which I believe have brought Hyman to adopt an anti-referential framework. Two reasons strike us for their relevance: first, the fact that, according to Hyman, pictorial resemblance is better understood as sharing of properties rather than as a (two-place) relation, second, Hyman's general scepticisms towards experiential views on PR, whose origin he individuates in Descartes' illusion theory of depiction. As we have seen, according to Hyman the idea that an image produces a peculiar experience in the viewer (the idea at the roots of any experiential theory of depiction) originates in Descartes' claims that an image produces a sort of illusion in the viewer. Contemporary theorists – Hyman argues – are unlikely to share Descartes' views on picture perception, but this does not mean that we should exclude that their views on depiction might have been influenced by Descartes' mistaken theory of perception, and that they might have remained unaware of this influence. To understand the relevance of this point, think about this: what grounds Hopkins' idea that a PR should depict a particular? According to Hopkins, we need to explain how particulars are depicted by images and how this implies pictures to attribute determinate aspects to them, otherwise our concept of PR would be too poor. Why too poor? I believe the explanation lies

²⁶⁷ Hopkins (1995; 1998, pp. 24-40; 2003, pp. 655-656).

in the fact that Hopkins' view is linked with Wollheim's idea that there is something we see in an image, and that a theory of PR should seek to describe the phenomenology of this something. Seeing-in is supposed to be a special visual experience images provoke in the viewer and a defining character of PRs. A theory of PR must explain seeing-in and arguing that pictures resemble many objects in basic resemblance aspects, as Hyman does, definitely cannot accomplish this task. All this should allow one to see how the idea that there is an object which is the object of PR is firmly rooted in the Cartesian paradigm: if images are to be defined not on the basis of objective resemblances they bear to objects in the world, but on the basis of the experience of *seeing something that is not actually there* they trigger in the viewers, then images are like illusions of some kind, since they allow the viewers to see what is not there.

Now, to turn to Hyman's view on this point, the thing is that we can show how basic resemblance aspects link PRs to sets of objects in the world they share certain visual properties with, and we can see how this fact has been variously exploited in the history of painting, and how in many cases it comes to be determinant for the attribution of pictorial subjects to pictures. This, according to Hyman, is sufficient to claim that basic resemblance aspects can explain the kernel of the phenomenon of depiction, what lies at its roots. Of course they cannot explain how it is that a picture depicts a certain particular, but it does not have to be taken for granted that depiction is at its roots depiction of particulars, since it seems that the reason for this assumption is intrinsic to the experiential paradigm only, with its modelling of depiction on visual illusion. According to Hyman, depiction is at its roots depiction of aspects of objects, aspects that are shared by a variety of objects. So, leaving aside the referential paradigm, we can claim that it is properties of objects

pictures depict, and that such properties are determinate because there are objectively describable aspects in which a two-dimensional surface can resemble other objects (namely, occlusion shape and size, and aperture colour). This is the “what” of PRs that can be objectively described by means of a philosophical analysis. The rest is a matter of extra-philosophical research, or of philosophical research about aspects of pictures that do not define PR as such, e.g. pictures’ phenomenology, the recognition of pictorial subjects, and various visual effects achieved by pictures.

The basic resemblance view is rather counterintuitive, but it is grounded on objective aspects of pictures whose existence we can ascertain with our senses: it does not seek to make sense of our intuitions of resemblance between pictorial subjects and depicted objects (since those intuitions are often about “second-level” resemblances, i.e. the resemblances we notice between pictorial subjects and depicted objects, instead of the objective resemblances between depicted objects and pictorial surfaces), it does not seek to make sense of the feeling of depth in the picture which many pictures evoke in the viewer, and it does not seek to make sense of the idea that pictures depict objects that are not there. The last point I have deemed an “idea”, rather than an intuition, because I believe it is more the result of the influence of the illusion paradigm on literature on depiction (and, previously, of the mirror paradigm on Classical and Renaissance theory of art), than a thought that embodies an intuition we have when looking at pictures. Let us now turn to the second of Hopkins’ explananda:

Second, all pictorial representation is perspectival: the depicted object is depicted from a (or perhaps several) point(s) of view.

As I have stressed in chapter two, Hopkins' and Hyman's solutions are akin on this point: outline shape and occlusion shape make sense of the perspectival character of pictures, and the concept is further refined by Hyman with the introduction of relative occlusion size. Of course, given the rejection of the first explanandum, what Hyman explains is how a PR basically depicts occlusion shapes and sizes that can be presented by *a variety of objects* as seen from a certain point of view.

Third, only what can be seen can be depicted.

According to Hopkins, depiction is depiction of particulars (real or fictional) to which we can attribute visual aspects (i.e. objects that can be seen). According to Hyman, depiction is depiction *of visual aspects of objects*. This leaves untouched the fact that the requirement that only what can be seen can be depicted is common to both theories.

Fourth, pictorial misrepresentation is possible – something can be depicted as having properties it does not in fact have; but only within certain limits – beyond a certain point misrepresentation of a particular or kind ceases to count as depiction of it at all.

As we have seen, the question of misrepresentation is a particularly intriguing point in Hopkins' account, since Hopkins introduces the idea that a painter can depict an object X with the intention of representing Y, provided that he succeeds in making it clear for the viewer that Y should be recognized in X. For Hopkins what we have in this case is experienced resemblance of the picture to X not as it really is, but as it is depicted as being (i.e. experienced

resemblance of the picture to X-depicted-as-Y). How this really happens, how we can cognitively grasp the intention of the painter, is something Hopkins does not think a philosophical theory of depiction should seek to explain, since it concerns the *how* of visual perception, i.e. its physiology and psychology. Hopkins establishes with various examples that concepts of certain objects can enter our experience of other objects, and this, he believes, is sufficient for hypothesising that we can experience X as Y ²⁶⁸.

That concepts of certain objects can enter our experience of other objects is not something the defender of the basic resemblance theory need deny, however, within the framework offered by the basic resemblance theory there is no need to link this idea to the idea that the picture must be experienced as resembling “Y as X” in outline shape. Experience simply does not need to be taken into account in order to explain the basic content of depiction. The advantage of this view is that it allows for indicating what the basic content of depiction is for all pictures (namely, basic resemblance aspects), whereas with Hopkins we can argue that the experience of resemblance in outline shape is constitutive of our experience of pictures, but we cannot explain how such an experience comes to have the content it has for all pictures, as the cases of the very unrealistic caricature and of the picture of an indeterminate object show.

I shall consider the fifth and sixth explananda together. Here is Hopkins’ formulation:

Finally, the resources required to understand depiction are distinctive: knowledge of the appearance of the depicted particular or kind is necessary (fifth explanandum) and, given general competence with depiction, pretty much sufficient (sixth explanandum) for one to understand what a picture depicts.

²⁶⁸ See Hopkins (1998, pp. 104-114).

Again, the explananda can be kept, although they need to be modified, to fit in the non-referentialist paradigm. Knowledge of the appearances objects have or may take is necessary to understand depiction in terms of basic resemblance aspects, because it is necessary to understand how a picture can be said to resemble those objects that share a certain basic resemblance aspect, or a combination of more resemblance aspects. Of course knowledge of the appearances of particulars is also necessary to identify subjects that are portrayed by pictures, but, from a non-referential point of view, a theory of PR is not a theory of portraiture (although in certain cases it is sufficient to explain portraiture).

I agree with Hopkins that seeking to clarify the explananda for a theory of depiction is a good starting point and I hope to have achieved the goal of explaining how the basic resemblance theory identifies the explananda for a theory of depiction and articulates its explanations for them. However, I believe that it is also important that a theory of PR seek to show the relevance of the clarification of the concept of depiction for an understanding of how pictures work and that it should seek to explain this with reference to pictorial practice. It is this thought that has grounded my approach in the third and fourth chapter.

In chapters three and four I have attempted to show that there is a realm of explanation to which Hyman's theory can be originally applied, namely abstract painting. Generally, philosophers working on depiction do not consider abstract pictures or dedicate to them a few remarks only. Hyman himself does not address this issue, and the hypothesis I have sketched out is the result of my reading of his basic resemblance theory of PR. I am persuaded

that Hyman's is a coherent and sound view, and that the reasons for this claim have emerged from my analysis in the first two chapters. Moreover, it seems to me that it is a consequence of the basic resemblance view that also some abstract pictures belong to the realm of pictorial representation, and especially abstract paintings, i.e. pictures intended as art objects with a distinctively pictorial character. It is, then, a task for a defender of the basic resemblance theory to explain how this view should be applied to abstract paintings or why it should not. If Hyman or another philosopher sympathetic with the view would like to reject my claims, provided that they are sound, then he/she should seek to explain why PR is bound to figurative pictures, or only to certain abstract pictures.

Hyman's core lesson, I believe, is that we use basic resemblance aspects pictorially to represent aspects of objects so that we can describe the colours and marks we see on a pictorial surface with concepts that originate in our visual experience. In average cases of PR, it is our experience of particulars and objects of a certain kind that inspires our description of a given PR. However, it cannot be excluded that the description be inspired by our experience of aspects of objects, without any identification of objects taking place. This, as I have tried to show, may be what happens in the case of abstract paintings. Moreover, I have tried to show that there are certain borderline cases in which abstract paintings not only ask to be described in terms of aspects attributable to a variety of objects, but also ask the viewer to consider such aspects as *aspects of pictures* (especially aspects relevant to the development of painting as an art), although they do not allow for the identification of any specific picture that they pictorially represent.

I disagree with Wiesing's claim that the only description of content abstract paintings allow for is description of their own elements as their content. Strictly speaking, such description of content is the only description of basic pictorial content every PR allows for, no matter it being figurative or abstract. However, if what we are talking about is the ways pictures allow us to describe their basic pictorial content in terms of something else we have visual experience of then we can argue that abstract paintings allow for description of their content in terms of aspects that belong to a variety of objects, none of which we can identify with certainty. Moreover, also aspects of those objects we call "paintings" qualify for being the content of certain abstract pictures. This should explain how certain abstract pictures have a content that embodies meditations on painting as an art and form of representation.

Finally, I acknowledge that there is a problem intrinsic to Hyman's view, since it firmly rejects many of the arguments shared by other established views on depiction (first and foremost the idea that pictures refer to objects). In so doing, Hyman requires the reader to accept or reject the possibility that a theory of depiction may (or should) be grounded in intuitions different from the ones that are crucial for other contributors to the debate. Of course, Hyman provides reasons why we should accept his view and reject the others: especially the criticisms against subjectivist views on depiction and against the understanding of resemblance in pictures as a relation. However, it cannot be excluded that there could be ways to defend a referential approach to depiction that are not committed to such views, although such ways have remained so far unexplored. It may be that theorists who seek to explore the phenomenon of depiction departing from different intuitions will never agree, because they will keep putting different weight to certain or other arguments. These arguments

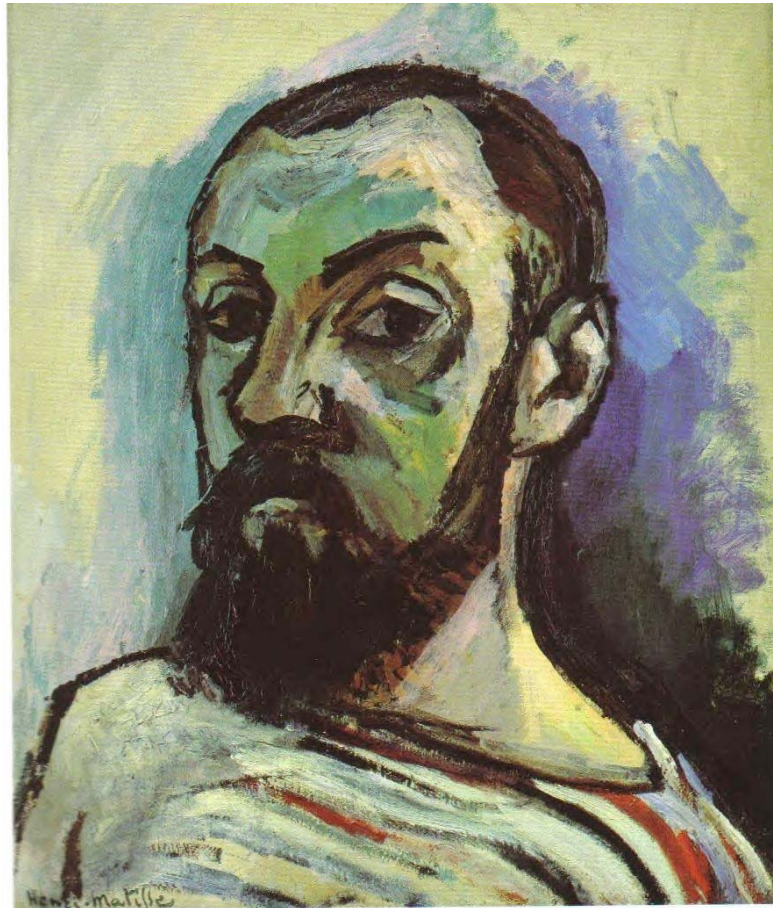
may be all logically sound, but their explanatory power varies depending on the uses they are put for, and this is ultimately a decision that depends on the intuitions that inspire every single view. To ask for general agreement on certain basic intuitions would probably imply the abandonment of research, because it is by means of assuming different presuppositions (i.e. different points of view on the same problem) that we can not only think about alternative explanations, but also consider questions as philosophical problems.



1. Edgar Degas, *Dancers Practicing at the Bar* (1877), Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York



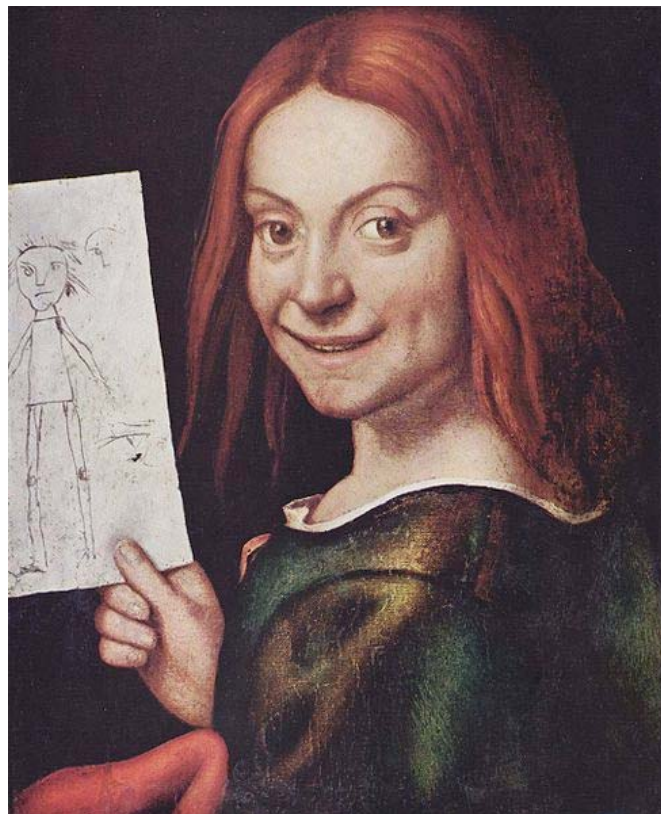
2. William Blake, *The Ancient of Days* (1794), British Museum, London



3. Henry Matisse, *Self-Portrait in a Striped T-shirt* (1906), Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen



4. Jasper Johns, *Flag* (1967), The Eli and Edythe L. Broad Collection, Los Angeles



5. Giovan Francesco Caroto, *Portrait of a Boy with a Drawing* (1523), Museo di Castelvecchio, Verona



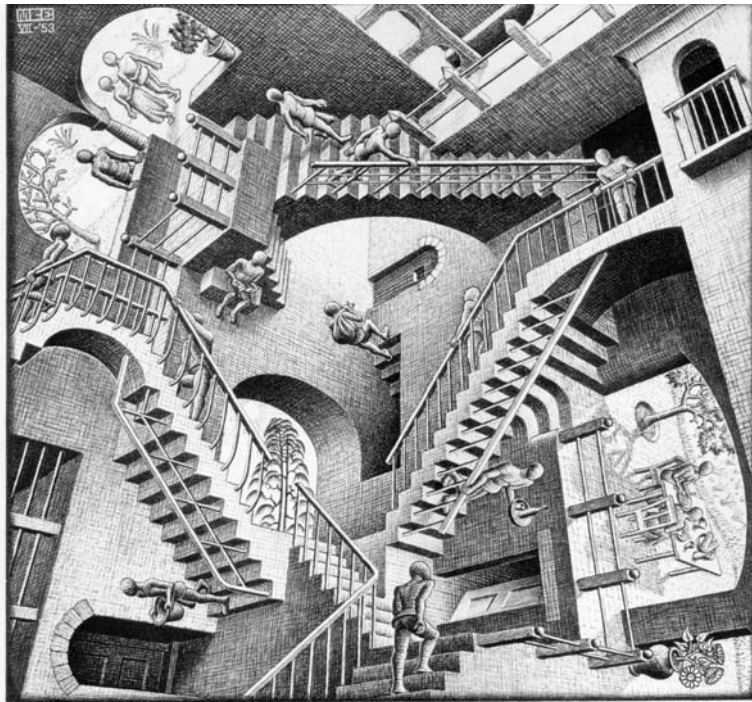
6. Rembrandt, *Jan Six* (1654), Six Collection, Amsterdam



7. Steve Bell, *Caricature of George W. Bush* (2003)



8. Diego Velasquez, *Las Hilanderas* (c. 1657), Museo del Prado, Madrid



9. Maurits Cornelis Escher, *Relativity* (first printed in 1953)



10. Piet Mondrian, *The Red Tree* (1908), Haags Gemeentemuseum, The Hague



11. Piet Mondrian, *Blue Apple Tree* (1908), Private Collection



12. Piet Mondrian, *Gray Tree* (1911), Haags Gemeentemuseum, The Hague



13. Piet Mondrian, *Apple Tree* (1912), Gemeentemuseum, The Hague



14. Piet Mondrian, *Apple Trees in Bloom* (1912), Private Collection



15. Piet Mondrian, *Oval Composition* (1913), Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam



16. Hans Hoffman, *Pompeii* (1959), The Estate of Hans Hoffman



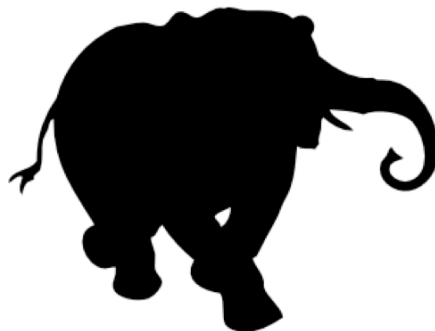
17. Barnett Newman, *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* (1948), Museum of Modern Art, New York



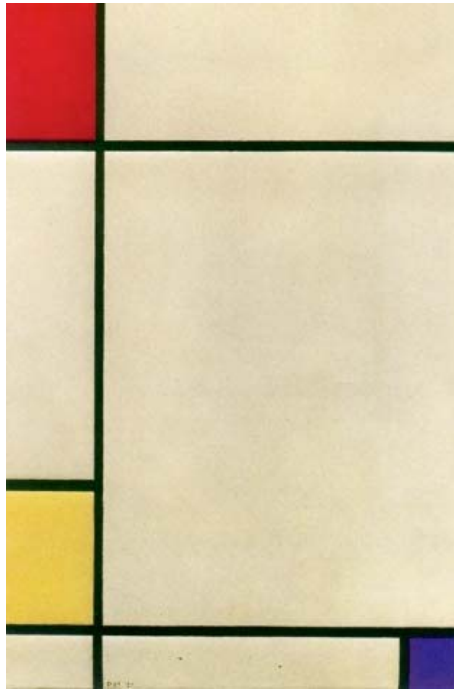
18. *Stick-drawing of a Human Figure*



19. *Jane Austen: silhouette from the second edition of Mansfield Park (1833?)* , National Portrait Gallery, London



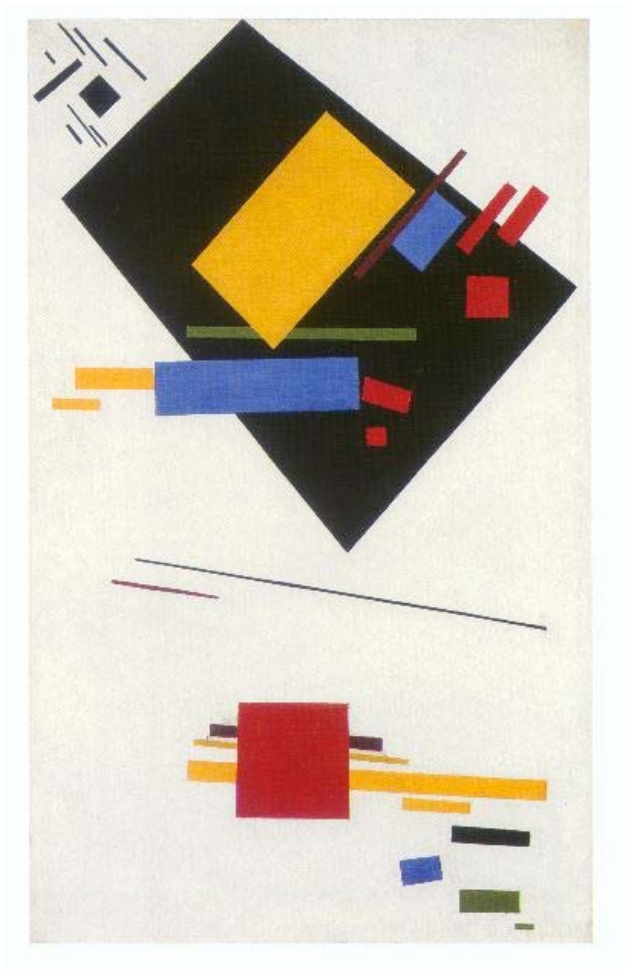
20. *Elephant*



21. Piet Mondrian, *Composition with Red, Yellow and Blue* (1927), Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam



22. Georges Braque, *Glass, Carafe and Newspapers* (1914), Private Collection



23. Kasimir Malevich, *Suprematist Painting* (1915), Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam



24. Jackson Pollock, *Autumn Rhythm n°30* (1950), Metropolitan Museum, New York



25. Barnett Newman, *Abraham* (1949), Museum of Modern Art, New York



26. Jackson Pollock, *Untitled* (1948-50), Ohara Museum of Art, Kurashikj



27. Jackson Pollock, *Untitled* (1948), Private collection

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