

Medium, Subject Matter And Representation

John Dilworth

[*Southern Journal of Philosophy* 41 (1):45-62 (2003)]

I argue that the physical marks on a canvas resulting from an artist's intentional, stylistic and expressive acts cannot themselves *be* the artist's expression, but instead they serve to *signify* or *indicate* those acts. Thus there is a kind of *indicative content* associated with a picture that is *distinct from* its subject matter (or 'representational content'). I also argue that this kind of indicative content is closely associated with the *specific artistic medium* chosen by the artist as her expressive medium, for which reason I call this kind of content *medium content* (or *medium-related content*).

I further argue that medium content is distinguished from subject matter by the differing *functional roles* that each plays in a picture. Medium content, broadly speaking, expresses an artist's *interpretation of*, or *commentary on*, the subject matter of the picture, while correspondingly the subject matter or 'subject content' functions as *that which is* interpreted or commented on by the medium content.

As for the nature and identity of a picture itself, I first argue that the medium content in a picture itself *represents* its subject matter, and then argue that a theoretical simplification is needed, in which a picture is *identified with* its medium content. Thus an overall interpretive theory results in which a physical artifact (such as a physical painting) *indicates* the picture itself (which picture is an organized collection of medium content), which in turn *interpretively represents* its subject matter.

It is a truism about art that each art form, or art medium, provides a characteristic language, or set of methods and procedures, which artists may use to express themselves or their ideas about certain topics or subject matters. But exactly *how* is an art medium related to the ideas, etc. which it may be used to express about some subject matter?

Clearly, representational artworks¹ such as pictures are typically created through use of *some* recognizable traditional art medium, including painting, drawing, film, literature or dance, and each medium is associated with its own characteristic kinds of expressive

possibilities and artistic meaning. But the nature of a medium itself, as thus used to represent some subject matter in characteristic, medium specific ways, is little understood, beyond our general assent to the opening truism.²

Also little understood are the ways in which the intentions,³ expressions and styles of individual artists are somehow associated with, or present in (or exhibited or expressed by), their individual works of art--as distinguishable from, yet nevertheless integrally connected with, the subject matters of those representational works.

I shall try to mutually illuminate these obscure topics--of the nature of a medium when used representationally, and the nature of expressive, stylistic and intentional aspects of representational art--by arguing that one central strand in the concept of a medium is of a distinctive kind of *meaningful content* associated with an artwork, that is distinct from its subject matter or representational content, and which content is also the locus for a work's expressive, stylistic and intentional aspects.

Thus in broader terms I shall be attempting to distinguish two different kinds of *meaning* or *content* associated with representational artworks: first, their *referential* meaning, concerning their subject matter or representational content (or what the work is *about*)--which meaning or content is relatively well understood already⁴--and secondly their *medium specific* meaning or content, which I shall describe as *medium content* (or medium-related content).

As for medium content itself, in order to provide the promised illumination I shall both have to describe its nature and provide evidence of its existence, and also explain how artists can *create* and *make use of* medium content in producing the expressive, stylistic and intentional aspects of their own individual works. I shall primarily draw my examples from the visual arts, mainly because they present the most challenging obstacles to an account such as mine, as will shortly become clear.

1. Non-Physical Aspects of Media

A prominent obstacle to an account of medium content is the apparent *physicality* of many media, that is, that they seem to be closely associated or identified with certain characteristic physical *materials* or physical *properties*. This is particularly true for the visual arts, whose products such as paintings or drawings might seem to be *constituted by* various physical items or attributes, such as particular canvas or paper sheets along with the layers of paint or graphite, having various physical properties, that have been applied to their surfaces.⁵ Thus an account such as mine that seeks to find some kind of *meaningful content* associated with a medium itself must somehow overcome an initial ‘presumption of physicality’ of the nature of such media.⁶ This I shall now attempt to do.

A realistic *painting* of a given natural scene will have certain characteristic differences from a realistic *drawing* of the same scene, and each will be characteristically different from either a black and white, or a color, *photograph* of the same scene (which

photographs in turn will have their own characteristic differences). But in what do these characteristic differences consist?

An initial reply might be that each work represents the same subject matter or scene, but that each does so using characteristically different *physical materials*--paint in the case of a painting, charcoal or graphite in a drawing, and typically (colored or uncolored) silver compounds and gelatin in the case of the (black and white or color) photographs.

But at best this account is incomplete, in that arguably an artistic *medium* cannot adequately be characterized merely in terms of the *physical materials* used by artists in the medium. For example, for much of the history of photography a 'photograph' consisted of a paper backing rendered light-sensitive by a layer of silver salts and gelatin on its surface, which, after exposure to light (and subsequent development and fixing) would be chemically changed into other more light-resistant silver compounds.

However, increasingly photographers are now using quite different methods and materials to achieve original artistic photographs, including digital, filmless cameras (or digital scanning of negatives produced from traditional cameras), and direct printing onto a substrate using jets of ink in place of the familiar traditional darkroom technology. Yet the result of such a process is now generally regarded as being just as much a *photograph* (that is, a work produced squarely within the *medium* of photography) as is any more traditionally produced photograph.⁷

More broadly, the general availability of computer technology, along with specialized software and appropriate printing methods, means that virtually *any* artistic effects associated with traditional media, from drawings, watercolor or pastel to the appearances of prominent brush or palette knife strokes in heavy paint impasto, can be produced by use of such computer-based methods—which thus could collectively be thought of as providing the material basis for a new kind of *general-purpose* visual art medium, by means of which the artistic effects of any traditional medium can readily be obtained.

However, some caution is required in interpreting this result. Skeptics are likely to object that it merely shows that it is now possible to *simulate* (or copy, or reproduce) artworks executed in traditional media--or to simulate the *effects* of traditional media--using computer technology, so that the result does not immediately demonstrate that such works could be genuine *instances* of works executed in traditional media, rather than merely being copies or simulations of such works (or of effects associated with such works).

In reply, at least in the case of digitally produced photographs their status as genuine photographs seems to be already secure, in that they are no longer regarded as merely providing an inexpensive means of reproducing other more traditional photographs (though of course either variety of photograph *could* be used for merely reproductive purposes).

And in general, the skeptic's point depends on a contrast between original artworks (and the integral artistic effects associated with them) versus copies or reproductions of such, which distinction has no obvious relevance to the discussion of *media themselves*, since there seems to be no reason why an artist should not, for example, use a computer 'paint' program along with an appropriate printer to produce an *original* artwork of hers, which she regards as being a genuine *painting*--which painting might then be laboriously copied by another less talented artist using traditional painting methods, to produce a mere copy or reproduction of it, or of the artistic effects involved in it. Thus the original/copy distinction cannot be used to impugn the (at least *prima facie*) distinction between a *medium*, and various *physical materials* that may be actually or potentially associated with that medium.

The possibility of a general purpose, computer-based medium discussed above also undercuts another potential skeptical objection, namely that perhaps a medium is still purely physical, in that it could be regarded as consisting of *several different kinds* of physical materials—so that a medium just is, or is identifiable with such materials, or with a disjunction of such, but of a broader class than traditionally conceived. The problem for such a view is that a general-purpose class of materials (as provided by computer technology) would occur as part of the definition of *almost all* media, so that the intuitively great differences between different media could not be accounted for on such a physicalist account of their nature.

To sum up the discussion so far, particular media have at least initially been distinguished from the physical materials and properties associated with them, so that the initial ‘presumption of physicality’ for media has been weakened: it is now at least a *logical possibility*, in that it is no longer *logically ruled out*, that an art medium might be closely associated with some kind of characteristic, non-physical meaningful content. I turn next to more specific arguments in favor of such a possibility.

2. A 'Meaning Non-Transmission' Argument

In this Section I shall develop a '*meaning non-transmission*' argument, to the effect that artists cannot *directly* transmit meaning to their artworks, and therefore must do so indirectly instead. To begin, the only means available for an artist to expressively carry out her artistic intentions, using her own unique style, is through the physical manipulation, in various appropriate ways, of some specific artistic materials associated with her chosen medium. Thus any *artistic meaning*⁸ that an artist wishes to be associated with her artwork must somehow be initially embodied by the artist in her *actions* or *activities* of working with those materials in producing her artwork.

Second, those physical artistic *actions* are logically distinct from the resultant *causal effects* of those actions upon the developing artwork itself,⁹ just as any physical group of causes are distinct from their physical effects on other objects. Thus for instance, a

certain movement of the artist's arm, while holding a stick of charcoal in contact with a sheet of paper, would result in her depositing some charcoal in a certain configuration on the paper; but that intentional, stylistically expressive *action* of hers--of a specific kind of 'charcoal-deposition'--cannot be identical with the *resultant charcoal configuration* itself on the paper.

Thus any (successful) drawing or painting activity by an artist will include (at some stage) the actual depositing of some kind of pigment on a suitable surface. Now it is easy to confuse the *depositing* of the pigment with the *deposited* pigment itself; but the artist's action or activity of *depositing* that pigment (which activity expresses her intentions and style) is all that the artist herself is able to do; the *deposited* pigment itself is no more than a *trace* or *record* of her artistic activity in so *depositing* the pigment¹⁰--which fact is already recognized in connection with the work of 'action painters' such as de Kooning, in that it may even be claimed that their *whole works* are in some sense no more than such a *trace* or *record* of their meaningful painterly actions in producing them.¹¹

The point being made here is a completely general one, which applies not only to drawings or paintings but also to sculptures (molded or carved), films, literary or musical manuscripts, and so on: in all cases, the artist's *actions* in working on those artifacts must be distinguished from the causal results of those actions, which at best can merely provide a trace of the relevant actions.

Third, given the logical distinctness of actions and results, it follows that any artistic meaning that the artist has embodied in her actions *cannot be directly transmitted or transferred* by her to the artwork itself. For I take it that it would generally be agreed that the embodiment of meaning is specific to its particular vehicle: actions are meaningful in different ways than are objects. Thus an artwork cannot literally *be* meaningful in the same sense as that in which the actions that produced it were literally meaningful—or at least, there is no magical process by which the meaning of actions can automatically or directly be transmitted to their otherwise meaningless causal results.

Of course, I have no wish to deny that artworks can in some sense be meaningful, and that in some way they acquire their meaning 'as a result of' the artist's activities. What I am denying is only that a work could acquire its meaning via a *direct transmission* of the meaningfulness of artistic actions to the causal results of those actions. I shall now present an alternative, indirect account of how artworks acquire their non-referential meaning.

3. Actions, Traces and Medium

I see the key to understanding how artworks can acquire meaning as being centered round the point, emerging above, that the results of artistic actions are, or provide, *traces, manifestations or records* of those actions that causally acted upon them, or more broadly, that they *signify, indicate or provide information about* the actions that caused them to be as they now are. For example, if one steps outside and finds the ground to be

wet, this provides a generally reliable *indication* that it had previously rained—one can thus acquire *information* about the likely causes of the current wetness results that one is observing. Similarly, in observing a finished watercolor picture, one can acquire information about the likely artistic actions that *resulted* in the picture having the features that it now has.

Thus on this account the meaning in artworks is provided in a broadly *symbolic* or *significatory* way: artworks do not, strictly speaking, themselves literally *possess* meaning, but instead they symbolize or indicate or provide information about the relevant artistic actions that *did* literally possess the relevant kinds of meaning. Thus on this view, artistic meaning is associated with a species of symbolic or indicative *content*—though a kind of content (to be called '*medium content*', as initially mentioned) distinct from the usual referential or representational content or subject matter of an artwork

But where, it might be asked, does the concept of a medium come into all of this? Here is the crucial connection: that insofar as the meaning of artworks is related to their broadly symbolic functions, the concept of a medium provides the structure and details of the *language in which* an artwork is able to symbolize the relevant artistic activities. Thus the medium of watercolor, or of painting, and so on provides a necessary structure of *artistic conventions* that enables a suitably informed viewer of an artwork in a given medium to understand, on the basis of her perceptions of the artwork, precisely which *medium-specific artistic actions*—and with which features--are symbolized or indicated by the work.

Otherwise put, without art media any artwork would symbolize too *indefinitely*--symbolizing anything, or nothing. Artists avoid this problem by constraining themselves to work within a specific medium on a given project, so that viewers of their works can have legitimate or correct *expectations* and receive reliable *indications* from the work as to which medium-specific meaningful actions of the artist were involved in its creation.¹²

As an example showing the importance of correct medium expectations, and hence the indispensability of the language provided by a specific medium in understanding artworks, consider the medium of *engraving*, which makes much use of cross-hatching and repeated lines to achieve its effects. Thus an engraving of a woman, as normally perceived, would typically represent the outlines of and modeling in her features by use of such linear, engraving-related methods. However, it is quite possible that someone unfamiliar with the medium of engraving might instead mistakenly see such an engraving as a picture of a woman with *lines*, or a *variegated mesh*, covering her face.¹³

In such a case, what has gone wrong? An explanation can be extracted from an account of each case—of perception of the engraving with correct versus incorrect expectations--as follows. Each case involves a different perceptual *interpretation* of the engraving, in the first of which it is interpreted in the normal way, such that the lines and cross-hatching are seen correctly as an 'engraving' kind of medium-related content, which in turn represents the woman's features as its subject matter.

On the other hand, in the second (more unusual or deviant) interpretation, the original physical lines are instead interpreted as medium content of some *other* kind, such as would be found in some *other* medium (such as in realistic painting using only black and white pigments, or black and white photography), with that (incorrect) medium content in turn being seen as representing both a woman *and* a mesh-like series of lines across her face.

Thus my account can explain both how each interpretation is a genuine pictorial interpretation of the engraving, and also how one is correct and the other incorrect. For what makes the former interpretation correct is (presumably) that the artist did indeed intend his engraving to be interpreted as an *engraving*--as a work produced using the *medium* (and not merely the materials) of engraving. Whereas the second interpretation is one in which, as explained above, the viewer's incorrect assumption as to the medium involved led him to *misinterpret* the work.

Thus to conclude this Section, I would argue that it is through use of the emerging theory being described here that the initial truism that began this paper--that each art form, or art medium, provides a characteristic language, or set of methods and procedures, which artists may use to express themselves, or their ideas about certain topics or subject matters—may potentially be vindicated.

4. Objections

It might be objected that the above account of artistic meaning has things backwards. Artists intend to produce certain artistic *results*, and their actions are focused on achieving such results, so that any meaning they intend to produce in the artwork is ‘*result-oriented*’ meaning or content. But on my account, the objection charges, the meaningful content of those results is instead ‘*action-oriented*’ content, in that it is a kind of symbolic or indicative content that symbolizes or indicates only the artist’s *actions*, rather than her intended *results*.¹⁴

However, this objection fails in at least two ways. First, it fails to recognize the force of the metaphysical fact that one cannot *literally* endow physical resulting objects (and their non-artistic properties) with meaning of *any* kind, whether action-oriented or result-oriented meaning: all one can do is to cause them to be certain ways, that is, to be in a certain physical state with certain physical properties, which state and properties may then more or less reliably *indicate* the meaningful actions (and their features) that produced them. Thus any intuitions we may have about the nature of ‘result-oriented meaning’ must themselves be accommodated to this unavoidable metaphysical fact.

The second failing of the objection is that it conflates indication of an artist’s *actions* with indication of certain *properties* of those actions—in particular, their property of expressing certain result-oriented meanings. Just because it is inevitable, metaphysically speaking, that artworks can only indicate *actions* (and their properties) rather than results,

it does not follow that therefore they can indicate only '*action-oriented*' content in so doing. For, as with any indication or representation, resultant art objects can indicate both *concrete entities* or *events*—such as the artistic actions that caused them—and also *properties* of those concrete events, such as their property of expressing certain *result-oriented* meanings. Thus artworks can acquire 'indicative content' that indicates, or is indicative of, both artistic actions *and* their properties of expressing intentional, expressive and stylistic kinds of result-oriented meaning.¹⁵

Thus the indicated, meaning-related properties are *complex*—such as a property of *expressing a certain intention*—rather than simple, such as an indication of 'an intention' *simpliciter*. This feature is needed (among other things) to satisfy the intuitive requirement that artworks can, via their indicative powers, *express* intentions (just as do actions) instead of merely 'having' intentions.

However, an objector might try to reply to the above account with a kind of '*excessive complexity*' objection: that since one can *simply see* the both the subject matter and expressive etc. properties of an artwork in most cases, this simple basic phenomenology cannot be adequately explained by the kind of 'indirect meaning' analysis I have given, which involves at least the following cognitive stages. First, an art object and its properties must be identified. And second, one must use one's general knowledge as to the most likely causes of the observed physical properties to identify a package of 'informational content' associated with the artwork, each item of which must be seen as resulting from the object's indicating of some feature or property of the relevant causes--

which indicated properties are themselves complex in that they are, broadly speaking, *expressive* properties (expressing either ‘meaning content’ or referential content) of the relevant causes (artistic actions). Is not this an excessively ‘noisy’ or complex analysis of the actual, phenomenologically simple experiences we have of artworks?¹⁶

An initial rejoinder is that, viewed in terms of the general perspective of cognitive science, there could easily be many complex kinds or layers of information processing concerning artworks that occur at a *sub-perceptual* or sub-doxastic level: the apparent simplicity of conscious perception clearly is not a reliable guide to the actual information processing tasks that may be involved in producing such perceptual experiences.

Nevertheless, I believe that it would be a mistake to completely reject or ignore the ‘complexity’ objection. For a main thesis of this paper is, in effect, that successful artists use a particular medium in such a way as to *reduce as far as possible* the complexity of that processing task faced by a viewer of their work. Technically fluent artists are those who learn how, through use of a particular medium, to give their works the specific appropriate physical properties that will best, or most clearly and simply, provide a viewer (through the indirect procedure discussed) with the desired kinds of meaningful content with respect to the work in question.

As well as such a general account, the issue of complexity-reduction can also be discussed in more detail, as follows. In almost all genres of art,¹⁷ one way of reducing the complexity of the viewer’s task is to eliminate in a finished work, as far as possible,

any indications that would draw attention specifically to various *physical* properties of an artist's actions, such as the amount of pressure she applied to a brush in making a brushstroke, or the speed or momentum of the movement of her arm in depositing pigment in a given area of the work—hence the truism that typically the best art is ‘art that conceals art’, i.e. that does *not* obtrusively indicate such physical efforts, or associated craft-like techniques, that may have been used by the artist.

Thus by and large an artist should construct her artwork in such a way that a viewer is free to concentrate on the indicated expressive, stylistic and intentional properties of an artist's actions, without any discordant or complicating indications of their specifically physical attributes, in spite of the fact that medium content is, of metaphysical necessity, '*backward-looking*' content--looking or indicating back to the actions that caused its physical basis (namely the resultant artifact) to have the physical properties that it does.

5. Medium Content Versus Representational Content

It is time to reintroduce the referential or subject matter content that is also present in any case of representational art. Such representational content could be described as '*outward-looking*', in that such works in typical cases¹⁸ at least purport¹⁹ to represent something external to the artwork itself. However, as already noted in the initial exposition, referential content must also (as with medium content) be initially acquired through a process of backward-looking or indirect indication of actions and their features,

since a work cannot be *directly* endowed with *any* kind of content, including referential content. Nevertheless referential content, once thus validated or established indirectly through action indication of an artist's *subject matter* intentions as expressed through her actions,²⁰ may also then take on a more primary indicative or symbolic role as specifically *representational* (outward-looking) content--perhaps for some of the familiar traditional reasons, such as resemblance to some actual subject.²¹

Clearly then a discussion of the differing functional roles of both representational content and medium content is needed, for it is a natural, derivative thesis of this paper that in order to understand representational art one has to understand the contributions of *both* primarily outward-looking (representational) content *and* primarily backward-looking (medium) content to the total meaningfulness or informativeness of any given work.

In terms of C. S. Peirce's tripartite classification of signs²² as *icons* (which resemble their subjects), *indices* (which typically point to some actual entity) and *symbols* (which conventionally signify something), an artwork is a sign that is usually primarily *iconic* with respect to its *representational* content, in that it typically resembles some actual entity of the kind represented, whereas with respect to its *medium* content, though some iconic elements may be involved,²³ it is also significantly *indexical* (referring back to the actions that brought it about) and *symbolic* (in that it makes use of standard artistic conventions as to how elements in the relevant medium should be used and interpreted).²⁴

However, though those relatively technical points about modes of signification of artworks are of some theoretical interest, it is more pressing at this stage to discuss further the broadly *functional* connections of the two kinds of content with each other. In order to do so I shall introduce another useful truism: that artists generally seek not merely to accurately *represent* the subject matter of their artworks, but also to *interpret* it, that is, to provide a visual *commentary* on it (with analogous forms of commentary for other non-visual art forms). Or, to put the truism in stylistic terms, in the case of artworks *how* a subject is represented, or the *way in which* it is depicted, is as important as what the subject matter itself is of a work.

Now since medium content is closely connected with artistic intentions, style and expression--all of which are integrally involved in an artist's commentary on her subject matter--it seems inescapable that it is *medium* content that should be viewed as having the function of providing the visual *commentary*, or '*interpretive*' aspects of an artwork, while on the other hand the representational content of an artwork of course functions as its *subject matter*.

Thus the concept of medium content not only functions (as previously) as an explanation of the medium-specific *language* in which an artwork's meaning is expressed, but it also naturally takes up the functional role of providing an artist's interpretation, construal or *commentary* on some specific subject matter. For an artist comments on her subject in ways that are specific to the particular *medium* that she chooses to use, which medium is the visual language in terms of which her *meaningful commentary* is expressed.

To be sure, these are points of great generality, but the completely natural way in which our two kinds of truism dovetail with each other--first a point about a medium (in the form of medium content) as providing a *language* for expression of meaning, and second a point about its also providing, in specific uses of medium content by an artist, a *commentary* on or *interpretation* of the relevant subject matter--strongly suggest a central and perhaps even indispensable role for a concept of medium content in any fully adequate analysis of representational artworks.

6. The Possible Indispensability of Medium Content

It might seem unduly provocative to claim (as I just did) that the concept of medium content may be indispensable in analyzing representational artworks. As a brief defense of this claim, consider two well-known and quite different accounts of the meaning of artworks, namely those of Arthur Danto and Kendall Walton.²⁵

Danto has argued that suitable physical objects become meaningful artworks by being appropriately *interpreted* by viewers, while Walton instead regards artworks as props in *games of make-believe* engaged in by their viewers. Both of these accounts of the meaning of artworks may seem remote from mine, but my claim is that neither approach can by itself explain the *genesis* of meaning, that is, how artworks initially *acquire* their meaning--or more precisely in the case of these authors, how artworks acquire

appropriate *dispositional* meaning properties, such that acts of interpretation can be both *appropriate* and *successful* when applied to them (in the case of Danto), or such that appropriate games of make-believe are *licensed* or *mandated* by a work (in the case of Walton).

My most basic claim is that backward indication of actions and their properties--which defines, among other things, the medium content of a work--is metaphysically the *only possible* way in which a work itself can acquire any (relatively) objective, viewer-independent meaning,²⁶ no matter how much theories of representational art may otherwise differ as to the subsequent nature of viewer involvements (whether interpretive, imaginative game-playing, and so on) with art objects having such viewer-independent meanings.

Thus at least *backward-looking meaningful content*, no matter how described, is an unavoidable postulate of any theory of representational art. Then my additional claims are that such meaningful content would *not be possible* without the resources of specific art media (so that specifically the content must be *medium-related* content), and also that such content is in addition inevitably in the form of a *commentary*, since that is the appropriate general category to which intentional, expressive and stylistic kinds of meaning belong.

7. How Artworks Make Statements

I shall now integrate two threads in the current paper: first my initial view that medium content is a *trace* or *indication* of the artist's actions in producing it, and secondly the more recently discussed view that medium content provides a (medium-specific) *commentary* on its subject matter.

To begin with, it might seem as if I have ended up abandoning any significant role in my view of an artwork for the artist's *actions* with respect to it *as such*, since it is only *indications of* those actions--along with a generally strong de-emphasis of indications of the physical properties of those actions--that explain the meaningfulness of medium content on my account. However, with the introduction of the point that medium content provides a *commentary* on subject matter the way is open to re-emphasize the *active* nature of the artist's commentary, in spite of the fact that it is only *indicated* by the finished work. For it is through her physical actions in producing the work that the artist *expresses* her commentary on the subject matter, and in thus *commenting on* a subject she is engaging in an expressive *activity*--which expressive activity is part of what is indicated by the relevant medium content.

Thus the underlying structure of the meaning of a work, from a semantic point of view, is initially focused on the role of a *verb* as in a sentence such as 'Artist A *comments on* subject matter B'. Or more precisely (since an artwork expresses a first rather than third person point of view), the artist's medium-specific statement is, after appropriate

linguistic translation, of the form 'I *thus* comment on *this* subject matter', which semantically involves an indexical reference to the artist herself (by 'I'), and two demonstrative references, first to *the manner in which* the artist is commenting ('thus comment') and second to the relevant subject matter ('this subject matter').²⁷

What this means is that, logically or semantically speaking, medium content provides an *adverbially qualified verbal* rather than *adjectivally qualified noun* kind of content--of a *manner* or *way* in which the artist's *action* of commenting is carried out by her, rather than an adjectivally described substantive object, which categories would apply instead to the relevant *subject matter* of the artist's work. Thus, medium content and representational content function in complementary ways at the semantic level as well as in the other ways previously discussed.

One could sum up these points by saying that medium content is *adverbial* (that is, adverbially modified verbal content),²⁸ and that on my view another truism about artworks--that one understands an artwork when one understands *the statement that an artist makes* by means of it--can also be given a relatively precise validation, in the semantic terms just discussed.

Of course, none of this is to deny that an artist's actions can *also* be regarded as substantive events having adjectival properties, which events cause changes in a resultant artwork. The point is rather that the *meaningful content* of an artwork is (after appropriate linguistic translation) of the above first person, adverbial form, rather than of

various more scientific or impersonal forms that may also convey accurate information concerning the artist, events, properties and artwork in question.

8. Broader Horizons.

I shall conclude both by discussing perception of medium content, and by briefly extending the results of this paper so as to integrate them with a recent, more general theory of art.²⁹ These extensions cannot be fully justified here, so that in the context of this paper they are somewhat speculative; but they may perhaps be of some value in supporting that more general theory.

To begin, consider a typical van Gogh picture of a cornfield, with prominent vigorous brushstrokes covering all of the visible areas of the picture. Now my first point is that strictly speaking there are not, and cannot be, any *genuine* brushstrokes in the picture, because of course a brushstroke is an *action* by an artist of depositing some pigment with a brush; as discussed previously, what are usually called ‘brushstrokes’ are in fact *traces* or *indications* of the artist’s brushstrokes. In the discussion below I shall assume that the term ‘brushstroke’ refers to such resultant traces of the artist’s actions.

Next, an issue that has not been raised in this paper yet is that of the *identity* of an artwork. It is natural to assume that the physical artifact, which is the result of the artist’s actions, plays at least some role in the identity-conditions of the relevant artwork. Here is

an argument for that view. It seems, intuitively or pre-theoretically speaking, as if much of what one sees when one looks at such a picture is *not* directly related to its *subject matter*: though of course the brushstrokes *represent* the cornfield, their particular structures and characteristic configurations seem to be noticeable ‘in their own right’, independently of their representational function in depicting parts of a cornfield. Thus in the absence of a concept of medium content, it may seem obvious that at least part of what one sees when looking at the picture is those *physical brushstrokes themselves* (that is, the physical traces of brushstrokes), with their characteristic physical configurations.³⁰

However, once the concept of medium content is introduced, the issue is no longer so clear. For the non-representational ‘extra’ seeing or noticing of features of the brushstrokes could now be regarded as instead supplying *indications as to their causal and intentional origins*, that is, as involving a noticing of *another* kind of content—*medium content*--in addition to one’s noticing of their representational content. Using one’s understanding of the medium of painting, one can now *interpret* what are, in fact, physical traces of brushstrokes *as* a particular case of van Gogh’s commenting, in a medium-specific, painterly way, on the cornfield that is his subject matter.

Thus it is no longer obvious that this integrated visual perception and pictorial understanding *must* involve perception or awareness of specifically physical aspects of the brushstrokes. For just as fluent users of a language can communicate with no thought as to the physical characteristics of the letters or sounds they use, one could similarly hold that visually fluent viewers of van Gogh’s painterly communications could equally

understand them without having to notice their *physical* characteristics. (Which view is quite consistent with also holding that *non-fluent* viewers, including those seeing a painting for the first time, may have to pay careful attention to its physical characteristics as a preliminary to thus accurately perceiving its medium content).

One possible upshot of this line of thought is that, just as the meaningful content of a linguistic utterance (a statement or proposition) may usefully be regarded for theoretical purposes as being an entity *distinct* from its linguistic vehicle—as a structured package of informational content---so also may *artworks* similarly be regarded as being distinct from their physical vehicles, and as being structured packages of informational content, which in their case consists of medium content plus representational content.³¹

But how exactly should this view be theoretically articulated, given that the artwork in question has to *itself* represent its subject matter? There is really only one possibility, namely that it is the *medium content* of an artwork that represents the subject matter--because there is nothing else that could do the job, on this 'informational package' approach.

Returning to perception of a van Gogh cornfield picture, this claim--that medium content does the representing--does seem psychologically realistic, in that it is clearly the *perceived vigorous brushstrokes* (fluent perception of which, it will be recalled, on the present view is simply perception of the relevant items of medium content, including

stylistic and expressive features such as their vigorous quality) that can be seen to represent the cornfield.

But how is this view of medium content, as representing subject matter, to be rendered consistent with the earlier arguments of this paper to the effect that medium content is itself indicated or symbolized by the artwork that results from the artist's actions? To achieve consistency all that is necessary is to distinguish the physical *artifact* that results from the artist's actions, from the resulting *artwork*—which must now be identified with the relevant *medium content* itself, since as before there is nothing else available that could take on that role on this 'informational package' view of artworks. Thus a more complete statement of the resulting theory is that it claims that the physical artifact *indicates* the medium content—which is the artwork—and which medium content (or artwork) in turn *represents* its subject matter.

Thus the key to achieving a consistent theory is to regard representational artworks as involving not one but *two* distinct stages of signification or symbolization. In the first stage, a physical artifact of some kind (whether a painting, printed page, length of film, musical or theatrical event, and so on) signifies an *artwork*, which is an (organized) collection³² of medium content of the appropriate, medium-specific kind. And in the second, more conventional stage, that artwork represents its subject matter.

As to the kind of signification involved in each stage, it might seem clear enough from this paper that each stage must involve a *distinct* kind of signification (which kinds I have

described as ‘indication’ and ‘representation’ respectively in this paper). However, this issue remains unsettled, since the very different *functional* roles of medium content and representational content in understanding artworks do not necessarily imply that each must be signified in a different manner or mode.³³

Thus, to sum up this concluding section, I have discussed the perception of medium content, and also outlined one possible way in which the results of this paper could be naturally extended to support a more comprehensive account of the nature of artworks.³⁴

Notes

¹ I shall use the term 'representational' broadly, to cover any cases in which a picture (for example) has some *subject matter*, even if that subject matter is 'abstract' in not being readily recognizable as some familiar kind of object or person, etc. This usage roughly corresponds to Richard Wollheim's broad term 'representation', and I too would reserve the term 'figurative' for the narrower subclass of readily recognizable things as just described. See R. Wollheim, *Painting as an Art* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 21. Also, even with figurative representations, their *subject matter* (or 'representational content') should be distinguished from their 'actual subject' (if any), for some pictures are simply of 'a man' rather than of some particular actual man. (On which see Wollheim, *ibid.*, pp. 67-71).

² Wollheim provides some suggestive but fragmentary remarks about the nature of a medium in relation to the materials of painting in the early sections of his *ibid.*

³ Which term I shall use as a 'portmanteau' word from now on, to cover the whole range of feelings, emotions, intentions, attitudes, expectations, and so on that an artist might wish to express in a work--or that might be expressed anyway, irrespective of the artist's intentions. (Wollheim uses the term 'intention' in a similarly broad fashion: *ibid.* p. 86.)

⁴ E.g., see Dominic Lopes, *Understanding Pictures* (Oxford; Oxford University Press, 1996, who discusses the distinction of representational content from (actual) subject on pp. 3-4.

⁵ Whereas other media, including literary genres such as the novel or poetry, are less clearly linked to specific physical items.

⁶ Michael Podro has emphasized the medium versus materials distinction, e.g. in M. Podro, "Review of Wollheim, *Art and Its Objects*, 2nd. Ed." *The Burlington Magazine* 124, no. 947 (February 1982): 100-102, and M. Podro, 'Depiction and the Golden Calf', in *Philosophy and the Visual Arts: Seeing and Abstracting*, ed. Andrew Harrison (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1987). But Podro's account is couched primarily in terms of a concept of a particular artist's intentional *use* of a medium, and so arguably it is too specialized to explain the characteristic ways in which artistic media *as such* differ from each other (see P. L. Maynard, 'Seeing Double', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 52, no. 2 (1994), pp.155-167, for related comments on Podro's views). Nevertheless, there are some affinities between Podro's view and mine.

⁷ In addition, Quentin Williams in 'Projected Actuality', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 35, no. 1 (1995), pp. 273-277, suggests that some paintings by Vermeer are 'photographic pictures', in that they achieve characteristic effects of the *medium* of photography while using only the *materials* of painting. A musical example would be the use of synthesizers to achieve orchestral effects normally achieved using traditional instruments.

⁸ Any further unqualified mention of 'artistic meaning' will be assumed to be of the relevant stylistic, expressive or intentional kinds, as opposed to referential or subject matter related meaning.

⁹ For expository convenience I shall, until the last Section of this paper, ignore an important distinction between an *artwork* and the physical *artifact* associated with it, which strictly speaking is what the artist works upon.

¹⁰ An analogy may be helpful. If an angry person swings her arm and hits someone, that action is distinct from its effects on the victim, such as any resultant bruises. Thus in the case of a watercolor, the eventual effect, after the artist's *action* of *applying the wet pigment* to the surface, is a kind of 'bruise' which is the result of the spreading and drying of the pigment; but clearly that eventual, dried effect or 'bruise' is distinct from the artist's antecedent action of applying wet pigment to the surface.

¹¹ E.g., E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion; a Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* 2d ed. (London: Phaidon Press, 1962), pp. 243-44: "...he must make us read his brushmarks as traces of his gestures and actions... This, I take it, is what the 'action painter' aims at." A related phenomenon can be found in photography as well: Patrick Maynard in P. L. Maynard, 'Drawing and Shooting: Causality in Depiction', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 44 (1985): 115-129, argues (on p. 124) that blurs

in photographs are 'traces or manifestations' of the photographer's movements in taking them.

¹² To be sure, mixed media works are possible, including those in relatively well-defined genres such as opera--a fusion of drama plus vocal and orchestral music. Such cases are more complex, but though they increase the complexity or difficulty of the artist's task of providing her audience with legitimate expectations and reliable indications, it seems unlikely that they require a different kind of theory altogether, dependent as they are on mixings of pre-existing media involving more standard expectations and indications.

¹³ This example is adapted from one is given by Andrew Harrison, "Dimensions of Meaning," in *Philosophy and the Visual Arts : Seeing and Abstracting*, ed. A. Harrison (Boston, U.S.A.: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1987), p.63, but who sees the mistake not as being medium-related, but rather as a failure to understand the 'logical grammar' or projective model involved in the engraving in question. See also Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, p. 78: "To say of a drawing that it is a correct view of Tivoli does not mean, of course, that Tivoli is bounded by wiry lines."

¹⁴ This criticism is along similar lines to one of Jerrold Levinson's criticisms of Gregory Currie's 'Action Type Hypothesis' theory of art, as given by Levinson in his article "Art as Action," repr. in his book *The Pleasures of Aesthetics* (Ithaca: Cornell, 1996), pp. 138-149.

¹⁵ As well, of course, as those artworks acquiring their better-understood *representational* content—the referential or subject matter ‘meaning’ of an artwork-- which will also be initially acquired from appropriate properties of the actions in question.

¹⁶ ‘Simple’ in that we directly perceive their meaningful properties, even if they are otherwise complex in involving many different meaningful properties.

¹⁷ Other than, for instance, ‘action painting’ as mentioned earlier, in which the indication of overtly physical aspects of an artist’s actions might be considered as being at least a central part of the essence of the genre.

¹⁸ I shall ignore atypical cases such as an artwork made of materials that easily deteriorate, which might be intended to represent its own impermanence.

¹⁹ ‘Purport’ only, in that, as mentioned in fn. 1, a picture may merely be of ‘a man’ rather than of a particular actual man.

²⁰ Compare Wollheim, *Painting as an Art*, pp. 46-59, on the difference between merely seeing a subject matter *in* a surface, versus its specifically *representing* that subject matter. On my account it is the validation that is provided by indication of artistic action that makes the difference.

²¹ Though see, e.g., Lopes, *Understanding Pictures*, for doubts about such resemblance accounts.

²² See *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, ed. C. Hartshorne and P. Weiss (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931-1958).

²³ The relative prominence of such medium-related iconic elements probably varies widely, depending on the medium, with photography being one extreme example having strong iconicity, in that the photographer's actions and procedures typically allow most of the visual data structures present in the light impinging on a photographic emulsion to be retained in that emulsion after appropriate development and fixing.

²⁴ Thus, previous discussions as to distinctions between pictorial and *linguistic* representations (which are primarily 'symbolic' in Peirce's sense) have inevitably been incomplete to the extent that they have not discussed these indexical and symbolic aspects of pictorial signs.

²⁵ Arthur C. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981), and Kendall L. Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990).

²⁶ Here I exclude from consideration referential or subject matter meaning,

in that, for example, a piece of driftwood might suggest, as a result of features it had previously acquired through natural processes, a subject matter prior to any actions of a sculptor upon it.

²⁷ This is my alternative to Wittgenstein's views as to the logical syntax of pictures, such as were expressed in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London: Routledge, 1922).

²⁸ This adverbial view naturally supports the traditional view of *style* as giving the 'how' of 'what' is represented by a picture; on which see Dale Jacquette, 'Goodman on the Concept of Style', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 40, no. 4 (2000), pp. 452-466 (I was the commentator on an earlier version of his paper, delivered at the American Society for Aesthetics, Washington, DC, 27-30 October 1999).

²⁹ Which theory is presented in my papers "A Representational Theory of Artefacts and Artworks," *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 41 no. 4 (October 2001): 353-370; "Theater, Representation, Types and Interpretation," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 39 no. 2 (April 2002): 197-209; "Three Depictive Views Defended," *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 42 no. 3 (July 2002): 259-278, and "The Fictionality of Plays," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 60 no. 3 (Summer 2002): 263-273. Various ancillary topics are discussed in "Four Theories of Inversion in Art and Music," *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 40, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 1-19, and "Varieties of Visual Representation," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 32 no. 2 (June 2002): 183-205.

³⁰ Wollheim defends this common assumption in his book *The Art of Painting*, arguing that one simultaneously sees both the physical painting and what it represents. I argue against this view in my paper “Three Depictive Views Defended”.

³¹ This view is most explicitly defended in my paper "Three Depictive Views Defended".

³² In a fuller account one would regard particular elements of intention, style and expression as individual ‘items’ of medium content, which in an appropriately organized manner make up the collection in question. I discuss these issues in my paper "Three Depictive Views Defended".

³³ But I do distinguish four different kinds of visual signification in my paper "Varieties of Visual Representation", and subsequently I plan to argue that two of them may be identified with the concepts of 'indication' and 'representation' as discussed in this current paper.

³⁴ My thanks to an anonymous referee for very helpful comments that have led to significant improvements in the argument of this paper.