

# PICTURES, PICTORIAL CONTENTS AND VISION

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## 1. Introduction

Dürer's self-portraits give us the look of the man very differently to 'portraits' of him in words. A natural thought is that many of the notable properties of depiction derive from special relationships between pictures and vision. There are, though, numerous ways in which pictures could be especially visual.

It might be, for example, that the characteristic way in which we come to grasp the contents of pictures is peculiarly bound to vision. Or perhaps the contents which pictures characteristically express are distinctively visual. Or maybe pictures characteristically express distinctively visual contents in especially visual ways. Contemporary writers about depiction have sometimes ignored the thought that there is something thoroughly visual about the fundamental contents of pictures, however.

So, Walton remarks that 'there is something especially visual about pictorial representation'. But, as he notes, the especially visual nature of pictures can't simply rest in the fact that pictures are to be looked at, for 'so are written words, and we use our eyes on graphs and diagrams as well'. He then states that what is especially visual about pictures 'lies in the particular nature of the visual experiences that pictures provide'.<sup>1</sup> Yet the idea that the contents of pictures are especially visual at least deserves a mention there as well.

Similarly, Lopes asks '[w]hat ... it mean[s] to say that a picture shows how O looks, when seeing O in the picture is not just like seeing O face to face'. His question is very naturally construed as relating to the nature of pictorial contents: our talk of what a picture 'shows us' sounds analogous to our talk about what a passage of text 'tells us', and in the latter case we are signalling putative facts about content. But Lopes passes over that reading of his question, seeking immediately to answer it using observations about what it takes for someone to interpret a picture correctly; he states that '[t]he answer lies in the principle that seeing an object in a picture depends upon and expresses knowledge of the object's appearance.'<sup>2</sup>

Other writers have given much more of a hearing to the idea that pictures have especially visual contents. Hopkins, for example, says that it is 'tempting' to assert that pictures represent 'things *via* representing their [visual] appearances', while Budd suggests that his approach to depiction 'makes possible a unitary account of pictorial content' in terms of 'visual field representational content'.<sup>3</sup> Even for those two writers, though, the overriding concern is to clarify the relationships between facts about depiction and ones concerning the characteristics of those visual episodes in which look comprehendingly at pictures.

How far can we get in understanding what's striking about depiction if, by contrast, we concentrate exclusively upon the contents of pictures, ignoring completely for example questions about what it's like for us when we use our eyes to grasp those contents? I'll argue in what follows that we can get a long way; and that, in particular, a huge range of sight-related properties of depiction are easily derived from a proper account of the distinctively visual contents which pictures possess. Then, before closing,

I'll make some remarks about the bearing of those arguments on aspects of recent philosophical work on depiction.

## 2. An initial thought

Here's a thought which, although simple, nonetheless puts vision right at the heart of depiction:

(1) Pictures show how things look from viewpoints<sup>4</sup>; and what a picture depicts derives from how it shows things as looking.<sup>5</sup>

Note, too, that the following analogue (1\*) of (1) holds true of mental visual images:

(1\*) Mental visual images show how things look from viewpoints; and the scene which is displayed by a mental visual image derives from how it shows things as looking.

Despite its simplicity, (1) looks like it might help us to account for some of the strikingly vision-bound features of depiction. For example, a common claim about pictures is that they are restricted to depicting visible properties of visible things. But if (1) is right in stating that pictures depict scenes by showing how things look from viewpoints, that seems unsurprising. Indeed, the fact that (1\*) holds for mental visual images looks set to explain why a similar constraint holds there too.

Note that (1) is concerned with how pictures show things as looking—that is, with the contents of pictures—rather than with how pictures themselves look. To see that there’s an important distinction here, we need only to consider mental visual images. So, you or I can produce mental visual images which show things as looking certain ways from certain viewpoints, where some pictures also show things as looking those same ways. But the relationship which there holds between our mental visual images and appropriate pictures—that of showing things looking some common ways—is a wholly semantic one arising from similarities in the contents which belong to certain representations, rather than a relationship arising from similarities in the visual appearances of the very representations themselves.

Claim (1) relates solely to the contents of pictures, then. And the various refinements and relatives of that claim offered below will do likewise. In particular, therefore, (1) and the rest will remain entirely neutral on how to answer numerous controversial questions about the phenomenological characteristics of the visual experiences with which pictures may provide us—just as semantic accounts of, say, the propositions that are expressed by sentences like ‘if Oswald hadn’t shot Kennedy, somebody else would have’ don’t say anything about the phenomenological character of the episodes in which we understand the sentences.

I’ll return to that fact in section 5, when I come to provide an initial clarificatory comparison between the semantic ideas about pictures that I’m about to develop and some ideas on depiction figuring prominently in the literature. Before all that, though, we need to get a firmer grip on what exactly it is that’s said by (1) and (1\*). And to do that, we need to consider what it is for something to show how things look from a viewpoint.

Before addressing that question, however, it will be helpful to start with a simpler one.

What is it for things to look a certain way from a viewpoint?

### 3. How things look from viewpoints

Consider a nearby viewpoint  $p$  off to your right. That viewpoint  $p$  involves a location—*there*—but it also involves various orientational aspects: relative to  $p$ , one direction—*that* one—counts as forwards, while another—*that* different one—counts as upwards. Imagine that you possessed a machine which enabled you to supply some person with a sensation of any given (possibly-instantiated)<sup>6</sup> type. If you wanted things to look to that person how they look from  $p$ , what sort of sensation would you choose?

You'd obviously plump for a visual sensation, but it's equally obvious that not any old visual sensation would do. If you're in a normal room, for example, you wouldn't make it look to the person as if she is at sea; if a gnome isn't visible from  $p$ , you wouldn't make it look to her as if a gnome is present. But if a red wall is visible from  $p$ , you would make it look to the person as if an appropriately coloured wall is nearby; and if some books can be seen from  $p$ , you would make it look to her as if some books of the right sort are around.

More generally, we have the following:

- (2) A visual sensation-type  $T$  is a way that things look from a certain viewpoint  $v$  just in case  $T$  captures how the world is laid out around  $v$ .

What is it, though, for a type of visual sensations to capture how things are laid out around a viewpoint? Some supplementary ideas will be useful at this point.

Suppose that certain visual appearances are common to any visual sensation of type *T*; or, as I'll say, to any *T-sensation*. More fully, suppose that the common fund of visual appearances which always feature in *T-sensations* involve its looking as though things are precisely, say, like *that* (to use a demonstrative formulation which might come naturally to the subject of the appearances himself). Then the type *T*'s *phenomenological content* is *things being like that*. A visual sensation-type's phenomenological content captures the common way which things look to be to the subjects of sensations of that type.

Reconsider the nearby viewpoint *p*. Let *Your View* be, say, the type of those visual sensations which are, from the inside, just like the ones which you're now having. It looks to you, in the course of your current *Your View*-sensation, as though things are *thus*. Your current visual sensations, and the type *Your View* itself, may well capture how things are laid out around your own current viewpoint, because things hopefully are indeed *thus* relative to where you are. But it is probable that your current visual sensations, and *Your View* itself, don't capture how things are laid out around the nearby viewpoint *p*. For it is unlikely that things are exactly *thus* relative to *p*.

But now imagine how things would have looked to you if you had occupied *p* rather your own current viewpoint. And let *Putative p-View* be the type of those visual sensations in which things look the way that you've just imagined them to look. Then it may be that the sort of visual sensations which you're imagining—ones in which things

look to be, let's say, like *that*—does capture how things are laid out around *p*. For it may be that things are in fact like *that* relative to *p*.

We can use the terminology recently introduced to summarise the points made in the last two paragraphs. To take the first: the initial sensation-type *Your View* which we considered probably didn't capture how things look from *p*, because *Your View*'s phenomenological content—*things being thus*—isn't likely to have been true relative to *p*. By contrast, and to take the second point, the sensation-type *Putative p-View* may well have captured how things look from *p*, because its phenomenological content—*things being like that*—may well have been true relative to *p*.

Generalising from those cases, we get the following:

(3) A visual sensation-type *T* captures how things are laid out around a certain viewpoint *v* just in case *T*'s phenomenological content is true relative to *v*.

But (2) and (3) combine to give (4), which answers our question what it is for things to look a certain way from a viewpoint:

(4) A visual sensation-type *T* is a way that things look from a certain viewpoint *v* just in case *T*'s phenomenological content is true relative to *v*.

Before proceeding, here are some things that it's worth remarking in relation to (4).

Note, first, there may be a common way that things look to the subjects of the visual sensations of some type even though things don't look the same in absolutely all respects to the subjects of sensations of that type. That is, even relatively *high-level* visual sensation-types sometimes have phenomenological contents, although the sensations falling under those types may also belong to other lower-level sensation-types whose phenomenological contents are richer than those belonging to the higher-level ones. And relatively high-level visual sensation-types may also capture how things look from viewpoints, in accordance with (4). But when a relatively high-level sensation-type does capture how things look from a viewpoint, that fact will tell us less about how things are laid out around that viewpoint than for example the visual appearances you're currently enjoying purport to tell you about how things are around you.

Note, second, that (4) doesn't carry any implication to the effect that things only ever look *one* way from a given viewpoint. Perhaps, for instance, bees can have visual sensations which we cannot have, in which the world also looks to them to be certain ways. And perhaps one of those apian visual sensation-types *Bee View* has a phenomenological content which is true relative to the nearby viewpoint *p* discussed earlier. Then, even if the sensation-type *Putative p-View* discussed above is a way that things look from *q*, so too is the humanly-inaccessible visual sensation-type *Bee View*.<sup>7</sup>

#### 4. Distinctively visual contents and depiction

Recall the simple thoughts (1) and (1\*) above:

(1) Pictures show how things look from viewpoints; and what a picture depicts derives from how it shows things as looking.

(1\*) Mental visual images show how things look from viewpoints; and the scene which is displayed by a mental visual image derives from how it shows things as looking.

According to (4) above, what it is for a sensation-type to be a way that things look from some viewpoint is for the type's phenomenological content to be true relative to that viewpoint. If that's right, pictures and mental visual images presumably 'show how things look from viewpoints' by somehow characterising the phenomenological contents of visual sensation-types as being true relative to viewpoints.

Given the points noted in the previous paragraph, though, some fact will derive from how a picture or mental visual image shows things as looking just in case that fact is determined by the picture's or the mental visual image's appropriately characterising the phenomenological contents of visual sensation-types as true relative to viewpoints. In particular, therefore, we may conclude from the second parts of (1) and (1\*) that facts about what a picture depicts, and about the scene which a mental visual image displays, are fixed in that manner.

To sharpen things up, consider some picture which shows how things look from one or more viewpoints. Let the picture's *distinctively visual* content amount to a full characterisation of how the picture shows things as looking from those viewpoints.<sup>8</sup> Then the picture's distinctively visual content amounts, more fully, to a characterisation of the

phenomenological contents of various visual sensation-types as being true relative to certain viewpoints. And the things that are involved in those phenomenological contents—intuitively, the things which are involved in how the picture shows things as looking—will be what settles the picture’s depictive properties.

Recall, however, that the phenomenological content of a visual sensation-type merely captures the common way that the world looks to be to the subjects of visual sensations of that type. All that it is for a thing of some kind to be ‘involved’ in a visual sensation-type’s phenomenological content, then, is for the visual appearances which are common to the sensations of that type to posit the presence of a suitable item. We thus arrive at the following account of what pictures depict:

- (5) A picture depicts an  $F$ —from viewpoint  $v$ —just in case, for some visual sensation-type  $T$ , the picture’s distinctively visual content characterises  $T$ ’s phenomenological content as being true relative to  $v$ , where anyone who has a  $T$ -sensation thereby seems to see an  $F$ .

((5) may be adapted to supply an account of how the distinctively visual contents of mental visual images determine what’s displayed by them too.)

Suppose, for instance, that a picture shows things as looking a certain way from perspective  $q$ , where that way for things to look amounts to the visual sensation-type  $q$ -*View*. Suppose, moreover, that the cited way for things to look involves the nearby presence of a piebald cow. Suppose, that is, that anyone who has a  $q$ -*View*-sensation—and to whom it thereby looks as though things are, say, *thus*—seems to see a piebald cow

nearby. By contrast, though, assume that none of the ways which the picture shows things as looking involves a shaggy goat.

The picture's distinctively visual content characterises *q-View*'s phenomenological content as being true relative to *q*. That is, it characterises things as being *thus* around *q*. But for things to be *thus* relative to a viewpoint is, at least in part, for a piebald cow to be near to there. Hence, and by (5), the picture's distinctively visual content determines that the picture depicts a proximate piebald cow, and that it depicts the beast from *q*. But as none of the ways that the picture shows things as looking involves a shaggy goat—for none of the phenomenological contents figuring in the picture's distinctively visual content involves a shaggy goat—(5) also implies that the picture doesn't depict any such thing from anywhere. And all that seems correct.

Finally, recall that relatively high-level visual sensation-types may have phenomenological contents. Hence, just as those relatively high-level types may capture how things look from viewpoints, the distinctively visual contents of pictures may characterise the phenomenological contents belonging to those types as being true relative to viewpoints. Yet, if a picture's distinctively visual content does do that, (5) tells us that the information which the picture supplies concerning the depicted scene will be considerably less specific than for example the information which the visual appearances that you're currently enjoying purport to provide you with concerning how things are around you.

The claim that pictures have distinctively visual contents therefore certainly doesn't have the disastrous implication that the representational richness of pictures must always match the richness of the ways that things really look to us. Indeed, the previous

ideas enable us to understand how it is that a picture may ‘show us how things look’ while nonetheless providing us with only a fairly sketchy portrayal of what it depicts; they can, for example, be used to account for the contents of line drawings just as they can be used to account for the contents of trompe l’oeil paintings.

Before considering the explanatory powers of the semantic framework developed in this section, it will be useful to clarify its precise nature by discussing its relationship to another well-known account of depiction and to a well-known range of issues which have often featured in discussions of that account.

## 5. Situating the framework

One of the most notorious approaches to depiction is the Illusionism commonly associated with Gombrich. To quote Lopes, Illusionists hold that ‘pictures depict by taking advantages of ambiguities of failures of visual discrimination. A picture depicts a bowl of flowers because the markings on its surface “fool” the human visual processing system, which responds to the picture as it would when presented with an actual bowl of flowers’.<sup>9</sup> Here’s a summary of the basic Illusionist idea, then: Illusionists hold that a picture depicts an *F* just in case any suitably-circumstanced viewer of the picture would seem to see an *F*.

But now reconsider (5) above. That principle basically says that a picture depicts an *F* just in case one to whom things look as the picture shows things as looking would seem to see an *F*. Claim (5) thus binds facts about what a picture depicts to facts about what would seem to be seen by those viewers who stand in a certain relationship to the

picture. Doesn't (5) therefore merely amount to an unusually longwinded Illusionist account of depiction?

Recall the distinction, emphasised in section 2, between how a picture shows things as looking and how the picture itself looks. The account of depiction embodied in (5) is concerned entirely with the relationship between facts about what a picture depicts and facts about how the picture shows things as looking; that is, with the relationship between facts about what a picture depicts and the nature of the distinctively visual content which the picture possesses. In particular, (5) links facts about what a picture depicts to facts about what would seem to be seen by those viewers who have visual sensations of the types which figure in the picture's distinctively visual content.

What (5) doesn't do, though, is to link facts about what a picture depicts to facts about what would seem to be seen by viewers of the picture itself. (That's not to deny to such links may exist, of course; it's just that principle (5) itself doesn't purport to identify any.<sup>10</sup>) Yet that last sort of connection is precisely what Illusionism involves. Hence (5)'s account of depiction is far from being a brand of Illusionism, because (5) remains wholly neutral on issues relating to the phenomenological characteristics of those episodes in which we grasp the contents of pictures; and those issues are among the ones upon which Illusionism most immediately bears.<sup>11</sup>

One question that has frequently arisen in discussions of Illusionism, and indeed in discussions of plenty of the other accounts of depiction to be found in the literature, is whether the visual experiences featuring in those episodes wherein we grasp the contents of pictures must be 'twofolded' in Wollheim's sense: whether those visual experiences must be ones involving an aspect that is 'analogous to the experience of seeing the

picture without seeing anything in it' and another simultaneous aspect that is 'analogous to seeing the picture's object face-to-face'.<sup>12</sup> Illusionism is sometimes held to involve the implausible view that the visual experiences just mentioned cannot be twofolded, for example<sup>13</sup>, while Wollheim's insistence that they must be twofolded is also sometimes regarded as mistaken.<sup>14</sup>

It should by now be clear, however, that one can accept the ideas developed above without having to take sides in any of the debates over the status and nature of twofoldedness. For those discussions centre on issues concerning the phenomenological characteristics of the episodes in which we grasp the distinctively visual contents of pictures; precisely the sort of thing with which (5)'s account of depiction doesn't engage. For all that (5) says, for instance, the visual experiences featuring in such episodes may sometimes be twofolded, or they may always be twofolded; or they may never be twofolded.

## 6. Deriving some properties of depiction

In this section, I want to address a question raised towards the end of section 1. How far can we account for notable features of depiction merely using facts about the contents of pictures? Or, to refine that question somewhat in the light of the semantic framework developed in the previous sections, how far can we get in understanding depiction's striking features if we concentrate exclusively upon the distinctively visual contents of pictures?

I'll answer that query by discussing a range of important features of depiction, before drawing some general morals from the discussion.

i. Perspectivalness

One obvious way in which depiction is visual is that it is, like vision itself, perspectival.

To quote Hopkins:

(A) 'Everything is depicted from some [and perhaps more than one] point of view'<sup>15</sup>.

A counterpart of (A) applies to mental visual images. And, once again, it's natural to think that, in both of those cases, the perspectivalness flows from a common source, the fact that pictures and mental visual images of things show us how they look; that is, from their distinctively visual contents.

The earlier semantic framework substantiates that suspicion. Note, first, that what we see, we see from somewhere. Suppose, for example, that one sees an *F*. Then one enjoys a specific range of visual appearances which characterise correctly how the world is laid out around a certain viewpoint—namely, one's own—and in which one seems to see an *F*.

But suppose that some picture depicts an *F*. Then, by (5), the picture's distinctively visual content characterises the phenomenological content of some sensation-type *T* as being true relative to a viewpoint *v*, where anyone who has a *T*-

sensation thereby seems to see an *F*. And the picture thereby depicts an *F* from the viewpoint *v*. To put the point less stiffly, the picture depicts an *F* from *v*, because the picture's distinctively visual content singles out a specific range of visual appearances as characterising correctly how the world is laid out around *v*, where anyone having the visual appearances in that range seems to see an *F*. The perspectivalness of depictions of *F*s therefore corresponds directly to the perspectivalness of how our eyes present *F*s to us.

In addition, and as noted in section 4, a counterpart of (5) may be used to provide an account of how the distinctively visual contents which belong to mental visual images fix the nature of the scenes which the visual images display. That counterpart of (5) will imply, for example, that a mental visual image displays an *F*, from viewpoint *v*, only if the image's distinctively visual content characterises the phenomenological content of some sensation-type *T* as being true relative to *v*, where one who enjoys a *T*-sensation thereby seems to see an *F*. So the previous paragraph's demonstration that (A) holds generalises immediately, to provide a demonstration that a relative of (A) obtains for mental visual images too.

## ii. Visibility

Many writers have concurred with Alberti's famous comment that 'the painter is concerned solely with representing what can be seen'<sup>16</sup>; Lessing just as famously remarked that 'bodies with their visible properties are the peculiar subjects of painting'<sup>17</sup>. Hopkins interprets Alberti's remark as stating that 'Whatever can be depicted can be

seen'<sup>18</sup> but both Alberti's remark and Hopkins's gloss on it are, at least on one natural reading of them, slightly too restrictive.

Suppose, for example, that there is a certain property whose presence cannot in fact be visually detected, although it can look to us like the property is instantiated. (Some of the properties which seem to be instantiated in certain visual illusions are maybe like this.) Then one could surely depict the instantiation of that property, even though its presence isn't in fact something which can really be *seen*.

Alberti's comment is easily revised, however: 'the painter is concerned solely with representing what can *apparently* be seen'. More precisely, one can only depict those particulars which can seem to be seen; and any property which something is depicted as having is one whose instantiation we can seem to detect visually. I'll express those points using a slightly revised version of Hopkins's paraphrase of Alberti:

(B) 'Whatever can be depicted can apparently be seen'.

Now, and as briefly noted in section 2, pictures aren't the only sort of representations which are hamstrung in the manner recorded in (B); mental visual images are too. And, in both of those cases, it's very natural to think that the relevant representational restriction derives from the fundamentally visual nature of the representation's content, from the fact that pictures and mental visual images show us how things look. Does the earlier account of the distinctively visual contents of pictures provide a suitably generalisable account of why (B) holds?

It does. In particular, reconsider the content-based account of depiction embodied by (5). Take some picture which depicts an item  $a$  as being  $F$ . Then, by (5), the picture's distinctively visual content characterises the phenomenological content of some sensation-type  $T$  as being true relative to a viewpoint, where one who enjoys a  $T$ -sensation thereby seems to see  $a$ 's being  $F$ . Hence it could look to someone as though  $a$  is  $F$ .<sup>19</sup> More generally, (5) implies that pictures can only depict apparently visible features of apparently visible things—that is, it yields (B). A similar line of reasoning can be run for mental visual images too.

### iii. Relative specificity

Suppose that you seem to have a clear view of an unshadowed red ball in broad daylight. Then you won't just have seemed to see 'a red ball'; you will have seemed to see something whose surface was a particular shade of red. Similarly, suppose that you seem to see a triangle. Then you won't merely have seemed to see 'a triangle'. For you will have seemed to see a certain sort of triangle; the visual appearances which you are enjoying will have purported to provide you with some information about the relative sizes of the triangle's internal angles, for instance.

More generally, there are many properties  $F$  which are such that, if some visual appearances purport to present us with an item that is  $F$ , the appearances must characterise the item as being some more specific variety of  $F$ . But pictures and mental visual images are subject to related representational constraints, and it's natural to suspect that their being so is a reflex of the fact that they show us how things look.

If you produce a picture or mental visual image of a triangle, say, then the product of your efforts will show a particular type of triangle; your picture or mental visual image will provide you with some information about the relative sizes of the represented triangle's internal angles, for example. And suppose that you produce a picture or mental visual image that shows things as looking some way from somewhere, where part of what it is for things to look that way to someone is for the person to seem to have a clear view of an unshadowed red ball in broad daylight. Then your picture will depict, or your mental visual image will display, a ball whose colour is a certain specific shade of red.

Here's a brief summary of the points in the previous paragraph, as they apply to pictures, along with a related initial point about depiction:<sup>20</sup>

(C) Any depicted item must be depicted as having some property. And there are many properties  $F$  which are such that, if a picture depicts some item as being  $F$ , the picture must depict the item as being some more specific variety of  $F$ .

Can (C) be derived from (5)?

Consider, first, a picture that depicts a certain item  $a$ . By (5), the picture's distinctively visual content characterises the phenomenological content—*things being like that*—of some sensation-type  $T$  as being true relative to a certain perspective  $v$ ; and anyone who has a  $T$ -sensation, and to whom things therefore look to be like *that*, seems to see  $a$ . But we never seem to see raw individuals. So anyone to whom things look like *that*, and who thereby seems to see  $a$ , will be someone to whom  $a$  looks to be some way

*F*. But then, by (5), the picture depicts *a* as being *F*. More generally, depicted items must be depicted as having properties.

Next, consider a picture that depicts a triangle. By (5), the picture's distinctively visual content characterises the phenomenological content—*things being thus*—of some sensation-type *T* as being true relative to a perspective *v*; and anyone who has a *T*-sensation, and to whom things therefore look to be *thus*, seems to see a triangle. But we never just seem to see 'a triangle'. Rather, anyone to whom things look *thus*, and who thereby seems to see a triangle, will be someone who seems to see a particular sort of triangle. But then, by (5), the picture depicts a triangle of that more specific type. More generally, we get (C).

Once more, both of the pieces of reasoning in the last two paragraphs are easily rewritten to cover mental visual images, allowing us to account for why mental visual images are subject to representational restrictions that parallel those recorded in (C).

#### iv. Some general morals

I've just run through a range of explanations of why pictures have certain important features. Each of those explanations was merely an illustration of a general point, however. So I'll close this section by identifying extracting a shared moral from the previous subsections.

There are a host of notable features of depiction which seem to reflect interesting features of our visual sensations themselves and which seem to derive, more specifically, from the fact that pictures show how things look. (As mental visual images also show

how things look, one heuristically useful strategy for identifying the relevant features of pictures is to look for representational features which they share with mental visual images.) But the earlier framework for understanding distinctively visual content and its relations to depiction can explain all of those properties of depiction.

So, apart from the features discussed in subsections i. – iii. above, consider the following facts: that pictures never depict things as *not* being the case; that when a picture depicts two or more things from a single viewpoint, it depicts certain spatial relationships as holding among those things; that one’s abilities to categorise conceptually things by sight should typically enable one to classify conceptually what’s depicted by pictures<sup>21</sup>; ... Each of those facts about depiction seems to arise from the fact that pictures show us how things look; from the fact, as I’ve claimed, that pictures have distinctively visual contents. And each can indeed be derived using the framework developed earlier.

Furthermore, the resulting derivations have what is broadly the same shape. In each of them, and in each of the illustrative arguments supplied in subsections i. – iii. above, thesis (5) is used to convert fundamental facts about how things may look to us—that is, facts about the contents of possible visual appearances—into corresponding claims about the nature of depiction.<sup>22</sup> Each of the arguments therefore forcefully supports the idea that very many notable features of depiction flow immediately from crucial features of vision itself, on account of the deeply visual nature of the contents alone that belong to pictures.<sup>23</sup>

## 7. Some philosophical approaches to pictures

Philosophers working on pictures haven't tended to think about the contents of pictures by themselves, in total isolation from questions about how pictures express those contents.<sup>24</sup>

The semantic framework developed above—which just relates facts about depiction to facts about the distinctively visual contents which belong to pictures—therefore lies at a tangent to most contemporary work on pictorial representation.

Goodman, for example, claims that a 'symbol system' is pictorial only if it is syntactically plus semantically 'dense' and 'relatively replete'<sup>25</sup>, where it is then asserted that a representation is a picture only if it belongs to a pictorial symbol system.

Goodman's view is consistent with the thesis that pictures must also have distinctively visual contents, however, because he holds back from stating that a representation belongs to a pictorial symbol system only if it's a picture<sup>26</sup>. Let's accordingly supplement his position, so that it states that a representation is a picture only if it belongs to a pictorial symbol system *and has a distinctively visual content*; and we'll add (5) as well.

Goodman's approach has repeatedly been attacked using certain sorts of possible cases. So, Peacocke and Hopkins discuss examples which demonstrate that a representation in one of Goodman's 'pictorial' symbol systems may fail to be a picture.<sup>27</sup>

Hopkins, for instance, describes a situation in which a certain sort of graph displays the temperature of a colourless gas during some temporal interval, where the graph is a representation within a symbol system that clearly meets Goodman's criteria for being

pictorial. But the graph hardly *depicts* the temperature of the gas throughout the relevant period—the way it represents seems at best only peripherally related to the way that pictures do<sup>28</sup>. As Hopkins notes, the graph doesn't even show the gas's temperature from a viewpoint.<sup>29</sup>

But Goodman's position may easily be embellished to block Hopkins's criticisms. Indeed, we just made some suitable additions. For it is evident that Hopkins's graph doesn't have a distinctively visual content. And that fact combines with the neo-Goodmanian position articulated two paragraphs back to imply that the graph isn't a picture and doesn't depict anything at all. Similar remarks apply to Peacocke's related example. More generally, any attempts to refute the neo-Goodmanian position just specified by trying to show that the view allows for 'pictures' which depict invisible things, or which aren't perspectival, or ... will fail. For the arguments rehearsed in section 5 show that the view doesn't allow for any such things, given its endorsement of (5).

Of course, the points just made have nothing really to do with the details of Goodman's approach, for which I happen to have very little sympathy. If (5) is consistently added to *any* philosophical approach to picturing, the resulting position straightaway becomes able to account smoothly for the enormous range of features of depiction which derive from the fact that pictures have distinctively visual contents. Hence, although the semantic framework developed earlier treats depiction in a relatively unfamiliar manner, because for instance it ignores completely questions about what it's like for us when we look comprehendingly at pictures, it is nonetheless highly relevant to

the question how we should assess the philosophical approaches to pictures that have lately been battling it out.

So, Hopkins claims that his own theory—on which certain experienced resemblances between ordinary visual sensations and those which we have upon viewing pictures determine what a picture depicts—is singularly well-placed to explain certain general sight-related facts about depiction, including (A) – (C) above.<sup>30</sup> It's very hard to see why that's true, however. As just noted, for instance, the illustrative neo-Goodmanian view formulated above caters for (A) – (C) without any effort at all, simply because it incorporates (5).

In response to that, it might be asserted that the neo-Goodmanian view just *assumes* that pictures have distinctively visual contents, which is objectionably *ad hoc*, whereas Hopkins's theory may allow us to *explain why* pictures have distinctively visual contents. But what really needs explaining here? To my ears, anyway, the statement that picturing involves showing how things look sounds like a truism, something that needs no more explanation than the fact that killing involves depriving things of life. And if that's right, the neo-Goodmanian's explanations of (A) – (C) are precisely as deep as they need to be.

That isn't to say, though, that we may now ignore explanatory matters when assessing the main extant philosophical approaches to pictures. For example, the earlier (5)-based explanation of why depictions in general must be, say, perspectival won't help us to understand why it is that *some particular item* is a picture with a certain distinctively visual content, and hence depicts what it depicts perspectivally. Yet the very

fact that, for example, the thing has a distinctively visual content obviously cries out for explanation.

If we are to explain that last fact, though, we may well need an account of, say, the relationships between the distinctively visual contents which belong to pictures and the phenomenological characteristics of those visual encounters with pictures in which we grasp their distinctively visual contents. And perhaps Hopkins's ideas can be used to tell us the most appealing story of that kind. While, then, Hopkins's theory may not be uniquely well-situated to explain the various properties of depiction recorded in principles like (A) – (C), it—or another of the major recent philosophical approaches to picturing, like Walton's or Wollheim's<sup>31</sup>—might yet be best able to explain how it is that those principles come to bear upon specific items.

More generally, the overall approach to recent philosophical theories of picturing which Hopkins commends, on which our assessments of them ought to focus upon how well they can explain things, seems like a very good one.<sup>32</sup> But we need to ensure that we have a clear enough sense of what precisely needs to be explained by the theories from which we're choosing. And the sort of ideas developed in this paper—which tackle very directly the profoundly visual contents that belong to pictures, thus allowing us to track better the roles played by those contents alone in determining facts about depiction—promise to help us greatly with that. For they may aid us in distinguishing between those facts about depiction which can be accounted for merely in terms of the peculiar nature of the contents which pictures characteristically possess and those which need to be explained in terms of how pictures characteristically express their special contents.

## 8. Conclusion

This paper began by noting various different ways in which one might elaborate the intuitive idea that there's something especially visual about pictures. In particular, it was noted that one might take pictures to have especially visual contents; although that specific way of approaching the visual nature of pictures has sometimes been ignored. Section 2 then articulated some intuitive ideas about the contents of pictures and mental visual images, ones which suggest that those contents are indeed deeply visual.

Sections 3 and 4 developed an account of how it is that pictures and mental visual images 'show how things look'. In particular, section 3 tackled the question what it is for things to look a certain way from a viewpoint, while section 4 used the results of that investigation to provide a semantic treatment of pictures and mental visual images which assigned to them contents of a peculiarly optical sort. An account of depiction was also based upon the distinctively visual contents thereby given to pictures, and section 5 sought to bring out further the essential nature of that account by mapping its relationship to some well-known areas of recent discussion. Next, and in section 6, we saw that a huge range of notable features of depiction were explicable using the content-based account of depiction previously presented.

Each of the resulting explanations worked by transforming an observation about the contents of visual appearances into a corresponding observation about depiction, thereby exploiting the fact that the distinctively visual contents of pictures were built

upon the contents of visual appearances. Those explanations fitted very well with our intuitive sense that many of the strikingly visual features of depiction flow from the fact that pictures show us how things look. Section 7 then considered the bearing of the semantic framework developed earlier, and in particular of the explanations discussed in section 6, upon up-and-running philosophical debates about depiction.

To finish, some brief words on the fundamental elements of the approach to depiction developed in this essay. Somebody faced by claim (1) above might protest that there are pictures which don't 'show us how things look', and that some of those pictures aren't, say, perspectival. (Perhaps some pictures owed to children, like the 'tadpole-figures' which toddlers typically start producing at about three years old, don't show how things look.) But what if some of those pictures nonetheless do count as *depicting* things? Does that demolish the framework worked out above?

Not really. Suppose that there are pictures which depict things but which don't show how things look. Then, for example, the content-based account of depiction embodied by (5) above is false. For (5) assumes that there's an inescapable connection between correct applications of our ordinary notion of depiction and a picture's possession of a distinctively visual content. But if the class of depicting pictures does divide up in the manner just proposed—into some cases which show how things look and some cases which don't—then the class of depicting pictures is deeply heterogeneous. For it incorporates representations whose contents are of fundamentally different sorts.

In that case, however, correct applications of our ordinary notion of depiction will also cover profoundly diverse sorts of representational features. For some pictures, facts about depiction will derive from the possession by those pictures of distinctively visual

contents; while, for some other pictures, facts about depiction will flow from the possession by those other pictures of contents of a quite separate kind. So even if principle (5) is strictly speaking wrong, because there are depicting pictures which don't show how things look, a less general relative of (5) may still accurately reflect how facts about depiction come to be fixed in one importantly unified range of cases.

More generally, it's evident that the class of actual and possible pictures is remarkably heterogeneous. And it's fairly natural to suspect that there are philosophically interesting subclasses of that broader class which exhibit more unity than the class of pictures possesses as a whole. So long, though, as the class of pictures which have distinctively visual contents is one of those interesting but restricted subclasses, the semantic framework developed above may be useful, simply because of the light which it sheds on the pictures in that united group.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> That quotation and the preceding one from Kendall Walton, *Marvelous Images* (Oxford University Press: Oxford 2008), p. 118.

<sup>2</sup> That quotation and the preceding one from Dominic McIver Lopes, *Sight and Sensibility* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2005), p. 46.

<sup>3</sup> For the first quotation, see Robert Hopkins, *Picture, Image and Experience* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1998), p. 27; for the second, see p. 395 of Malcolm Budd, 'How pictures look', originally published in Dudley Knowles and John Skorupski eds., *Virtues and Taste: Essays on Politics, Ethics and Aesthetics* (Blackwell: Oxford, 1993) and reprinted in Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen, *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art: The Analytic Tradition*, (Blackwell: Oxford, 2004), which latter is the appropriate source for all of this paper's page references to Budd's article

<sup>4</sup> This claim mustn't be understood too restrictively. It allows, for example, for the (realised) possibility of pictures which show how things look from many viewpoints, and for the (again, realised) possibility of pictures which show things as looking various sorts of ways which don't answer to how things generally look to us (by featuring for example visual distortions of various sorts). Also, it's clear that pictures may show how things look from nonexistent viewpoints, which raises a host of nasty logical and metaphysical problems. Those last are mere instances of much more general problems, however, and there's nothing in what follows which demands a particular treatment of those broader issues, so I shall press on.

<sup>5</sup> See the conclusion for some comments on how things stand for what follows if (1) is false (for reasons which are explained there, it isn't really essential to the ideas that I'm about to develop that literally every picture which depicts something also 'shows how things look'). Also, note that I'm only concerned in this paper with facts about what pictures *depict*, rather than with facts about what pictures represent more broadly.

<sup>6</sup> From now on, each of the types of sensations discussed in the main text should be assumed to be one that has possible instances. This assumption will in fact underwrite a range of arguments used below, and there are a couple of later footnotes which briefly mention it in relation to some of those later arguments.

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<sup>7</sup> Suppose that some humanly-inaccessible sensation-type is a way that things look from, say, your current viewpoint. You are, we may assume, the only experiencing subject who occupies that viewpoint. So things may look a certain way from a viewpoint even though there isn't a subject at the relevant viewpoint who is having a sensation of that type. The notion of how things look from a viewpoint is therefore sharply distinct from the notion of how things look in the course of some sensation which occurs at the relevant viewpoint. For more on this theme, in relation to the question whether visualisings are inevitably imagined seeings, see [reference to paper by the author suppressed].

<sup>8</sup> Note that there's no insistence here that a picture's content is ever exhausted by its distinctively visual content.

<sup>9</sup> Lopes, *Sight and Sensibility*, p. 29.

<sup>10</sup> Indeed, we may allow that the ways that a picture shows things as looking—that is, the visual sensation-types figuring in the picture's phenomenological content—may single out the visual sensations that are their instances in relation to pertinent features of the picture's design; that is, in relation to relevant facets of 'those visible surface properties in virtue of which a picture depicts what it does' (Lopes, *Sight and Sensibility*, p. 25). (So, the particular way that a picture shows a hand as looking might amount to the type of those visual sensations in which someone seems to see a hand that looks like *that*—where the final demonstrative's content is to be captured by indicating the look of certain ink strokes forming part of the picture.) Our experiences of grasping pictorial contents may therefore be 'inflected', in the sense that the very contents which we grasp upon looking comprehendingly at pictures may involve aspects of the design of the picture itself. Now, other writers claim to have identified cases of 'inflection' where, on account of interactions between experiences of seeing-in and our visual awareness of portions of a picture's design, pictures depict things as having properties which things could not visually appear to possess. (See, for example, Michael Podro, *Depiction* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge Mass., 1998), p. 28; see, too, the discussion of a Rembrandt drawing also discussed by Podro, in Robert Hopkins, 'Inflected pictorial experience: its treatment and significance', forthcoming). As part ii. of section 6 will make clear, however, the possibility of cases of that most recent type is inconsistent with the account of depiction embodied by (5). The issues arising here deserve a much fuller treatment than I can give to them now; but, for what it's worth, my own view is that the supposedly troublesome cases are actually mere instances of the unproblematic type of inflection initially identified in this note, and hence perfectly consistent with the account of pictorial contents developed above.

<sup>11</sup> The starkness of the contrast here can be brought out further by considering mental visual images. Immediately after introducing (5), I remarked that a counterpart of that principle applies to facts about what mental visual images display. According to the relevant thesis, a mental visual image displays an *F* just in case, for some visual sensation-type *T*, the mental visual image's distinctively visual content characterises *T*'s phenomenological content as being true relative to some viewpoint, where anyone who has a *T*-sensation thereby seems to see an *F*. But that last claim certainly doesn't amount to the very implausible view that a mental visual image displays an *F* just in case any suitably-circumstanced viewer of the mental visual image itself would seem to see an *F*. For it is merely a claim about how the distinctively visual contents which belong to mental visual images generate facts about what mental visual images display; and, as such, it isn't at all concerned with the visual appearances of mental visual images themselves. Similar points hold for (5).

<sup>12</sup> Hopkins, *Picture, Image and Experience*, p. 18; for Wollheim on twofoldedness, see for example Richard Wollheim, *Painting as an Art* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1987), pp. 46 – 7.

<sup>13</sup> See for example Hopkins, *Picture, Image and Experience*, p. 18; Dominic Lopes, *Understanding Pictures*, (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1996), pp. 39 – 42; Flint Schier, *Deeper into Pictures* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1986), p. 10; and Wollheim, *Painting as an Art*, p. 77.

<sup>14</sup> See for instance Lopes, *Understanding Pictures*, pp. 47 – 51; and Jerrold Levinson, 'Wollheim on pictorial representation', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 56 (1998), pp. 227 – 33.

<sup>15</sup> See Hopkins, *Picture, Image and Experience*, p. 27; see also, for example, p. 392 of Budd, 'How pictures look'.

<sup>16</sup> Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting*, trans. John R Spencer (Yale University Press: New Haven, Connecticut, 1966), p. 43.

<sup>17</sup> Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocoon: An Essay upon the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, trans. E. Frothingham (Dover Publications: Mineola, New York, 2005), p. 91.

<sup>18</sup> See Hopkins, *Picture, Image and Experience*, p. 28.

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<sup>19</sup> My earlier restriction of sensation-types to possible-instantiated ones is evidently pulling its weight here, and it will do so again at a number of related points below.

<sup>20</sup> See Hopkins, *Picture, Image and Experience*, pp. 24 – 7 for a more detailed discussion of some of the issues arising in relation to (C).

<sup>21</sup> To explain this final feature of depiction, one in fact needs to introduce an additional important point about what's involved in *grasping* distinctively visual contents: one grasps some portion of a given distinctively visual content, where that portion of the content characterises sensation-type *T*'s phenomenological content as true relative to some viewpoint, only if one is aware of what it's like to have a *T*-sensation. Our comprehension of for example pictures and mental visual images therefore interacts with our knowledge of what things look like, to enable us to produce suitable conceptual classifications of what pictures and mental visual images display.

<sup>22</sup> Hopkins notes that Illusionism does surprisingly well in accounting for many of the most notable features of depiction (see Hopkins, *Picture, Image and Experience*, p. 18). Illusionism's successes—its ability to provide a neat explanation of why, for example, pictures can only depict visible things—are owed to the fact that it tightly binds facts about depiction to facts about what certain sorts of viewers would seem to see. But Illusionism makes the mistake of focusing upon the viewers of pictures themselves, which leads Illusionists to make implausibly strong claims about the visual experiences which viewers of pictures enjoy. Illusionism's striking explanatory successes can be replicated, however, if one instead ties facts about depiction to facts about what would seem to be seen by a different set of viewers: those to whom things look some way that a given picture shows them as looking.

<sup>23</sup> It's worth noting that the earlier framework can also provide us with some guidance about how we might resolve various perplexing questions about depiction. For example, it's unclear whether depiction can ever strictly be *de re*—so, can a portrait ever really *depict* its subject? Or can it only *represent* its subject by virtue of depicting the presence of someone with a certain look, in conjunction with further contextual facts? (5) implies the following: the portrait is capable of depicting its subject only if the phenomenological contents of visual sensation-types can be *de re*. That is, the portrait is capable of depicting its subject only if visual appearances may sometimes require the presence of specific individuals within the viewed scene, rather than the presence of arbitrary but appropriately arranged particulars with suitable qualitative characters. The question whether depiction can be *de re* is thus crucially related to questions within the philosophy of perception, about the nature of the contents of visual appearances more generally. And that seems right. If we can't seem to see one person rather than another, the especially visual nature of depiction makes it hard to see how pictures could be any more precise when it comes to depicting people.

<sup>24</sup> Part II of John Kulvicki, *On Images: Their Structure and Content* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2006) which is inspired by John Haugeland's paper 'Representational Genera' (see Haugeland's book *Having Thought* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1998), pp. 171 – 206) discusses the contents of pictures in a relatively abstract manner. The approach to pictorial contents which Kulvicki advocates is very unappealing, however. In particular, it doesn't sufficiently accommodate our sense that the contents of pictures have a special visualness, one which they share with the contents of mental visual images. (Kulvicki's view implies, for example, that the fundamental contents of pictures in linear perspective don't settle whether the pictures depict scenes laid out in depth or merely flat marked surfaces that are like the pictures themselves (see Kulvicki, *On Images*, p. 167).)

<sup>25</sup> See Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Hackett: Indianapolis, 1976), chapter 4, sections 2 and 5 plus chapter 6 section 1 for discussion of these notions.

<sup>26</sup> Hopkins, *Picture, Image and Experience*, p. 14 makes this point; the relevant passage is chapter 8, section 5 of Nelson Goodman and Catherine Elgin, *Reconceptions in Philosophy and Other Arts and Sciences*, (Routledge: London, 1988)

<sup>27</sup> See pp. 405 – 6 of Christopher Peacocke, 'Depiction', *Philosophical Review* 96 (1987), pp. 383 – 410; pp. 437 – 8 of Robert Hopkins, 'Explaining depiction', *Philosophical Review* 104 (1995), pp. 425 – 55; and Hopkins, *Picture, Image and Experience*, pp. 13 – 4.

<sup>28</sup> Hopkins, *Picture, Image and Experience*, p. 14.

<sup>29</sup> Hopkins *Picture, Image and Experience*, pp. 36 – 7.

<sup>30</sup> See, for example, the front fly-leaf to Hopkins, *Picture, Image and Experience*.

<sup>31</sup> See for example Kendall Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1990), and chapter 5 of the same author's *Marvelous Images*; and see Lecture II of Richard

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Wollheim, *Painting as an Art*, (Thames and Hudson: London, 1987) and the same author's paper 'In defense of seeing-in', in Heiko Hecht, Robert Schwartz and Margaret Atherton eds. *Looking into Pictures: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Pictorial Space* (MIT Press: Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2003), pp. 3 – 16.

<sup>32</sup> See, for example, Hopkins, *Picture, Image and Experience*, pp. 23 – 4. Budd also emphasises the explanatory benefits of his own related approach (see his 'How pictures look', pp. 392 – 3) (some of Budd's explanations focus on features of depictions which clearly cannot be explained merely using observations about the distinctively visual contents of pictures).

<sup>33</sup> Many thanks to Malcolm Budd, Rob Hopkins and Rosanna Keefe, for their very helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper; and many thanks to an anonymous referee for this journal, particularly for forcing me to be more explicit about the relationships between Illusionism and the ideas developed here. Thanks, also, to the audience who attended a session of the White Rose Aesthetics Forum at which I presented a version of this paper. Some of this work was done during a period of leave partly funded by the AHRC's Research Leave Scheme; I am very grateful to the AHRC for their support.