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**Images**, John V. Kulvicki, New York: Routledge, 2014, 221 pp., $40.00(pbk), ISBN:

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A blurb by Dominic Lopes on the back of Kulvicki’s book reads: “If your library has space for only one

book on the philosophy of pictures, then this is it.” Although such blurbs are notoriously hyperbolic, I

agree with Lopes. As an introductory volume to the post-Gombrich literature on pictorial depiction,

*Images* both acts as an excellent springboard for diving into the many diverse positions that dominate

the field, and as a wonderful textbook for upper-level undergraduate or graduate philosophy seminars.

It is also written very well, and even the most mildly interested reader would find it a pleasure to read.

Contrary to Lopes’ claim, however, Kulvicki aims to do far more in *Images* than survey the recent

history of the philosophy of pictorial depiction. There are roughly three goals he intends to meet in

the book:

(a) to survey the central positions and debates on pictorial depiction that have taken place within the

broader arena of the philosophy of art,

(b) to build upon his (2006) On Images, which argues that structuralism—as a model of depiction—can

unify the heretofore disparate theories of pictorial representation found within the philosophy of

science and the philosophy of art, and

(c) to touch on a few other “hot” topics related to the discussion of the philosophy of images more broadly.

Chapters 1 through 4, which cover the experience, recognition, resemblance, and pretense accounts of

pictorial depiction, all fall under (a). Chapter 5 falls under both (a) and (b), acting as an introduction

to structuralism in general, yet also expressing Kulvicki’s own view as more capable than Goodman’s

(1979) account. Chapter 6 is an excellent discussion of the realism/unrealism debate in the philosophy

of art, thus falling under (c). Chapter 7 touches upon the history of imagistic representation in the

philosophy of science, though its main goal is to illustrate how structuralism can help unify theories

of representation within the philosophy of science and the philosophy of art; it thus counts toward

(b). Chapter 8 stands alone as a brief discussion of how pictorial representation relates to the mental

imagery debate and the non-conceptual content debate in the philosophy of mind, focusing primarily

on how structuralist accounts can aid the Kosslyn (1994), Sober (1976), and Fodor (2008) thesis of

mental imagery. Chapter 9 also stands alone as a reassessment and response to Walton’s (1984) argument

for photographic transparency.

Pedagogically speaking, this text is excellent. Kulvicki’s writing is generally quite lucid, and he does

a fair job of assessing the pertinent debates even-handedly, although his commitment to structuralism

is always evident. Moreover, each chapter ends in a concise summary that elucidates the dialectic of

each chapter. Kulvicki also adds an expansive “further reading” list to boot. Both of these features,

along with a full glossary, add to the text’s appeal as course reading material.

What may be of most interest—especially to readers of *Philosophical Psychology*—is Kulvicki’s handling

of (b) and (c), so I will end discussion of the first four chapters here; it should suffice to say that

they represent an excellent introduction to the post-Gombrich (1941) debates of pictorial depiction

in the philosophy of art. After Gombrich began to first critically engage with the philosophy of pictorial

representation in its own right, a wealth of positions and arguments sparked a unique literature

wrestling with the problems and concepts he first proposed. Kulvicki’s survey of the history of these

views is clear and concise, and his critiques of them are generally fair and convincing.

Goal (b) is evident from the beginning of the text. Defining ‘images’ as “likenesses made to present

things” (p. 3), Kulvicki makes explicit that this broad class encapsulates both scientific images such as

graphs and charts and pictorial images such as paintings or photographs. Although his over-arching

goal of unifying the disparate discussions of representation within the philosophy of art and the philosophy

of science (via his own syntactic-semantic model) is central, Kulvicki also attempts to show

how other accounts (namely, those discussed in the previous four chapters) can tie into this broader

range of images. “That’s not so say that other accounts of representation have nothing to say on these

fronts,” he notes, “it’s rather to suggest that part of the value of understanding structure is the way it

unifies the philosophy of *images*, broadly construed” (p. 92).

Kulvicki’s case for (b) is very convincing, and his discussion is buttressed by his candid assertion

and explanation of why structuralism hasn’t been a popular view. In the first half of chapter 5, Kulvicki

offers a brief overview of syntactic/semantic structuralist thinking as first argued by Goodman (1976).

Structuralism is presented first in its classical form as Goodman articulated it, and then Kulvicki

argues for an improved model. While Goodman’s theory was only intended to answer the “pictorial

representation” problem, Kulvicki’s model updates Goodman’s account to incorporate images in

general. It also, Kulvicki argues, alleviates some of the concerns pertaining to Goodman’s approach.

Simply stated, structuralism holds that what makes images unique among other forms of representation

is that they belong to a particular *system* of syntactic-semantic qualities. Rather than

discuss how pictures are distinct forms of representation by how they resemble objects in the real

world, or how they “trick” our mind into perceiving something that isn’t actually there *as if* it were

actually there, Goodman characterized pictures as representations that fit within a particular class of

syntactic-semantic qualities. Pictorial representations, according to Goodman, are “syntactically dense,

semantically dense, and relatively replete” (p. 99). Roughly, this means that pictures differ from other

forms of representation—say, bar graphs or text—in how rich, vivid, and pertinent their information

is in depicting what they depict. While its focus on the sheer mechanistic properties of pictures

themselves rendered structuralism a noteworthy candidate in the debate on pictorial representation,

it is clear why the view never took off. The central criticism to Goodman’s view is that, simply put,

there is a lot more to pictorial depiction—what makes pictures *pictures*—than how syntactically and

semantically vivid, rich, and replete the said depictions are. Consider Kulvicki’s example: “Imagine

a two-dimensional color plot of a surface, with different colors corresponding to different ranges of

temperature at different locations on the surface” (p. 99). By all accounts, this color plot fits Goodman’s

criteria for pictorial depiction. Goodman himself had no qualms with biting this bullet: this example

doesn’t seem like a *picture* to us, he claimed, due simply to our particular cultural habits. Kulvicki,

among most others, are not satisfied with this response.

Wishing to improve upon these shortcomings, Kulvicki offers a brief explanation of the structuralist

model that he laid out in his earlier (2006) book. He offers two improvements: the first are alternatives

to syntactic and semantic density, *syntactic sensitivity* and *semantic richness*, that alleviate some of the

concerns with Goodman’s theory. Notions of sensitivity and richness improve upon Goodman’s view

primarily in that they—unlike syntactic and semantic density—admit of *degrees*, rather than being an

all-or-nothing affair. As such, pictures can be said to be *more* syntactically sensitive than such-andsuch

class of images, making Kulvicki’s characterization of the syntactic and semantic properties of

images more fine-grained than Goodman’s.

Where Kulvicki significantly departs from Goodman, however, is in introducing a further syntactic-

semantic constraint called *transparency*. In a transparent system, “representations of other

representations within that system are syntactically identical to their objects” (p. 100). A picture of a

picture—if clear enough—will be syntactically identical to its object. A thermo-color plot of a thermo-

color plot, however, will not be syntactically identical to its object. What makes pictures unique

on this structuralist account, then, is the fact that pictorial depiction is transparent. Chapter 5 thus

sets the reader up for what is perhaps Kulvicki’s broadest aim in the text, (b), which formally begins

in chapter 7.

Chapter 8, “Images in Mind”, is the most anticipatory chapter in the book, though it is also the most

dissatisfying. It seems clear why Kulvicki wanted to include a chapter on the many debates concerning

mental representations and their content, since these debates are both fascinating and popular in philosophy

at large. An introductory textbook on images and representational theory—particularly one

that aims to help build a bridge between the philosophy of art and the philosophy of science—seems

like the perfect place to include a discussion on mental representation. Unfortunately, however, chapter

8 has a relatively tepid and small-scope thesis. Rather than survey some of the major trends and

debates in the field like in the first four chapters, Kulvicki focuses on discussing two central topics:

how structuralistic thought can aid the “Kosslyn (1994)/Sober (1976)/Fodor (2008)” representation

thesis, and how recent studies on retinotopical perception may shed some light on how perceptual

brain states might “share a structure” with what the percepts represent.

The first point is argued well. The second point, although quite interesting, perhaps diminishes the

strength of his argument, as it glosses over the controversial assumption that structure *in the brain*

equates to structure *in the mind*. The “Kosslyn/Sober/Fodor” thesis, which dominates the majority of

the chapter’s discussion, argues that “each part of an object is represented by a pattern of points. …

Depictive representations convey meaning via their resemblance to an object, with parts of the representation

corresponding to parts of the object” (pp. 158–159). This account of mental representation

seems welcome to a structuralist theory of depiction. Kulvicki builds on this intuition, showing how

a syntactic-semantic paradigm can inform this characterization of depiction.

Some neglected topics that would have both greatly benefitted and aptly fit within this chapter

include the cinematographic perception hypothesis (e.g., Freeman, 2006) and the work of Pizlo (e.g.,

2010), whose work compares the fascinating patterns and structures of how both humans and machines

perceive shape. The cinematographic perception hypothesis explicitly correlates mental perception

with pictorial images; it compares perception to a cinematographic reel that runs,through a continuous

roll of “perceptual film” composed of successively changing still photos. Discussion of this theory

would neatly support Kulvicki’s argument that structuralist views can help unify disparate theories of

depiction—those in the philosophy of science, art, and mind. Pizlo’s work examines the structure of

perception in the mind and how it correlates to camera perception. It also, in effect, gives us a realworld

example of how images—understood as pictorial depictions—can be analyzed structurally in

the mind. I was surprised to find no discussion of these sorts of theories and research, as it could

have robustly (and vividly) aided Kulvicki’s case for structuralism and nicely dovetailed with the last

chapter on photographic transparency.

Kulvicki’s text, as stated at the beginning of this review, is excellent—especially pedagogically—as

an introduction to the philosophy of images. It’s a rather svelte volume, and the topics within it are

wide-ranging, clearly discussed, and carefully structured. As a closing note, I would highly recommend

supplementing this text with classics such as Gombrich’s (1951) paper and Wollheim’s (1974)

work. Kulvicki draws heavily upon these writings in the first few chapters, and having a first-hand

introduction to these texts would greatly behoove the student of the philosophy of images.

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