

Sense and Reference of Pictures

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John Hyman insists that Frege-style cases for depiction show that any sound theory of depiction must distinguish between the 'sense' and the 'reference' of a picture. I argue that this rests on a mistake. Making sense of the cases does not require the distinction.

In 'Depiction', John Hyman (2012) makes an observation about how people ordinarily ascribe representational content to pictures. Some uses of the verb 'to depict' express a relation, whereas other uses do not. He suggests that in turn this distinction is reflected in the more familiar difference between a genre picture (a picture with a generic content) and a portrait (a picture that portrays some individual or other). For example, when I say of a painting that it depicts a queen, I may be saying of the Queen that the painting depicts her (portrayal), or I may be speaking exclusively of the picture itself, meaning to say that it depicts a woman wearing a royal crown (genre). In the first case my use of 'depicts' expresses a relation, in the second case it does not. Hyman claims that these superficial differences reveal a distinction of fundamental importance to the theory of depiction. Any sound theory of depiction must distinguish between the 'sense' and the 'reference' of pictures. This is bluff. I will argue that the superficial differences do not require endorsing the distinction.

In drawing attention to differences in attributions of representational properties to pictures, Hyman echoes Nelson Goodman. In a similar vein, Goodman claimed that saying of a picture that it represents or depicts a so-and-so is 'highly ambiguous' between saying which individual or individuals the picture is a representation of, and saying what class of pictures it belongs to (Goodman, 1968, p. 22). Using Goodman's hyphenations, we either claim it is a picture of the Queen, or we say that it is a woman-with-a-crown-picture. Goodman's overt reason for distinguishing these two uses of 'represents' and 'depicts' is that we can represent one and the same individual using different kinds of pictures, and that moreover sometimes a picture is not a picture of some individual at all, but merely is a such-and-such-picture.

On these matters, Hyman agrees with Goodman. They disagree about the further question concerning which of these two uses of 'depicts' is central and basic to the theory of depiction. Another difference is that Hyman draws the distinction between the two uses of 'depicts' without relying on Goodman's nominalist device of classing pictures. Instead, Hyman uses Frege's distinction between sense and reference to articulate the difference in usage. If we may believe Hyman, there is a specific but crucial parallel between pictorial representation and linguistic meaning. As he writes:

Perhaps the simplest way to capture what I have in mind is to take a picture of a specific person, place or object, whether fictional or real, and to consider what we can call, for want of a better pair of terms, its reference and its sense. The words

‘reference’ and ‘sense’ are the normal translations of the terms ‘*bedeutung*’ and ‘*sinn*’, which Frege used to distinguish between the object that an expression stands for or designates, and the way in which the expression presents that object, the ‘mode of presentation’ as he called it. (Hyman, 2012, p. 136)

I agree with Hyman that the analogy is instructive. Frege (1892) introduced the distinction between object of reference and mode of presentation to solve a philosophical puzzle. It is useful to go through this familiar quandary. Clearly, ‘Hesperus is Hesperus’ and ‘Hesperus is Phosphorus’ do not mean the same thing, because the latter statement is cognitively significant in a way the former is not. Yet we also know that ‘Hesperus’ and ‘Phosphorus’ have the same meaning, given that they refer to the same thing—the planet Venus. And if ‘Hesperus’ and ‘Phosphorus’ have the same meaning, then surely ‘Hesperus is Hesperus’ and ‘Hesperus is Phosphorus’ have the same meaning! But this is a contradiction. Frege showed that by distinguishing between the object of reference and the *sense*, or mode of presentation of an expression, you can avoid the contradiction. Although ‘Hesperus’ and ‘Phosphorus’ mean the same inasmuch as they refer to the same thing, they also do not mean the same inasmuch as they express different modes of presentations. It is a difference in mode of presentation that explains the relative cognitive significance of ‘Hesperus is Phosphorus’. The advice Frege gives us is that, when we attribute meaning to expressions, we should be careful not to confuse two different uses of ‘means’: sometimes we talk just about the object an expression refers to, and sometimes we talk just about its sense, that is to say the way the expression presents its referent (if it has one).

I have presented the textbook Fregean distinction in some detail because I think that the analogy with Hyman’s allegedly neutral distinction between two uses of ‘depicts’ is revealing. Hyman brings out, correctly, that just as two different linguistic expressions can have the same reference (mean the same) while having a different sense (not mean the same), two pictures can portray the same individual (depict the same) while also having a different generic content (not depict the same). For example,

two portraits of the same individual may present him as dark-haired and seated, wearing a black smock (Kramskoy’s 1873 portrait of Tolstoy), or as grey-bearded and standing, wearing a white smock (Repin’s 1901 portrait). The analogy between expressions in a language and pictures is not exact. But it is helpful to think of each of these two portraits as designating, or standing for, the same individual as the other, while differing in its ‘mode of presentation’—in other words, as having the same reference, but a different sense. (Hyman, 2012, p. 137)

To account for the obvious fact that two pictures of the same individual can nonetheless differ in representational properties, Hyman urges that we distinguish between the ‘sense’ and the ‘reference’ of a picture. Ultimately, he claims, a theory of depiction—a theory that explains how pictures represent—is a theory of the *sense* of pictures. When we explain what a picture depicts *properly speaking*, we are offering an explanation of the picture’s sense. Pictorial reference, Hyman maintains, can be understood in terms that have no specific bearing on the nature of depiction.

On this last point Hyman disagrees with Goodman, who thinks just the opposite. According to Goodman, a theory of depiction is fundamentally a theory of pictorial reference. But this disagreement between both authors does not concern me here. What matters is the prior point on which they agree—the assumption that the distinction between (what Hyman calls) the sense of a picture and a picture's reference is of fundamental importance to the theory of depiction, and that any adequate theory of depiction is either a theory of the sense of pictures or a theory of their reference.

Hyman is adamant about this point. He says that anyone who assumes that the fact that Repin's portrait is of Tolstoy, and the fact that it depicts a grey-bearded man in a white smock, admit of the same explanation, is doing something 'logically naïve'. His target of these remarks is Richard Wollheim, but his message is intended for us all:

It is like failing to distinguish between the sense and reference of a phrase such as 'the morning star', as if the philosophy of language could make do with a single idea of meaning or signification that includes both. (Hyman, 2012, p. 138)

I will now explain why this is a piece of bluff. I agree with Hyman that it is indeed possible, helpful even, to see the situation with portrait painting as comparable to a Frege case. There clearly is a way in which Kramskoy's and Repin's portraits represent the same thing. And there clearly is a way in which both portraits do not represent the same thing. What is not true, though what Hyman seems to think is obviously true, is that the only way to resolve this puzzle is by assuming a distinction between two uses of 'represent' or 'depict'.

Recall once more the orthodox Fregean distinction between sense and reference. Bertrand Russell refused to accept this distinction. Was his refusal an obvious mistake? Was Russell's concept of meaning logically naïve? Or was his refusal the mark of a theoretical disagreement? Clearly it only was the latter.

Russell (1905) had a rival theory of meaning. He was well aware of the puzzles of which Frege had tried to make sense. But his own suggestion, that all names are in fact covert denoting phrases, allowed him to respond to Frege's puzzle in a way that avoided the assumption that there are two different senses of 'means'—an assumption Russell did not want to make. According to Russell, 'Hesperus' and 'Phosphorus' do not, despite appearances, in any way make the same semantic contribution to the sentences they figure in, because there is no way in which they have the same meaning. According to Russell, all linguistic meaning is on a par, and any difference in meaning can be explained satisfactorily in terms of differences in logical form.

Fregeans and Russellians offer you different theories of meaning. It's your responsibility to make up your mind. In that light, we can see that the analogy Hyman highlights with Frege's distinction is instructive in a subversive way. For there clearly are manners of making sense of the obvious fact that two pictures of the same individual can nonetheless represent very different things, without assuming that 'represent' or 'depict' are used in different ways when we ascribe individual or generic content to pictures respectively.

For example, we may just as well account for the fact that Kramskoy's and Repin's portraits both do and do not represent the same thing in terms of a merely partial overlap in representational content. It is unequivocally true that Kramskoy's painting represents Tolstoy and that it represents a man in a black smock. Similarly, it is unequivocally true

that Repin's painting represents Tolstoy and that it represents a man in a white smock. Hence, both of the paintings represent Tolstoy. They represent the same. But only one of them represents a man in a black smock. They do not represent the same. This is not contradictory because, in saying of a picture that it represents Tolstoy, we are not exhausting its representational content. We are merely lifting out an aspect of what the picture represents.

This solution clearly has its attractions. Especially with an eye on pictures, which notoriously are worth more than a thousand words, it is obvious that we invariably under-specify the representational content of a depiction. Nonetheless, when we say that a picture represents Tolstoy, we say enough about it for us then to go on to compare the picture with others that represent the same—in other words, with pictures that also represent Tolstoy. The availability of this explanation suggests that, prior to offering a specific theory of depiction, we have no theoretical need for two senses of 'represent' or 'depict'. All we need to assume is that what a picture represents is typically not captured exhaustively in words. But that assumption is a commonplace.

Russell's descriptivism constitutes a theory of meaning that rivals Frege's theory about sense and reference. It remains a controversial question which of the two theories, if any, is correct. But neither can be dismissed simply because it rests on an elementary mistake. Similarly, just as Frege's theory of sense, the distinction Hyman urges us to make is not theoretically neutral, but the vestibule of one of several controversial theories of depiction. Indeed, Hyman's distinction is an integral part of an objective resemblance theory of depiction, as the reader is invited to verify for themselves. The observation that two pictures of the same individual can differ in what they represent does not in any way support that theory.

None of this undermines the more superficial observation that sometimes we use 'depicts' in sentences that expresses a relation, and sometimes we use the verb in sentences that do not express a relation. When I say of a painting that it is of Tolstoy, I express a relation, because I make a statement that is equivalent to saying of Tolstoy that the painting depicts him. In other words, I here am referring to Tolstoy just as much as I am referring to the portrait. But instead of thinking that this somehow reveals a special use of 'depicts', it is much more straightforward to say that whenever we use a proper name such as 'Tolstoy' in our attributions of meaning or content, reference to Tolstoy is presupposed, whereas this is not true for attributions that use indefinite phrases such as 'a seated figure in a black smock', which can be used free from referential presupposition (Wollheim, 1967).

Hyman's distinction between the (alleged) sense and reference of pictures is an instance of a generic idea. It is not uncommon for philosophers writing about pictorial representation to assume from the outset a distinction between two uses of 'depicts' or two concepts of pictorial representation. Just as Hyman, authors who make this assumption profess that accepting the distinction between what a picture depicts, properly speaking, and what it merely represents is essential to any theory of depiction (for example: Peacocke, 1987, p. 383; Le Poidevin, 1997, p. 182; Abell, 2013). In each case, the specific version of the distinction is passed off as obvious, at least on reflection, and uncontroversial. Yet in each case, the distinction entails a restriction on what counts as depicted, properly speaking.

My argument does not decide whether other ways of articulating this generic idea are as controversial as the so-called sense and reference of a picture. Yet, my argument does offer reason also to treat such other articulations with suspicion, and at least to consider alternative ways of making sense of the facts.

To conclude, that Frege-style cases line the walls of portrait galleries gives us no reason to believe that any theory of depiction that does not distinguish between the ‘sense’ and the ‘reference’ of a picture is for that reason mistaken or logically naïve.

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