

Depiction Revised

The problem for a theory of depiction has been shown to be the reconciliation of illusion and notation. Neither is adequate, since illusion commits us to a perceptual mistake, or delusion, which does not square with the facts of everyday experience with pictures, while notation commits us to a familiar principle of reference, but cannot explain how such a notation might operate. It can explain in what ways it must differ from writing, or descriptive notation, but amounts to no more than saying it is no longer notation. On one hand the proposal is for a resemblance relation between picture and object, and on the other for a reference relation. Both agree that sooner or later they need the other, but in acquiring them they also lose some of their explanation. The illusion theory takes depiction to be tamed or conventionalised illusions, while the notation theory takes depiction to be a scheme that cultivates resemblance. But is an illusion still an illusion if it is rule bound? Is a notation still a notation if it resembles its object? Seemingly, stubbornly, the relations of resemblance and reference refuse to merge, resemblance is a symmetrical or two-way relation, reference is asymmetrical or a one-way relation.

The task now is to look a little closer at Goodman's theory of reference to see if there is a way around this. Goodman proceeds from arguments about the nature of reference, based upon denotation, but denotation is not the only mode or route of reference to his theory. He admits exemplification as the relation between a sample and referent, or the way in which it points to only some of its properties.³⁴ For example a swatch of cloth exemplifies colour, weave, texture and pattern of a certain type or bolt of cloth, but not its size or shape, age or smell. The swatch has these other properties, but they are not referred to, or exemplified. Equally the bolt of cloth has properties that are not possessed or sampled by the swatch, such as its

³⁴ Goodman, 1976, pp.52-57.

place and manner of storage. Exemplification is reference to only selected properties possessed by a sample.

Such reference might also be taken as a way of allowing resemblance. The sample and its referent share a symmetrical relation in selected respects, they share certain properties, and yet the sample refers to the type of cloth, while the cloth resembles in some respects, but does not refer to the sample. The fact that an exemplification refers only to some of those properties that it possesses, also suggest that it is reflexive or self-reference. One of Goodman's objections to taking pictures as resemblances is that representation, or reference cannot be reflexive, while resemblance can – 'An object resembles itself to the maximum degree but rarely represents itself' – yet in the case of exemplification it evidently can represent itself in selected respects.³⁵ This seems much closer to the requirements for depiction and suggests that depiction might more profitably be taken as a mode of exemplification rather than denotation.

The question then arises what is it that a picture exemplifies? What property does it share with its object and then sample or correctly display?³⁶ The property is simply two dimensions, or two-dimensionality. Two dimensions are of course contained within three dimensions in fact any number of two-dimensional planes may be constructed as slices within a three-dimensional volume. So we have a shared property between picture and object, if as yet a very general one. Does it hold for all depiction? Let us begin with the most basic pictures, for example, a single familiar object that might be produced by a pre-school, pre-historic or primitive artist, which is to say, they have basic skills in depiction, and in which is typically offered an outline or silhouette. Something like two dimensions is detected in the observation of distinct sides or single aspects of an object or in rudimentary relations between parts, in an overall profile or shape reliably identified or resembling an object. Such observations are useful because they are quick to make and easy to remember. They also make depiction easy to learn.

³⁵ Goodman, 1976, p.4.

³⁶ Although a quirk of language, makes a picture's object, its *subject*, following Goodman, the term 'object' is maintained here for any 'subject' of a picture.

A basic picture also requires the picture surface exemplify, or find the means to display its two-dimensionality. For the surface is not only a two-dimensional plane of course, even in the case of a pristine sheet of the smoothest white paper – it is still a three dimensional object, with a thickness and texture of some kind, whereas a two-dimensional plane has no thickness, no surface or texture, merely space extended along two axes. The surface can however exemplify its two-dimensional plane through the use of distinctive markings or features that not only set it apart from other kinds of surface, but then also serve to distinguish other kinds of surfaces or objects, so that properties thus distinguished then also sample materially, or much as a swatch does, and crucially, may also be taken in combination with depiction. Equally, such markings may also form distinctive patterns or designs that need not be taken as a resemblance to an object, or strictly as depiction, yet nevertheless exemplify two-dimensional elements and relations, and are also accompanied by the sampling of three-dimensionality, in the kinds of markings and material used.

Line is the simplest and easiest means of translating perceived planes or shapes of objects into depiction because the two-sided nature of a line gives the inside and outside of a shape the same value – as space – in an outline of the shape. The articulation of the shape depends upon the width of the line, its extent or length, and its direction, up and down, left or right. This is two-dimensionality proper, even where the maker or user is unaware of the fact. Similarly, relations between more than one shape in a depiction share these same fundamental articulations. Once lines create shapes as outlines, we have two dimensions, and these are shared with, or truly resemble shapes detected in the sides or single aspects of an object. So we have resemblance, but do we have reference? The outline refers to an object's shape, while an object's shape does not refer to the outline, because the line is around the shape, rather than part of it, and is, like the exemplifying practices of a swatch, a means of displaying two dimensions upon a surface. Hence we have a one-way reference and a two-way resemblance, in certain selected respects. Line is obviously not the only means for displaying two dimensions upon a surface, but its simplicity and efficiency in these basic stages, make it the crucial example. Nor do outlines necessarily depict the shapes of an observed or three-dimensional object. Their formal or intrinsic properties as pattern or design may equally develop an

appreciation of two-dimensional ordering; suggest fictive versions of extant objects. While such activities are commonly overlooked in an account of depiction, at the expense of pursuing parallels with writing and description, an important part of the revision of depiction lies in re-aligning pictures with patterns.³⁷ This aspect also becomes important in the appreciation of abstract painting. But before explaining this, we need to look briefly at why this attention to two-dimensional judgements is important.

Firstly, the concept of three dimensions or depth can only be understood in contrast with two dimensions. So the reason two dimensions are so basic, is because the concept of three-dimensional space or depth is so basic. A ready objection may run that we understand three dimensions intuitively – in our ability to navigate to them, much as Gombrich urges a functional or behavioural definition for such understanding in a squirrel’s jumping abilities in ‘The Analysis Of Vision’ in *Art and Illusion*.³⁸ The difference is in definitions of understanding. The squirrel’s understanding of space and light is measured by the behaviourist as its ability to ‘navigate’ them, but to perform more elaborate functions, such as remember, compare, analyse, measure, construct and communicate, requires a more elaborate view of understanding, and in this case, a more elaborate understanding of space.

Discerning separate sides to an object, and the shapes associated with them, may seem an innocent task, but need hardly remain one. Such shapes not only simplify the tasks of remembering and recognising the object, by breaking it down into smaller tasks, but it also make more of the object – literally. It discerns more qualities or properties of the object and so furthers knowledge. Equally, appreciation of pattern, of measurement and proportion, axes of symmetry,

³⁷ Pattern obviously deserves a far more extensive analysis than space permits. Gombrich carefully surveyed the history and literature of pattern in the underrated, *The Sense of Order*, London, Phaidon, 1979. Notable preceding publications include Owen Jones, *The Grammar of Ornament*, London, 1856, Charles Blanc, *Art in Ornament and Dress*, Paris, 1886, Wilhelm Ostwald, *Die Welt der Form, Entwicklung und Ordnung der gesetzlichschonen Gebilde, gezeichnet und beschreiben von Wilhem Ostwald*, (4 Vols) Leipzig, 1922-25. Understandably mathematicians are drawn to questions of two-dimensional geometry, such as Andreas Speiser, *Theorie der Gruppen von endlicher Ordnung*, Berlin, 1923, and Herman Weyl in *Symmetry*, Princeton, N.J. 1952. Related mathematical insights, are explored in Martin Gardner, *The Ambidextrous Universe*, New York, 1964, Michael Holt, *Mathematics in Art*, London/New York, 1971, and more recently various *tiling* problems – complex patterns - are considered in Roger Penrose, *The Emperor’s New Mind*, Oxford/New York, 1990, pp. 168-181 and Penrose, *Shadows of the Mind*, Oxford/New York, 1994, pp. 29-33.

³⁸ Gombrich, 1960, p. 276.

variations and orientations of a motif, serve to further principles of organisation in perception and cognition. It is not so much that depiction permits opportunities unavailable to observers of an object directly, but rather that we make more opportunities, and more of the opportunities, with depiction. Contrary to Gombrich's model of the artist matching a picture to nature, in the manner of Constable or Cezanne, the appeal more typically is to the picture more removed. We do not have or need the opportunity to look over the artist's shoulder and compare picture with object to appreciate depiction. Rather we test the picture against our knowledge of such objects and pictures. Hence the crucial role of memory in basic depiction for the primitive, pre-historic or pre-school artist, the task is clearly not one of illusion, or even of matching a present object, but of organising and testing what is known and remembered of an object. In the simplest of examples, let us take a line drawing of a cat, (Figure A) in the manner favoured by children and created by conjoining the letters M O Q in ascending scale and descending sequence, thus:

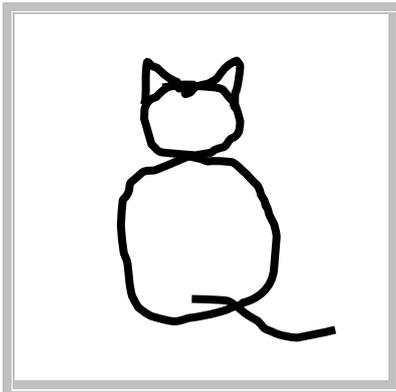


Figure A

Even in such a basic depiction, we can observe a surprising number of things about this cat, such as which way does its tail point? (Left or right?) Is the cat facing us, or does it sit with its back to us? How much wider is the cat's body than its head? Are its ears raised or lowered? Is it sitting or standing? Is it looking to the side or ahead? How tall are the ears compared with the head? In other words, any number of questions concerning measurements, placements, or plottings, across the two dimensional plane, or certain questions concerning the object's position or attitude toward the two dimensional plane, may be answered even in a basic line drawing. Clearly this is not so much a question of realism as of resemblance struck on stark linear or two-dimensional terms. There can be no confusing of the drawing with the actual presence of a cat.

Rather the drawing supplies answers to these questions on just the terms on which this resemblance is made. Indeed the power and pleasure of such basic pictures lies entirely in their appeal to memory and the understanding that guides resemblance.

Neither the primitive, pre-historic or pre-school picture-maker concern themselves with the presence of a model for this reason; two dimensions are easier to keep in the head than the eye. A basic picture is a way of testing this memory and prompting closer understanding. The understanding is of both the depicted object and the scheme or style of depiction. The thick and wobbling line used here samples a given tool upon a surface in contrast with surrounding text and scale of font, and an uncertain level of expertise. The sample sorts the depiction against the materials used, understands materials as well as depiction.

So a basic picture essentially maps or outlines a shape of an object. Indeed maps offer another good example of why two dimensions prove so useful. One is free to chart up and down, left and right, in any order, any direction or combination of directions. A map offers any number of routes, and allows one to comprehend the terrain across and between as well as along given routes. Depiction is thus bracketed with maps, diagrams, patterns and other two-dimensional schemas, because this multi-directional mapping stands in stark contrast with denotative or descriptive modes of reference. The difference arises because language and language-based references are committed to a temporal and one-directional ordering. Time may cease to be one-way in sub-atomic or macrocosmic physics, but for the sizeable stretch in between that is our main concern, it remains reliably one-way. Two dimensions of course exclude not only depth but also time, and depictions allow us to look at objects and scenes in more than one way or indeed more than one direction because of this. They may lack movement - without time - but a freeze frame, as is now so familiar, allows scrutiny of qualities unavailable in the flow of motion. A prompt objection may be that surely comic strips, film and television demonstrate that depiction and two-dimensionality need not exclude time. But the succession of images available in these examples remain fixed in a single sequence and even where they may be viewed in reverse, the sequence remains the same, we may reverse direction of a route in some circumstances, but we cannot re-route any given image in the sequence. Each image remains a given moment, and the value of the freeze frame lies precisely in what its route or motion has concealed. The point of two-dimensional perception and depiction is really to supplement a temporally ordered perception, with a spatial one, as a way to see out of time or around time, and something more of the world.

The distinction between time and space is by no means new to discussion of depiction. It is most notably identified with Lessing's famous essay on *The Laocoon*, and more recently has been the subject of an extended analysis by W. J. T. Mitchell.³⁹ Here the arrangement shares none of Lessing's critical or prescriptive principles concerning art, indeed, as will become clearer in later chapters, the position is quite the opposite, recognising a complementary function to the two modes. Mitchell is largely concerned with detecting ideological tendencies beneath Lessing's view, which need not concern us here, however it is worth noting that his attempt to demolish the time/space distinction, by claiming the difference between pictures and language as one of degree rather than kind, is one based upon a conception of pictures as a mode of denotation – after Goodman – and obviously rejected here.⁴⁰

A new theory of depiction as a mode of exemplification, sampling two-dimensionality has now been outlined. The theory adheres to Goodman's framework of reference, and maintains the functions of exemplification and denotation. It accepts the syntactic and semantic analysis of notation, but finds analogue densities finally at odds with these terms, and of limited use in understanding depiction.⁴¹ The revision is not that drastic in the larger scheme of things, as shall be shown. The new theory reconciles the requirements of a resemblance and a reference relation and avoids the commitment to an illusion in the recognition of two-dimensionality on a surface, and to a notation in its structure. An illusion may occur in as much as two-dimensions may be mistaken for three dimensions, but in general this is not the experience of looking at a picture, and part of the reason we have dwelt upon the simplest of line drawings is to emphasise this. A picture remains a reference or a representation, in as much as the

³⁹ Mitchell, 'Space and Time: Lessing's Laocoon and the Politics of Genre' in *Iconology, Image, Text, Ideology*, Chicago/London, 1994, pp 95-115. G. E. Lessing, 'Laocoon' in *Laocoon, Nathan the Wise, Minna von Barnhelm*, London/New York, 1930.

⁴⁰ Mitchell, 1994, p.102. In passing, Mitchell's subsequent attempt to lump all artefacts together as 'spatio/temporal structures' seems less than useful, distinguishing neither between forms of art, objects or reference.

⁴¹ Since depiction is so closely tied to two-dimensionality here, depiction used in discussion elsewhere, in sculpture, drama and literature for example, is consigned to loose talk. While sculpture is mainly concerned with three-dimensionality or material sampling, and so shares resemblance with depiction, in drama and literature depiction at best refers to a density or circumspection of reference, especially linked with depiction, and dealt with in Chapter Five.

surface is altered or marked in such a way as to exemplify its two-dimensional properties, but this system is not a notation, because of its multi-directional character.

But while this formulation allows for a distinction between patterns and pictures, the demarcation begs further attention. For example, simple symmetrical shapes such as a circle or a square are not generally understood as *a picture* of a circle or a square, but just as an instance or presentation rather than a representation. This is not to say that pictures cannot include a circle or square, or be *of* a circle or square in some further three-dimensional scene, or indeed use a circle or square to depict some three-dimensional object, only that a circle or square are often used for either purpose. The same outline may serve as either or both, a lesson in geometry or linear depiction. Just when a circle depicts a sphere or disc as opposed to merely instantiating a circle, is by no means clear-cut, but is largely a matter of scheme and style, even when schemes and styles allow ambiguity. But rather than pursue stylistic features directly, the next chapter tests this theory of depiction against more elaborate kinds of picture and issues raised by other theories. Implications to the reshuffle of reference within Goodman's theory are also to be traced along this path.