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WHEN IS A PICTURE?*

ABSTRACT. Philosophical discussions of depiction sometimes suffer from a lack of differentiation between several questions concerning the 'nature' of pictorial representation. To provide a suitable framework I distinguish six such questions and several levels on which one might want to proceed in order to answer some of them. With this background, I reconstruct Goodman's and Elgin's answer to the specific question: 'What distinguishes the pictorial from the verbal or linguistic?' I try to reveal some major motivations behind their system-oriented approach and to indicate some reasons why a strategy of this kind is to a certain extent mandatory to grasp the 'nature of the pictorial'. The system-relative and functional character of depiction has to be captured by every adequate theory.

'What is a picture?' is one of the old Socratic or, better, Platonic questions. Like some of the other great queries, it is potentially misleading; in this special case it may mislead in at least two ways.

Part of the trouble arises because the deceptive façade of the 'What is (an) F?'-construction tends to conceal the fact that there is a bundle of different, though perhaps partly related, questions about pictures that keep puzzling us.

Furthermore, this way of asking might give you a false conception of the task to be performed. If you understand it as 'What things are permanently pictures?', the task would be to demarcate two stable classes of objects: the class of pictures and that of non-pictures. As we proceed, it will emerge that the task is somewhat different.

QUESTIONS

Here, then, is a list of questions concerning pictorial representation that can and should be distinguished:

(1) How is pictorial representation (depiction) to be defined?
(2) What distinguishes pictures (whether they denote anything or not) from all other symbols?
(3) What distinguishes the pictorial specifically from the verbal?

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(4) What distinguishes pictures sensu strictu (paintings, drawings, etc.) from related phenomena (diagrams, maps, etc.)?
(5) What determines reference in the case of pictorial symbols?
(6) What is the logical form of sentences containing predicates like 'is a picture of', 'pictorially represents'?[1]

Like Goodman,[2] I will mainly focus on: (3) What distinguishes the pictorial from the verbal? Confusion arises when this question is pursued under the explicit or implicit assumption that all symbols could be sorted into one of these two categories. Many philosophers, psychologists, and linguists stubbornly ignore the great variety of symbols and symbol systems, and try to force all signs and symbols into the Procrustean bed of two or three categories.

If we keep in mind that we are not dealing with a dichotomy, the question 'What distinguishes the pictorial from the verbal or linguistic?' is certainly *a good starting point*. After all, depictions and descriptions – though not the only kinds of symbols – are of special theoretical and practical interest.

Obviously, there are many heterogeneous levels on which relevant differences may be sought. Let us list some of them:

(a) the mark taken in isolation;
(b) the ranges of extension (of the different kinds of symbols);
(c) the expressive (or 'representative') power of the systems;
(d) relations between the single symbol and the thing(s) it may refer to, e.g., relations of resemblance, structural similarity, etc., or causal relations;
(e) the intentions of the producer/user of the symbol;
(f) conventions governing the use and interpretation of the symbols;
(g) relations of the symbols (in a symbol scheme or system) to one another,
  – syntactic relationships,
  – semantic relationships;
(h) competence with regard to the symbol systems.[3]

Before we turn to Goodman's system-oriented, level (g), and, in the main syntactical, answers to (2)–(4), let me comment briefly on some of the other levels of investigation and on why they are not suitable for characterizing what is pictorial about pictorial representation.

Needless to say, I cannot try to demonstrate conclusively here that they are ill-suited to our main task, but I hope to reveal some of the motivations behind the system-oriented, syntactic approach. It is quite essential to recognize that a theory of this sort is not only one viable strategy among others, but is also to a certain extent mandatory to grasp the nature of the pictorial.

ALMOST ALL ANSWERS ASIDE

Level (a)

The following statements seem to be true:

(i) Nothing (no object, no mark) is by itself a symbol.
(ii) Nothing is by itself a symbol of a specific sort, e.g., a pictorial symbol.
(iii) Nothing by itself refers to some other thing.[4]

The points are most easily made when we consider marks of low complexity (though in principle they hold for marks of arbitrary complexity). Consider, then, the following mark: o.

Is this a symbol? That depends, of course. In itself it is no more a symbol than any other mark. Nor is status as a symbol grounded in any physical, perceptual, or intrinsic features of the mark.[5] Is it a picture, or a letter, or a cartographical symbol, or perhaps a musical note? That, too, depends. Nothing has in and of itself a certain mode of symbolization. It is a matter of how you interpret it, how you 'read' it, or, better, *how it is to be read* in a given context or situation. It is dependent on the symbol scheme or system in terms of which the mark is to be 'identified' and interpreted.

Of two marks that are qualitatively 'identical' – due to the relativity to system and interpretation – one may function as a picture, and the other as a verbal symbol (or as a symbol of some other sort).

An analogous point can be made for the case where there is only one mark. Consider the case of the industrious but miserly Chinese man. During the day, he sells food to his fellow countrymen. A nice store sign with Chinese characters attracts the customers; a rough translation of the inscription is 'Fruit and Delicatessen'. During the night our miserly friend runs a restaurant for well-to-do tourists who have no command of the Chinese language. The beautiful mark that served

as the store sign and as a verbal symbol during the day now serves as a decorative painting hanging on one of the walls of the restaurant.

Consider, next, a case that might even better illustrate the dependency on system and interpretation, a case, as it were, of trans-system-ambiguity. Some years ago, you could buy in German bookshops a poster on which the text of *The Communist Manifesto* was typed in such a way that you could see the head of Karl Marx in the configuration of letters. Now, ask yourself: Is such a complex symbol a text (a verbal symbol) or a picture? In a certain sense, it is both at the same time. It can be read as a text; and it can be read as an element of a pictorial system. Via some sort of aspect change, you can switch from one way of reading it to the other.

By now, we have seen some of the reasons why it is appropriate to substitute the misleading question 'What is a picture?' by the less misleading ones: 'When is a picture?' or 'Under what circumstances does an object function as a picture?'. In order to illuminate further the rationale behind such replacing, and in order to preclude possible misunderstanding, it might be helpful to look at another shift from 'what' to 'when' in Goodman's writings.[6]

In *Ways of Worldmaking* Goodman reminds us that "a thing may function as a work of art at some times and not at others".[7] Aesthetic theories suffering from a fixation on the question 'What is art?' run into difficulties when it comes to found art, environmental art, or conceptual art, for example (though the 'problematic' cases are not restricted to modern art). As you will remember, Goodman suggested a remedy: "In crucial cases, the real question is not "What objects are (permanently) works of art?" but "When is an object a work of art?" – or more briefly, as in my title, "When is art?".[8]

Now, my reason for replacing 'What is a picture?' by 'When is a picture?' is not, of course, that I take the latter question to be a subquestion of 'When is art?'. That would, certainly, be a serious mistake. We have to distinguish carefully the questions:

(A) What/when is a picture?
(B) When is an aesthetic picture?
(C) When is a good aesthetic picture?

Only (B) and (C) are subquestions of 'When is art?'; but I am solely concerned with (A), and I am well aware of the fact that only very few

pictures are works of art (i.e., aesthetic pictures), to say nothing of good works of art.

Thus, my reason for passing from 'what' to 'when' in the theory of depiction is a different one; I think moreover that it is in accord with Goodman's views. He stresses in the article cited above that "an object may be a symbol . . . at certain times and under certain circumstances and not at others".[9] I agree, and I take that to include the view that an object may be a *pictorial symbol* at certain times and under certain circumstances and not at others. It seems clear, then, that Goodman holds a "functional view"[10] of works of art *and* of symbols in general. What I want to emphasize, here, is a corollary of the latter view; namely, a functional view of depiction.

In sum, 'symbol', 'pictorial symbol' ('picture'), and 'work of art' are all functional concepts in the sense indicated. Notice that the fundamental form of functionality lies in the concept of a symbol. The functional view concerning works of art is in a way a consequence of a functional view of symbols and symbolizing. The functioning of objects as artworks is according to Goodman a matter of special symbolic functioning, a matter of "domination of certain specific characteristics of symbols".[11]

Levels (b) and (c)

Are the differences between symbols, particularly between linguistic and pictorial symbols, due to differences in what *is* or *can* be symbolized by them?

One difficulty is, of course, that only some depictions and descriptions symbolize at all – at least, in the sense of denoting (see below).

But even if we restrict ourselves to denoting symbols, another difficulty remains, especially when we are trying to distinguish the verbal from the pictorial by this method. Verbal and pictorial systems seem to be almost universal in the sense that they can serve to symbolize almost everything.

Many popular theses about alleged limitations of pictorial systems are, at best, unclear; some are clearly false. I cannot discuss the individual proposals here, but I want to make three general points. One, the expressive power and flexibility of pictures is greater than many theorists have thought (e.g., there are generally denoting pictures; pictures are not unavoidably specific: they can give limited bits of information; they are not restricted to the representation of the visible, the simulta-

neous, etc.; to be sure, there remain unclear cases, e.g., negation or disjunction). Two, the expressive power and flexibility is extendible (and in unforeseeable ways), e.g., by all sorts of metaphorical applications. Three, most importantly, investigations on level (g) will have priority, since some of the real limitations will be due to peculiarities in the structures of the systems to which the symbols belong.[12]

Level (e)

Intentionalistic theories of depiction are in the main theories about pictorial reference; and, as I will argue below, theories focussing on reference are unable to answer the fundamental questions about how the pictorial differs from the verbal. (See below: Level (d).)

Let me note some additional difficulties. It seems that there are at least some cases of pictorial representation where no intention is involved, at all: depiction can occur in the absence of any relevant intention. Several different and more or less definite cases can be cited to illustrate this point. Think, e.g., of pictures produced by an automatic camera,[13] or, a different case, of pictures produced by a man "idly doodling on a pad".[14]

Even when there is an intention to produce a picture (and even an intention to produce a soandso-picture or a picture of suchandsuch), this does not guarantee, of course, that the result will be a soandso-picture or a picture of suchandsuch (or a picture, at all). Conversely, something may be an F-picture or a picture of x contrary to the painter's intention. As with other endeavours, what is realized in a work may diverge in various ways from what was intended: some works exceed the intentions of the painter (or the author, etc.); many works sadly fall short of them.[15]

We do not need to deny that, in the processes of producing and using pictures, intentions are usually involved, but it does not follow that they have to be mentioned in an analysis of depiction.[16]

Level (d)

Many writings about depiction focus exclusively or predominantly – too predominantly, in my opinion – on question (5) What determines reference in the case of pictures? and on level (d) (i.e., relations between the single symbol and the things it may refer to), in general.

Admittedly, these are interesting and intricate matters in their own right. Notice, though, that considerations concerning level (d) and answers to (5) are of little help in addressing the central questions (1)–(4) about the nature of the pictorial. One important point to be remembered is, of course, that by far not all pictures are referring symbols (in the requisite sense) at all. As everyone knows, the world is full of fictional and other non-denoting pictures. In addition, there are myriads of "abstract pictures" that do not even purport to denote.[17]

Non-denoting pictures are genuine cases of pictures; they are *no less pictorial* than denoting ones. Nor are they negligible, borderline cases.

Every adequate treatment of depiction has to take account of denoting *and* non-denoting pictures. Thus, level (d) and question (5) cannot claim priority in theories on the nature of the pictorial.

But even if we restrict ourselves to denoting pictures, I am skeptical about whether answers to (5), i.e., the question of reference fixing, could help to illuminate the nature of the pictorial. I have two worries.

One, actual practice suggests that there might be no simple, general answer to (5). Depictive content, causal factors, titles and other accompanying texts or symbols, conventional 'schemata', and perhaps other further factors may play a role in settling the denotation of a given picture.[18]

Two, even if there were one uniform criterion, this alone would not necessarily help to distinguish the pictorial from other symbols, simply because the criterion could be relevant in the case of these other symbols as well. Suppose, e.g., that a causal condition may be decisive for matters of pictorial reference. Now, since causal considerations may play a role in determining the reference of many non-pictorial symbols, we are still missing something that marks the difference between the pictorial and the non-pictorial. (Analogous remarks apply to intentionalistic criteria (e).)

GOODMAN'S ANSWER

One of the most powerful and influential ideas in Goodman's (and his followers') approach to a general theory of symbols is certainly the idea to give investigations on level (g) priority (i.e., to focus on the syntactic and semantic *structures of symbol systems*, particularly not on the symbols in isolation but on their *relationships to each other*).

As to theories of pictorial representation, and especially as to the

distinction between the pictorial and the verbal, we have to pay special attention to the syntactical parts of symbol systems, the *symbol schemes*. Since any primarily semantic approach will be unable to take non-denoting pictures into account (see above), the distinction between the pictorial and the linguistic must be drawn in terms of *syntactical* features independently of what the symbols may refer to.

The syntactic component sets conditions for identifying marks (inscriptions or utterances) as instances of a single character. To belong to the same character, all inscriptions (of a given character) have to be syntactically equivalent, i.e., they must be freely exchanged for one another without any syntactical effect.[19]

To make all this a bit more vivid, let us consider systems or schemes with alphabets (such schemes can serve as a contrast to pictorial schemes, which of necessity lack alphabets). An alphabet (this word taken in a wide sense) need not consist of letters, though this is the most familiar case. An alphabet is a (finite) string of marks out of which all of the characters in the symbol scheme are to be constructed. In any alphabetic scheme a distinction can be made between contingent and constitutive features of the marks:[20] only those features that affect *spelling* are constitutive; the rest are contingent. Alphabetic schemes are syntactically disjoint and (finitely or effectively) differentiated; these features ground the possibility of a distinction between contingent and constitutive features of the marks in such a system. In a syntactically *disjoint* system, no mark may belong to more than one character.[21] The requirement of finite or effective *differentiation* amounts to this: "Two characters K and K′ are effectively differentiated if and only if for every mark *m* that does not belong to both, we can determine either that *m* does not belong to K or that *m* does not belong to K′".[22]

Syntactic disjointness and differentiation perform different functions:

> The former insures that all marks correctly adjudged to belong to the same character are mutually substitutable. The latter insures that it is possible to adjudge correctly that two marks belong to the same character. Discursive languages, Arabic numerical notations, and standard musical notation satisfy these requirements.[23]

Now, pictorial symbol schemes lack alphabets. For such alphabetless systems a distinction between constitutive and contingent features cannot be drawn in a general way. "In painting . . . with no such alphabet of characters, none of the pictorial properties – none of the properties the pictures has as such – is distinguished as constitutive; no such

feature can be dismissed as contingent, and no deviation as insignificant".[24]

Pictorial systems are syntactically *non-disjoint*; and they lack effective differentiation. Indeed, they are syntactically *dense*: "A scheme is syntactically dense if it provides for infinitely many characters so ordered that between each two there is a third".[25] The intuitive idea behind this notion is that in syntactically dense (e.g., pictorial) systems, fine and finest differences in certain respects constitute a difference between symbols. In such systems, the symbol occurrences do not sort into discriminately different characters, but blend or merge into one another.[26]

Goodman's example in *Languages of Art* is with respect to height:

> Consider . . . some pictures in the traditional Western system of representation: the first is of a man standing erect at a given distance; the second, to the same scale, is of a shorter man at the same distance. The second image will be shorter than the first. A third image in this series may be of intermediate height; a fourth, intermediate between the third and the second; and so on. According to the representational system, any difference in height among these images constitutes a difference in height of man represented. Whether any actual men are represented does not matter; all that is in question here is how the several images classify into characters, of which the images are marks. And no matter how delicate our discriminations may be, the classification is such that for each picture that belongs to a given character, we cannot possibly determine that the picture belongs to no other character. Syntactic differentiation is absent throughout.[27]

It should be clear of course that pictorial schemes are dense with respect to many pictorial properties (height, breadth, width, length; size; position; hue, intensity, saturation of colour; etc.).

The misleading terms 'analog' and 'digital' can be distinguished in terms of density and differentiation. A scheme differentiated throughout may be called digital; schemes are analog if "between each two characters there is in the scheme a path of pairs of nondifferentiated characters".[28]

A NEW RIDDLE OF DEPICTION REQUIRING A RECONCEPTION

Using the terms 'analog' and 'digital', we may rephrase a major result of Goodman's system-oriented, syntactic account of depiction in the following way: *the pictorial and the analog are related* (as are the verbal and the digital).

Now, "Representation Re-presented", one of the case studies making

up the middle part of *Reconceptions*, is, in the main, devoted to the clarification and defence of this fundamental insight. It can indeed be defended, though a serious difficulty first arises concerning the question *just how* the analog and the pictorial are related. Put differently, the difficulty concerns the level on which the two are related (and, accordingly, the level on which the demarcation between the linguistic and the pictorial can be effected).

We have already seen that no symbol is by itself analog; strictly speaking, the epithets 'analog' and 'digital' apply to symbol schemes, and not to symbols in isolation. Thus, the hypothesis (H1) – pictures must be analog symbols – fails (strictly speaking, it is even meaningless, since it contains something like a category mistake).

More surprisingly, the hypothesis that suggests itself next – (H2), a picture must be a symbol in an analog symbol scheme – will not do, either. As Goodman amply illustrates (with examples of dotted pictures then and with examples of non-dotted ones), every picture belongs to some digital schemes, and indeed "symbols in general belong to schemes of both types and so do not sort into digital or analog according to the type of scheme they belong to".[29]

The problem raised by these types of cases deserves detailed study that cannot be attempted on this occasion. What is most important in the context of this paper is that Goodman's positive solution preserves the affinity between the pictorial and the analog, and reaffirms both the functional character of pictures and the relativity of depiction. The key to the necessary reconceptions is to consider *full* or *comprehensive* symbol schemes. The unsatisfactory hypotheses (H1) and (H2) can then be replaced by (H3): "A full scheme is pictorial *only if* analog, verbal *only if* digital".[30] The functional and relative status of depiction is underlined: "A symbol functions as a picture only when taken as a character in the full pictorial scheme".[31]

NOTES

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[1] Notice that some queries prominent in recent discussions of depiction dangerously vacillate between two or more of the listed questions. Consider, e.g., the popular question 'How do pictures represent?' that vacillates, at least, between (1), (2), and (5).

[2] Cp. Goodman and Elgin (1988, pp. 129, 131). To be sure, Goodman and Elgin have suggested answers to most of the other questions as well. Large parts of *Languages of Art* are devoted not only to answering (3) but also to answering the more general query (2). And, as is well known, Goodman has offered a proposal about what distinguishes pictures from diagrams (etc.); see his discussions on relative repleteness (Goodman 1968, pp. 228–30, 252; 1978, pp. 67ff.; 1984, pp. 58, 136ff.; and Goodman and Elgin 1988, p. 123). In addition, Goodman has made very important contributions to what we might call the 'logic of representation'. See especially his remarks on the ambiguity of "x is a representation of *y*", his analysis of the notion of "representation-as", as well as some refinements of these explications (Goodman 1968, pp. 21–31; 1972, pp. 122–25; 1984, pp. 77–80).

[3] On this topic, see Schwartz (1975), Goodman and Elgin (1988, Chap. VII), and Scholz (1991, pp. 33–43).

[4] Cp. Schwartz (1980, p. 289): "Whether a state or item is functioning as a symbol, what it symbolizes, and the mode of symbolization it exhibits are all dependent on and relative to what if any system of interpretation is employed".

[5] Cp. Elgin (1983, p. 97).

[6] Such a shift occurs more than once in Goodman's work: (i) "What is art?" – "When is art?" (cp. Goodman 1978, Chap. IV; 1984, pp. 142, 145; Goodman and Elgin 1988, p. 68); and (ii) "What is a variation?" – "When is a variation?" (cp. Goodman and Elgin 1988, Chap. IV). I will focus on the first case.

[7] Goodman (1978, p. 66).

[8] Ibid., pp. 66–67.

[9] Ibid., p. 67.

[10] Goodman (1984, p. 142).

[11] Goodman (1968, p. 264); cp. Goodman (1978, p. 67; 1984, pp. 135–38).

[12] Cp. Elgin (1983, p. 97).

[13] Cp. Goodman (1972, p. 125).

[14] Candlish (1982, p. 223).

[15] Cp. Goodman and Elgin (1988, pp. 44, 55).

[16] Besides all this, there is the serious difficulty of giving an analysis of depiction in terms of the relevant intentions that avoids *circularity* and *infinite regresses* (cp. Squires 1969, p. 195; Black 1972, pp. 110–13; Walton 1974, p. 240; Scholz 1991, pp. 115–20).

[17] Cp. Goodman and Elgin (1988, p. 131).

[18] Cp. Schwartz (1985, p. 719, n. 10). For detailed criticisms of the resemblance view see Goodman (1968, Chap. I) and Scholz (1991, Chap. 2 and the literature quoted in it). For criticisms of purely causal theories of pictorial reference, see the third chapter of my book.

[19] Cp. Goodman (1968, pp. 131ff.) and Elgin (1983, pp. 24, 97ff.).

[20] Goodman (1968, p. 116) and Elgin (1983, pp. 25, 97ff.).

[21] Cp. Goodman (1968, p. 133) and Elgin (1983, p. 98).

[22] Goodman and Elgin (1988, p. 125); cp. Goodman (1968, pp. 135ff.) and Elgin (1983, p. 99).

[23] Elgin (1983, p. 100).
[24] Goodman (1968, p. 116).
[25] Ibid., p. 136.
[26] Cp. Goodman (1978, pp. 67ff.; 1984, p. 57).
[27] Goodman (1968, pp. 226ff.).
[28] Goodman and Elgin (1988, p. 126); cp. Goodman (1968, pp. 160ff.).
[29] Goodman and Elgin (1988, p. 127).
[30] Ibid., p. 130.
[31] Ibid., p. 130, n. 4.

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