

[Please note: the following text is not a draft paper, but an extended abstract intended only to outline the general argument of the proposed paper.]

The nonconceptual content of paintings

The notion of nonconceptual content is sometimes appealed to in philosophy of mind to facilitate the claim that an action or state can have content without the respective agent's being explicitly aware of that content. Concepts can be employed by a subject in active thought, are the 'constituents required to explain [the] inferential relations' between propositional contents (Crane 1992, 147), and are paradigmatically linguistic. By contrast, nonconceptual content either lacks immediate availability to conscious thought or has a sub-semantic function, typically linked with subpersonal information states exhibiting a fine-grained structure, such as putatively involved in visual perception. It is thus natural and common to suppose that pictures in general, and hence paintings, have content that is nonconceptual. This paper will address the attribution of nonconceptual content specifically to paintings, arguing that they should not be subsumed under the more general rubric of 'depiction' and that embodied/artisinal and mechanical modes of depiction are characterized by different types of nonconceptual content. The first part of the paper sets out how the nonconceptual content of pictures can be accommodated and characterized by views of depiction based on information-theory. The second part of the paper takes Merleau-Ponty's conception of painting as a mode of embodied expression as its point of departure. This view is developed to argue that paintings cannot be assimilated to the information-theory approach and that their manner of production nonetheless invests them with a kind of nonconceptual content.

The information-theory approach

One way of thinking about the nonconceptual content of pictures is provided by what I shall call the 'information-theory' approach to depiction, examples of which are found in Lopes (1996) and Kulvicki (2006). This approach is characterized by the use of a two-level model to accommodate the intuition that pictorial content covaries with changes in their fine-grained syntax (in Goodman's terms, that pictures combine syntactic and semantic density). Thus Lopes (1996, 3 f.) – modelling his view of depiction on Evans's (1982) view of perception – distinguishes the visual properties of a picture, its 'design', from the properties it represents the world as having, or its 'content'. Whereas recognitional abilities are involved in the (conceptual) grasp of a picture's content, experience of a picture's design is nonconceptual (Lopes 1996, 145, 185). Similarly Kulvicki distinguishes the 'bare bones content' of an image, i.e. the scenes which would generate it under a certain mode of projection, from their 'fleshed out content', which 'results from deploying concepts as a result of seeing the picture surface' (Kulvicki 2006, 173). The point of thus distinguishing two levels can be illustrated by considering different pictures of the same thing, e.g. of a certain building photographed from the same position at different times of the day. The fact that the same concepts would be employed to describe or interpret what is depicted – i.e. seen 'in' the picture – corresponds to sameness of such pictures' pictorial content (in Lopes's sense) or fleshed-out content. Conversely, purely visual differences – even subtle ones, such as a minor change in lighting conditions or a slight change in viewing position – correspond to differences in the information embodied by the respective pictures, i.e. their design or bare-bones content. This approach to depiction is thus an information theory in a dual sense: the notion of informational content is

relied on to account for both the basic visual content of pictures and the nonconceptual character of such visual content.

The embodied depiction approach

The starting point for a more adequate understanding of the nonconceptual content of paintings is provided by Merleau-Ponty's conception of painting as a kind of embodied expression. The point of his emphasis on the constitutive role of the human body is to understand expressed meaning in relation to the processes in which it is generated, rather than by recourse to an idealized system of fully constituted and determinate relations. An important consequence of this approach is that there is no separation of the meaningful from the merely causal, as the human body functions as a locus in which causal factors are blended with rational considerations. An effective illustration of this blending is provided by a slow motion film of Matisse at work, discussed by Merleau-Ponty, which shows that rather than moving with mechanical or surgical precision, Matisse's hand deftly rehearsed different possibilities, appearing to 'meditate', before applying each single brushstroke (Merleau-Ponty 1969, 62). The act of painting thus provides a model of what might be called 'motoric deliberation', a preconceptual weighing up, (literally) going through the motions so as to get the right feel for the stroke required. Since this operation is both intentionally directed towards the work being produced and involves deliberate choice, it provides a model of intelligent action that resists both assimilation to some kind of calculus and reduction to mechanical processes or blind causation. Rather, as the product of embodied expression, paintings acquire an ambivalent mode of intelligibility in which there is no principled cut-off between the influence of motoric dispositions and conscious control.

This Merleau-Pontian view of embodied expression suggests that painting cannot be properly accounted for by the information-theory approach to depiction. The reason for this, I suggest, is that the information-theory approach tacitly overrelies on mechanical depiction, in particular photography, as a paradigm.¹ In such mechanical imaging it is entirely appropriate to think of pictures as a conduit for information transmission, with each syntactic feature embodying something determinate about what it is an image of. However, as Merleau-Ponty's discussion makes clear, the basic set-up in the case of embodied depiction is different: the human body is an additional causal factor which actively (rather than passively, e.g. as a rule-governed projection) mediates the picture production. Even if it is assumed that the body's perceptive role can plausibly be likened to the operation of a camera, such bodily mediation involves two further aspects. First, in one respect the body functions as an impediment to information transmission, as a source of noise so to speak: for even if an agent intends simply to reproduce what is seen, the ability to do so is conditioned by executive ability. Yet the control each of has over our own body is imperfect, and there is a dialectic between what we might want our bodies to do and what our current dispositional and motoric state allow us to do (consider the difficulties we have in learning to play a sport or a musical instrument). Second, in another respect the body functions as a source of integrity, as the embodied agent's intentions to organize forms in a certain way guide the process of producing the painting. Bodily mediation thus involves a causal complex of perception-intention-execution, rather than a simple regular projection of the type assumed by the

¹ Indeed Lopes (1996, 103) highlights that the 'paradigm of an information system is a mechanism such as a camera'.

information-theory approach. Hence the information-theory approach breaks down: for even if syntactic features of a painting were thought to encode information, there would be no way of decoding it – i.e. no principled way of paring apart what is due to bodily mediation and what is attributable to the visual appearance of what is depicted. Paintings cannot therefore be read simply as a conduit for information transmission.

A Merleau-Pontian approach also has interesting implications for the way we should think of nonconceptual content with regard to paintings. To begin with, as just outlined, it implies that paintings are not to be thought of as having nonconceptual content of the kind assumed by the information-theory approach. Nonetheless, on the one hand, the idea of motoric deliberation suggests that paintings are the result of conscious controlled activity which is guided by compositional intentions. In this respect the microstructure of paintings is closer to the conceptual than the information-theory model suggests, as the painter actively employs some grasp of what s/he is doing in producing the picture. On the other hand, there is no obvious reason for thinking of such structure in terms of semantic content, i.e. as being conceptual or propositional in kind. The application of paint to a canvas does not seem to be mediated by propositional awareness, nor does it correspond to determinate propositional contents. Rather the intentions at work are compositional, directed to the realization of certain visual configurations, and inflected in a space of pictorial possibilities. Of course – as McDowell (1996) has shown – any ‘fine-grained’ structure can be exploited in the conceptual realm, or the ‘space of reasons’, by deploying recognitional abilities and demonstratives. But this is a parasitic operation, amounting to a conceptualization: the choices made and the degrees of freedom these exploit (e.g. hue, tone, shape, texture) are proper to the space of painterly possibilities rather than the conceptual/propositional ‘space of reasons’. In this respect the microstructure of paintings is less concept-like than information. For whereas nonconceptual content is often thought of simply as a tacit awareness of something that can be specified conceptually (using ‘canonical concepts’), the traces of intelligent action that make up the composition of a painting fail to meet basic conditions to function in the semantic space such as determinacy, the ability to pick out referents, to serve as bearers of inferential properties, or to function as components of propositions. Thus, on Merleau-Ponty’s approach, the fine-grained configurational features of paintings can be thought of as having content which is genuinely nonconceptual rather than tacitly conceptual.

References

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