

# Originally Nested — Seeing Picdows in Pictures

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ABSTRACT. In the first part of the paper (sections 1 and 2) I will consider an argument proposed by Robert Hopkins in his essay *Inflected Pictorial Experience* (2010). Hopkins argues that, in divisive accounts of pictorial experience, inflected seeing-in reduces to nested seeing-in. In the second part of the paper (sections 3 and 4) I will argue that such a reduction of inflection to nesting is not a true problem, but rather a clue that nesting has to be treated as the key structure of pictorial experience. Seeing-in is originally nested to the extent that what we see primarily in a picture is a distinctive phenomenal object, namely a *picdow*, through which we can see the depicted scene. In the third part of the paper (sections 5 and 6) I will rethink the notions of seeing-in and inflection by means of the notions of nesting and picdow.

## 1. Inflection and Nesting

In the account of depiction proposed by Wollheim (1987), “seeing-in” is the distinctive experience whereby the viewer relates to a picture along two dimensions: a configurational fold (CF) representing the picture’s surface, and a recognitional fold (RF) representing the depicted subject. Among the properties experienced in the CF, a relevant subset is constituted by the design properties, which are defined by Lopes (2005, p.25) as “those visible surface properties in virtue of which a picture depicts what it does”. Lopes’ notion of design property allows us to individuate two special cases of seeing-in experience. First, *inflection*, in which a full characterization of the RF needs to make reference to some design properties in the CF. Second, *nesting*, in which a full characterization of the RF needs to make reference to some design properties in the RF itself.

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From a similar perspective, Hopkins (2010, pp. 158-159) defines *inflection* as the case in which “what is seen in a surface includes properties a full characterization of which needs to make reference to that surface design (conceived as such)”. Hopkins (2010, p. 163) considers as a paradigmatic example Rembrandt’s sketch *Jan Cornelisz Sylvius, the Preacher*, in which “fully to see the upward-turned hand in the picture, one must see the movement of the ink strokes as occurring not on the marked surface, but in the space visible therein”. Likewise, Hopkins (2010, pp. 159-160) defines *nesting* as the case in which “what we see in a picture is itself a picture in which things are seen”, and therefore “what is seen in the design before us needs characterizing by reference, not to that design, but to a design visible in that design”.

To sum up, both inflection and nesting need to refer to *a* design in order to characterize the depicted subject, but these designs belong to different levels: a first-level design for inflection (the design *of* the picture), a second-level design for nesting (the design *in* the picture). According to Hopkins (2010, p. 170), the explanation of inflection and nesting depends on whether we endorse a divisive or a unitary account of seeing in. A *divisive* account (as for example Lopes’ recognitional account) conceives of seeing-in as the actual combination of the two folds of the pictorial experience, whereas a *unitary* account (as for example Hopkins’ experienced-similarity account) treats the folds as mere abstractions from an unique experience conceived as a whole.

In a divisive account, inflection and nesting share the same CF, understood as a component that represents the picture, including its design. The difference between inflection and nesting thus depends on the RF, which in the case of inflection is a component that represents the scene, along with certain inflected properties (call it: RF-i), whereas in the case of nesting is a component that represents the scene, including a design, with some further scene visible in it (call it: RF-n). In short, inflection is the combination of CF with RF-i, whereas nesting is the combination of CF with RF-n.

## 2. The Reduction of Inflection to Nesting

In divisive accounts, the RF represents the scene in the way that ordinary

face-to-face visual experience represents its objects. Hopkins (2010, p. 173) calls this way of representing: Standard Visual Representation. But, in the case of inflection, can the RF be Standard Visual Representation? In Hopkins terms: “Anything bearing inflected properties is not just an unusual sort of entity, but one that somehow combines aspects drawn from very different orders of reality: the world of design and the world of the scene visible in design. Can Standard Visual Representation offer us *that*?” (2010, p. 174).

In order to treat the RF of inflection as Standard Visual Representation, we need to make as if there is an “intervening pane” between the viewer and the scene: “Think, for instance, of seeing an object through a distorting lens, such as a very uneven piece of glass. Here one’s experience represents something that combines different orders: that of the world seen through the lens, and that of the lens through which is seen. Doesn’t this suggest that different levels are something Standard Visual Representation is perfectly capable of capturing?” (Hopkins, 2010, p. 175).

Yet, according to Hopkins (2010, p. 175), by conceiving of inflection’s Recognitional Fold as an intervening pane, we make inflection indistinguishable from nesting. That is because the putative intervening pane in the case of inflection works exactly like the design that is inside the depicted scene in the case of nesting. Inflection reduces to nesting to the extent that the intervening pane works as an intermediate level of representation between the scene and the viewer’s experience.

For example in the series of photographs called *Distortions* (1976), André Kertész uses distorting mirrors as an intervening pane between the camera and the depicted subject, and those very photographs are treated by Bence Nanay (2012) as a paradigmatic case of pictorial inflection. The fact that pictures produced by means of nesting are in fact assessed as a case of inflection seems to be a clue that inflection relies upon nesting.

We know that inflection and nesting share the same CF (a component that represents the picture, including its design) but differs in the RF since the RF of inflection (RF-i) is a component that represents the scene, along with certain inflected properties, whereas the RF of nesting (RF-n) is a component that represents the scene, including a design, with some further scene visible in it. Yet, if the “inflected properties” in the RF-i work as an intervening pane, then they work as “a design, with some fur-

ther scene visible in it”, and therefore the RF-i becomes indistinguishable from the RF-n. That is to say that inflection becomes indistinguishable from nesting. The difference between inflection and nesting reduces to a mere quantitative matter: on the one hand, in the classical case of nesting we have a “little” picture P\* that is located inside the main representation P; on the other hand, in the case of inflection, we have a “big” intervening pane Q\* that in turn is located inside the main representation Q but occupies all the space visible in it.

To sum up, Hopkins’ argument for the reduction of inflection to nesting can be so outlined:

- (i) In divisive accounts, the RF must work as a Standard Visual Representation.
- (ii) In order to characterize the RF of inflection as Standard Visual Representation we need to refer to an intervening pane.
- (iii) The intervening pane is a secondary representation within the RF.
- (iv) A representation that involves a secondary representation within the RF is a case of nesting.
- (v) Conclusion: inflection reduces to nesting.

### **3. The Nesting Hypothesis**

So far, we have seen that in divisive accounts of seeing-in inflection reduces to nesting. Yet such a reduction does not lead to a *reductio ad absurdum*. Rather, it seems to suggest that any kind of seeing-in reduces to nesting. If this is the case, then nesting is the best explanation of inflection just because nesting is the best explanation of seeing-in in general. I call this point the “nesting hypothesis”: in any seeing-in experience, the content of the RF is not directly the depicted scene but a visual structure X (a sort of intervening pane) allowing the viewer to see the depicted scene. Such a structure X is seen in the picture’s surface, but X is phenomenally different the picture’s surface under two fundamental respects: first, X is experienced as *transparent*; second, X is experienced as *detached*.

On the one hand, by claiming that X is experienced as *transparent* I mean that X is experienced as transmitting light reflected or emitted by other objects (whereas the real surface of the picture is experienced as an opaque surface reflecting or emitting light on its own). What matters here is not physical transparency (i.e., knowledge about a causal chain linking the depicted scene to the picture, cf. Walton 1984), but phenomenal transparency: the impression of seeing through a surface, of having a glass-like experience, regardless of physical transparency. On the other hand, by claiming that X is experienced as *detached* I mean that what X makes us see cannot be localized in our egocentric space. In this sense detachment allows the nesting hypothesis to explain why, in the case in which a viewer moves around the picture, her perspective on the real surface of the picture manifestly shifts, but her perspective on the depicted scene stays the same (cf. Hopkins, 2012, p. 656). That is because detachment disentangles the depicted scene from the viewer's egocentric space by placing this very scene in an "allocentric space" which is not related to the viewer's body but only to her vision.

#### **4. Picdows**

I propose to call the phenomenal object X constituting the main content of the RF: "picdow", that is, something that works under certain aspects as a *picture* and under others as a *window*. In particular, the picdow is like a window to the extent that it is experienced as transparent. By experiencing the picdow I have the impression to see a scene through the surface. Yet the picdow is also like pictures are usually intended to be, to the extent that the scene presented by the picdow does not carry any specific information about the environment in which the viewer is located, and prevents her to orient her body with regard to the scene, so as the scene is experienced as detached.

The nesting hypothesis can thus be stated in the following terms: a picture represents a picdow that makes us see a scene. On the one hand, picdow's transparency takes into account the impression of seeing through a surface: the impression of receiving sights (and sounds, in the case of cinema) that travel from the depicted scene through the surface up to us. On

the other hand, picdow's detachment takes into account the impression of seeing a scene that (in spite of transparency) is not in front of us, nor is it just behind the picture (in the sense in which the scene we see through a window is just behind the window). The depicted scene is in an environment detached from ours, and nevertheless we experience sights (and sounds) as traveling from this scene through the picdow up to us.

In the first instance, the picdow can be conceived of as a phenomenal object that is delivered by our perceptual system when coupled with a picture. We can thus characterize the picdow as an interface that, by separating two spaces, namely the egocentric space and the "allocentric" one, only allows for the transmission of light (and sound, in the case of cinema), and prevents any other kind of connection.

The picdow is a physically impossible object, because the experience of transparency requires a spatio-temporal path allowing the light to travel from the depicted scene to the viewer's environment, which therefore cannot be detached from the depicted scene. In short, transparency and detachment are physically incompatible properties. Yet the picdow is not a phenomenally impossible object, because transparency and detachment are not phenomenally incompatible properties. We can experience the same surface as both transparent and detached, that is, as enabling us to see through the surface a scene (here is the transparency), which nevertheless is not localizable in our environment (here is the detachment).

The experience of transparency is essentially the experience of perceiving a scene *K* through a surface *S*. The possibility of localization of *K* in a place behind *S* is only a common feature of the experience of transparency, but it is not an essential feature of it. Devices like the telescope and especially the periscope show that there can be an experience of transparency without an inherent experience of localization. One could say that the picdow is like a periscope that emerges on the depicted scene. Yet it is worth noting that this is just a simile. The picdow is not a periscope, neither must the viewer imagine that there is a periscope in the depicted scene, or something similar. The viewer just has the impression of a surface that is phenomenally transparent and detached like a periscope, without being committed to imagine that this surface is a periscope – let alone a massless capsule (cf. Wilson, 1986, p. 55) or a cross-worlds satellite (cf. Levinson, 1993, p. 71).

In the case of the periscope, we infer from the experience of transparency that the scene we see should be over there, in spite of the fact that such a scene seems detached from our environment. Yet in the pictorial experience this inference is blocked. We just have an experience of transparency and detachment, without inferring spatial connection from transparency so as to eliminate detachment. The experience of transparency is just the impression of perceiving the scene *somewhere* beyond the surface, without being committed to identify such a *somewhere* with an *over there*.

### 5. Seeing-In Revisited

In claiming that we see picdows in pictures, I am claiming that depiction involves three different objects:

1. The surface of the picture as a physical object (experienced in the CF).
2. The picdow as a phenomenal object (directly experienced in the RF).
3. The depicted scene (indirectly experienced in the RF).

In order to thoroughly explain the relationships between these three objects, we need not only the notion of seeing-in but also the notions of seeing-as and seeing-through. The spectator, indeed, sees the depicted scene *in* the picture's surface because she sees this very surface *as* a picdow *through* which she can see the depicted scene. The seeing-in experience (seeing the scene in the surface) is thus delivered by the combination of a seeing-as experience (seeing the surface as a picdow) and a seeing-through experience (seeing the scene through the picdow).

*Seeing-as* differs from seeing-in to the extent that the former, unlike the latter, does not allow the viewer to experience the two folds simultaneously. In seeing-as, the viewer must alternate between the RF and the CF, so that, in fact, they are no longer folds of a composed experience, but rather full-fledged experiences (cf. Gombrich, 1960). That being the case, the relationship between real surface and picdow must be seeing-as, since the viewer cannot simultaneously experiences the same object as a localizable opaque surface and as a detached transparent surface.

*Seeing-through* in turn differs from seeing-in to the extent that in the former the surface is experienced as a transparent medium, whereas in the latter the surface is experienced as an opaque object. According to Walton (1984) seeing-through requires a causal chain that connects the surface to the scene. Yet we can distinguish between *physical transparency* actually requiring a causal connection between the surface and the scene, and *phenomenal transparency* in which what really matters is just that the surface elicits a window-like effect, regardless of its causal connection to the scene. And, as I have argued in section 3, what really matters in pictorial experience is phenomenal transparency.

In sum, the viewer sees the picture as a picdow, and she sees the scene through the picdow. Yet, once the viewer has recognized the scene, she can turn her attention to the surface now considered as the opaque surface it really is, without giving up the visual experience of the scene. She has used the picdow in order to experience the scene, but once she has visually grasped the scene, she can finally throw away the picdow (like it was a ladder she has climbed up on), so to see the surface as the opaque surface it really is. If all of this is right, seeing-in with its distinctive twofoldness is just a secondary effect that can be produced by the combination of a seeing-as experience with a seeing-through experience.

In its originally nested form, the pictorial experience is articulated in two tiers: in the first one *we see the surface as a picdow*, and in the second one *we see the scene through the picdow*. Yet in the viewer's experience the two tiers can "collapse" (cf. Hopkins, 2008) thereby disavowing the picdow's mediation, so that the first tier reduces to a CF in which *we see the surface*, and the second tier reduces to a RF in which *we see the scene*; it is only at this moment that the combination of the two folds leads to the twofold seeing-in experience whereby *we see the scene in the surface*.

## 6. Inflection Revisited

A depicted scene is experienced either *through* the phenomenal picdow or *in* the real picture's surface. Correspondingly, there can be in principle two different accounts of inflection. On the one hand, *weak inflection* (or *picdow-inflection*) whereby a full characterization of the depicted scene

needs to make reference to the picdow through which we see that scene. On the other hand, *strong inflection* (or *surface-inflection*) whereby a full characterization of the depicted scene needs to make reference to the real surface in which we see that scene. The viewer must refer to strong inflection only with regard to those properties that she cannot fully characterize in terms of weak inflection. In other words, the viewer must trace back to marks on the real picture's surface only when she is faced with properties that she cannot experiences as effects of a sort of intervening pane.

The notion of picdow, with the consequent distinction between weak (picdow-dependent) and strong (marks-dependent) inflections, allows us to take into account three basic levels of the pictorial experience.

At the ground level, whose paradigmatic instances can be found in cinematic depiction, the picdow is experienced only as a frame – a sort of boundary – that detaches the allocentric space of the scene from the egocentric space of the viewer.

At the intermediate level, which corresponds to weak inflection, the picdow is experienced not only as a frame but also as an intervening pane that affects the manifest features of the depicted scene. Weak inflection shows up in pictorial experience not only in the aforementioned example of Kertész's photographs *Distortions*, but also in the general case of black and white photographs. Furthermore, weak inflection affects those naturalistic pictures that attribute to depicted scenes a distinctive look which is not an intrinsic visual feature of depicted subjects – as for example the oily look of the scenes depicted in oil paintings.

At the top level, which correspond to strong inflection, the viewer experiences visual features that cannot be taken into account either as exclusive features of the depicted subject or as features determined by the picdow as an intervening pane. This is the case of the aforementioned Rembrandt's sketch *Jan Cornelisz Sylvius, the Preacher*, and more generally of those pictorial styles (for examples the styles of painters like Turner, Monet, Cezanne, Matisse) that force the viewer to simultaneously experience the marks on the surface and the depicted subject. It is only in those cases that twofoldness immediately shows up in pictorial experience, without the need of a voluntary cognitive effort whereby the experience of the picdow is traced back to the configuration of a real surface. Strong inflection, so to say, breaks the picdow: it prevents the viewer from enjoying

phenomenal transparency, by forcing her to see that the scene in the allocentric space is made of marks which are in fact in her egocentric space.

If seeing-in is understood as strictly twofold, that is, as involving a simultaneous awareness of both a configured surface and a depicted scene, then we can agree with the thesis according to which “seeing-in can only be inflected seeing-in” (cf. Voltolini, 2012) and we could add: inflected in the strongest sense. Yet such a conclusion does not necessarily show that all pictures elicit an experience of inflected seeing-in. Rather, it seems to show that Wollheim’s seeing-in theory is nothing but an account of strong inflection. Treating it as a general account of depiction amounts to mistake a limit case for a paradigmatic case.

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