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Edited by Connell Vaughan and Iris Vidmar

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***Some Concerns with Experientialism about Depiction:  
the Case of Separation seeing-in***

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ABSTRACT. Experiential theories claim that depictive representations should be defined with reference to the experience elicited in their viewers. To accommodate both the visual and the representational character of pictures, they introduce the idea of a standard of correctness determining the appropriate pictorial subject, which is made available to our experience by resorting to general background knowledge. I argue that this kind of account is unable to clarify what makes some piece of information more suitable than another to contribute to the recognition of the depicted subject. I support my point with an analysis of the notion of *separation seeing-in*, developed by Robert Hopkins to account for pictures like stick-figure drawings, which exhibit a gap between what is visible in them and what we take them to depict. The result is that visual experience cannot guide the selection of the necessary information to individuate the represented subject: the representational function of a picture cannot be reduced to any idea of experience suitably constrained.

Many philosophical accounts of depiction can be regarded as proposing to understand it in terms of the experience elicited by a certain kind of surface. Although they differ from each other concerning the identification of such

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an experience,<sup>2</sup> these views share many crucial features regarding their explanatory stance. Exactly because of their insistence on the importance of the spectator's reaction to depictive representations, they have been often considered together as a unitary class of "experiential" theories, as Robert Hopkins (1998) has labelled them.

The common aim of these positions is to capture both the visual character of pictures, that is the fact that they convey the visual impression of a three-dimensional scene, and their representational character, namely that they are about a subject matter which can be grasped either correctly or incorrectly. Experiential accounts thus contend that causing a certain visual experience governed by correctness conditions for pictorial reference is a necessary and sufficient condition for depiction: to express the idea with Richard Wollheim's words, "a painting represents whatever can be *correctly seen in it*" (2003, p. 5, italics mine).

This paper will discuss the outcomes and the limits of this kind of definition. In Section 1, I will start by spelling out some basic tenets of experiential theories, with particular attention to how the visual and the representational aspects of pictures are explained. The analysis will show that our experience of a picture needs to be supported by background general knowledge in order to grasp the standard of correctness for the depicted content. Section 2 will outline some arguments pointing out a

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<sup>2</sup> Some of the most debated solutions variously suggest understanding depictive experience as an illusory visual experience (Gombrich, 1960), a veridical *sui generis* visual experience (Wollheim, 1987), a visual experience coloured by imagination (Walton, 1990), or an experienced resemblance between the depictive and the depicted item (Hopkins, 1998).

possible drawback of such a claim, namely that we cannot suitably select solely on the basis of our experience which information enables us to recognize the *represented* subject, without already presupposing some insights concerning that subject. In Section 3 I will examine the whole discussion in the light of some puzzling cases of depictive representations, such as stick-figure drawings, explained by Hopkins with the notion of *separation seeing-in* (1998). These pictures, characterized by a certain degree of indeterminacy, exhibit a clear mismatch between what is properly visible in them and what they represent. I will argue that an experiential explanation, like the one proposed by Hopkins, gives rise to some doubts regarding the role played by experience in pictorial interpretation. Finally, I will draw from these reflections some conclusions about the need for a theory of depiction not to downplay the specific scope of notions like experience and representation.

## **1. Pictorial Experience and Standard of Correctness**

Experiential theories adopt a stance towards pictorial representations which takes seriously what has been defined as “the beholder’s share”.<sup>3</sup> Following experientialism, a spectator faced with a picture undergoes a distinctive kind of visual experience, which should enable her to pick out the represented subject. However, subjective experience alone is surely not sufficient to determine the *right* content of a picture. Unless specific constraints are in place, what is seen in the pictorial surface may well be consistent with many

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<sup>3</sup> The expression has been made famous by Gombrich (1960).



possible options. As an example, the picture of a sea otter realized in the peculiar split-style typical of Haida Native American tribes has its proper subject: it does depict a sea otter. Nonetheless, in line with its visual appearance, the image could also be mistakenly understood as depicting other items, such as an eel, a snake, a smiling anthropomorphized half-moon, a Frisbee, a piece of jewellery, and so on. But even if it is possible in principle to see all these alternatives in the picture, there is only one which the audience is *entitled* to see as the depicted subject; that is, a sea otter.



**Figure 1:** Haida sea otter

This is the reason why experiential views appeal to the idea of a *standard of correctness* applying to the experience of pictures. Such a standard is a normative statement which fixes the subject to be correctly recognized and rules out incorrect interpretations. Its content is usually set with reference to the picture maker's representational intentions or, as many authors contend

in the case of mechanically produced pictures like photographs,<sup>4</sup> by other kinds of causal relations holding between the scene and the picture. Hence, to stick to the example previously mentioned, a defender of experientialism would propose that the Haida picture depicts a sea otter since we can see a sea otter in it and, moreover, its author intended us to see a sea otter in it. A crucial implication of such a move is that the intention behind the standard should be *fulfilled* by the resulting picture. This means that the author should be able to make her intention available through her work: what really matters here is not just entertaining some depictive intention, but also expressing it. From an experiential point of view, the picture maker succeeds in pictorially representing a subject insofar as, under the ideal conditions, a spectator undergoes an experience which complies with the intended standard.

The issue about the author's fulfilled intentions is particularly worth considering, because it sheds light on an explanatory asymmetry regarding the conditions for depiction provided by experientialism. In fact, an experiential kind of approach appears to grant a sort of priority to the conditions capturing the visual character of pictures, which work as *explanans* also for the conditions of the representational character, while, in contrast, these latter depend on the former ones. The reason underlying this

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<sup>4</sup> Issues concerning the adequacy of assuming a separate standard of correctness for photographs are largely debated in Hopkins (1998, pp. 71-78) and Lopes (1996, ch. 8). For the purposes of this article, I will not get into the details of this discussion, nor will I take a stand about it. Furthermore, in what follows I will mainly refer to the standard of correctness as based on the author's intentions, as this has been the idea classically targeted by the main examinations of how pictures represent.

standpoint is outlined by this quote from Wollheim:

If all the suitable spectator can do is to pick up on the artist's intention [...] and there is no register of this in his experience of the picture, the conditions of representation have not been satisfied. Representation is perceptual. (1998, p. 226)

What Wollheim wants to suggest here is that recognizing the content of a picture is a radically distinctive task from other kinds of symbolic interpretation. The standard of correctness is fleshed out by how the subject appears in the visual experience of the spectator, as long as the author has successfully expressed her intention in the picture. Such considerations bring to the fore an important assumption adopted by experiential views on the nature of depiction. As it turns out, experientialism ends up treating depiction not merely as a distinctive *species* of representation, which shares some common features with other kinds of representations (like linguistic ones) but at the same time diverges from them in some more specific aspects. In an experiential light, pictures are rather understood as belonging to a distinctive *genus* of representation, with its own special mode of representing a certain subject matter: a mode which precisely involves some kind of visual experience. This clarification also shows how the notion of experience deployed by experiential theories can address the representational character of pictures by incorporating issues about communication and recognition of a message expressed in a visual manner.

At this point, however, an experiential position is faced with a problem arising from two conflicting intuitions. On the one hand, intentions determining the subject of a picture cannot be directly detected by a visual

experience of the picture: as Wollheim points out, “it is out of the things that can be seen in [a] picture that [a particular] intention determines what the picture represents” (2003, p. 9). On the other hand, visual experience still provides the key access to the subject represented: to put it as a slogan, “no pictorial content without experience”. To recall again Wollheim: “if something cannot be seen in a painting, it forfeits all chances to be part of its content” (*ibidem*). Yet, once it is accepted that the correlation between the content of a picture and the intentional factors behind it is not visible in the picture, one might wonder whether visual experience can actually give us the standard of correctness, and thus let us recognize the represented subject.

Experiential theories usually suggest treating the difficulty by allowing visual experience to be influenced by information, assumptions or hypotheses pertaining to the standard of correctness. Whenever these suggestions are not immediately available (for example from the title of the work) they can be generally drawn from acquaintance with contexts and methods of production, or from plausibility and common sense. Appealing to this kind of background knowledge enables the spectator to reconstruct the intentions or causal relations which are not themselves directly visible in the picture, but still determine the depicted scene to be recognized. Therefore, pictorial experience has been characterized by many authors as penetrated by various cognitive attitudes,<sup>5</sup> so that the standard of correctness

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<sup>5</sup> Gombrich (1960) has firmly opposed to the so called “myth of the innocent eye” by insisting that pictorial seeing cannot but be informed by thought. Wollheim (2003) and Voltolini (2014) have argued that pictorial seeing is open to being affected by concepts, in particular with regard to the recognition of the depicted subject. Walton (1990) has

can be visually relevant. Revised accordingly, the beholder's experience thus becomes sufficient to provide the represented subject.

## **2. The Problem with Background Information**

However, this proposal still leaves us with a question about how background knowledge connects with our experience of the picture to make us recognize the appropriate subject. Sure, some pieces of information are more suitable than others for understanding what the author intended to represent with a certain picture; the audience is thus supposed to be skilled enough to draw only on clues of the right kind. In other words, to put it as Catharine Abell does,

We need to know why, in certain cases, we are justified in applying such knowledge to our interpretation of a picture; why, in other cases, we are not justified in doing so; and how we tell the difference between the two kinds of cases. (2005, p. 59)

To remain true to an experiential perspective, a satisfactory answer should be guided by a twofold disclaimer. As argued in the last section, although a visual experience not supported by background information is *not sufficient*

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advocated for a slightly different kind of cognitive penetrability, which involves imagination. However, it is not necessary to construe the interaction between pictorial experience and background knowledge as an instance of cognitive penetration within the content of our seeing. As I will point out in Section 3, Hopkins (1998) proposes a model in terms of inductive reasoning to make sense of the appearance of the picture.

to carry out the recognition of the represented subject, giving rise to an experience has to be maintained as a *necessary* condition for depiction. Precisely for this reason, it seems implausible that the search for information is not directed and constrained by the spectator's experience. According to experientialism, in fact, the identification of the subject is undertaken by a visual experience of the picture. This assumption marks the difference from a purely *semiotic* point of view, which explains depiction in terms of the conventional features of pictorial signs, in a similar vein to the analysis of other kinds of languages.<sup>6</sup> Since it puts the stress on the denotative powers of pictures within symbolic systems, such an approach would allow us to take the visual significance of pictures as a sort of side-effect resulting from the structural characteristics of depictive symbolic systems. On the contrary, experiential proposals hold as an essential fact about pictures that they depict a scene by offering a look at it, so that the access to the represented subject has to be achieved through a visual experience.

A promising move could thus be to test whether the background information necessary for the interpretive task is recalled to the spectator's mind starting from an experience of the picture. On this point, it can be argued that such experience provides *relevant* hints which connect to background general knowledge in order to individuate the particular represented subject.<sup>7</sup> To get back to the Haida image example, facing the

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<sup>6</sup> The first and most famous defence of this position was provided by Nelson Goodman's book *Languages of Art* (1968).

<sup>7</sup> The notion of *relevance* here is based on many works on communicative interpretation and cognitive pragmatics, the most important of which is Sperber and Wilson (1986).<sup>8</sup> See again Sperber and Wilson (1986; 2005).

picture would remind us of general ideas about animals and their physical appearance, so that we can recognize a sea otter in it. Nevertheless, this suggestion appears problematic for two main reasons.

First, consistently with an experiential framework, the proposal takes experience to be both the relevant input for and the process itself of pictorial recognition. Yet a theory of interpretation should reasonably distinguish what has to be interpreted from the cognitive attitude required to interpret it. To better appreciate this point, it can be helpful to compare how the notion of relevance is applied to experientialism about depiction with the role played by relevance-based inference in the domain of verbal language.<sup>8</sup> In this latter case, it is the *sentence* itself, rather than our *understanding* of it, that provides the relevant clues to reconstruct the meaning of an utterance.

Second, our experience of a picture does not seem able to specify the appropriate pieces of background information any more than it can directly convey the represented subject. After all, if experience could constrain this far the selection of that information, why should it not have also what it takes to move further to directly grasp what is depicted? The issue here is that background knowledge necessary for pictorial recognition belongs to the wider context of such practice; such context involves a great number of considerations which go beyond the face value of our experience.<sup>9</sup> The information mobilized for the recognition of the subject uncovers those contextual elements; its role consists exactly in making the interpreter aware

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<sup>8</sup> See again Sperber and Wilson (1986; 2005).

<sup>9</sup> Following McDowell (1994), I talk here of taking an experience at its face value as judging that something is in a certain way on the basis of what is presented by the experience.

of the standard of correctness behind the representation.

What appears from the arguments outlined is that no straightforward way to resort to background information seems available starting exclusively from our experience of a picture. On the contrary, it seems that this information is salient to the viewers only as the standard of correctness itself is salient: the relevance of experience together with other assumptions is a function of the success of the pictorial work in making the standard available. However, the strategy pursued by experientialism takes the represented subject to result from having further information derived by visual experience. This contrast between the explanatory powers and the *desiderata* of experientialism risks in this way giving rise to a circularity: while the represented scene is grasped by referring to additional knowledge, this latter is in turn grasped by referring to represented scene.

### **3. Separation Seeing-in**

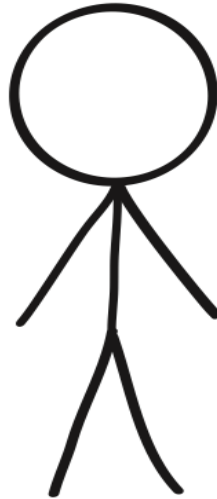
An instance of the experiential position targeted so far has been developed by Robert Hopkins with his idea of *separation seeing-in*.<sup>10</sup> This notion refers to many examples of pictures displaying some sort of depictive indeterminacy: what we *determinately* see in them does not coincide with what they *indeterminately* represent. The typical example addressed by Hopkins is the stick figure drawing of a person. What we strictly speaking discern in this kind of picture is a creature with an odd appearance (a totally

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<sup>10</sup> The concept is also discussed by Brown (2010), who takes separation seeing-in to occur in front of an even wider range of pictorial representations than Hopkins would be willing to admit.



blank face, no hands and no feet, an abnormally thin body); notwithstanding, we would not hesitate to recognize the subject as an ordinary person, despite the lack of accuracy in the design. Here, following Hopkins's own term, a "separation" occurs between the visible content and the represented content of the picture.



**Figure 2:** stick-figure drawing

As a fundamental tenet, Hopkins maintains that our experience of pictorial representations should be the starting point for interpreting them: as he writes,

experience of course provides our first and best guide to what the picture depicts. To see something in a surface is already to begin to explore hypotheses about whether, and what, it depicts. (1998, p. 130)

However, when it comes to indeterminate pictures, he also concedes that the mere visual appearance of the picture fails to provide a straightforward identification of the subject. His proposed adjustment is that, in those cases, our recognition of the depicted scene is guided by all the background (and often implicit) knowledge relevant to the task at hand. In addition to basic acquaintance with what a particular item looks like, pictorial competence encompasses also assumptions about what we normally encounter in our world, what would most likely be depicted, and about the characteristics of the diverse pictorial styles, media and techniques (especially insofar as they interfere in some way with the artist's intentions). Hopkins outlines this integration between experiencing and assuming as a sort of practical reasoning to the best explanation which starts from the basis of our experience. By compensating for the wrong track of our initial impressions, the whole range of background information acts as a razor towards all the possible unauthorized interpretations of a picture. The principles underlying this practice are considered by Hopkins to be so elementary that, in its general lines, the process of pictorial understanding "parallels the interpretation of many other aspects of our environment" (*ivi*, p. 140).

This solution is undermined by the same worries discussed in the previous general overview of experiential approaches to depiction. To begin with, let us assume that an experience of the stick figure drawing reminds us of certain background information about men. However, if our experience is already sufficient to narrow down the scope of information required for pictorial recognition, why should the initial misleading impression conveyed by *that same* experience take place at all? As a result, separation seeing-in ends up being treated in the same way as ordinary perceptual error. The

problem is that a mismatch between the visible and the represented content of a picture cannot be reported and fixed merely by our experience, which is only responsible for the visual character of the image.

A second concern requires us to restate the relevance of what we see in front of a picture. The figure seen is *relevant* because it connects in a profitable way with background information, so that a person can be recognized as the pictorial subject. Yet, can such relevance be determined only by the mere visible features of the image, without relating them to the context presupposed by practices of pictorial recognition? The notion of relevance basically refers to a communicative goal to be achieved: nothing is relevant unless it is embedded in a *context* of interpretation.

These arguments show that the experience of the stick figure cannot be relevant just by itself but, rather, its relevance is determined by understanding how it fits in the context of background knowledge needed to interpret a picture. This means however that our experience makes such connection manifest to us insofar as it also makes the standard of correctness manifest. As a consequence, the necessary information to make sense of an instance of separation seeing-in seems only accessible to us by being already able to deal with other pictures of the same kind. To frame the point in the light of Hopkins' concrete example, seeing a person in a stick figure requires knowing the potential of *that* depictive system, in realizing *that* depictive intention. This amounts to nothing more than being able to see how people can be depicted through stick figures, which in turn is exactly to be able to see a person in a stick figure.

#### **4. Conclusions**

It is now possible to advance some general considerations on the purposes of experiential accounts. These theories point out with good reasons that the visual and the representational values of pictures can diverge, but they still aim at characterizing both as relying on the beholder's experience; the only attempt to distinguish the two aspects consists in establishing a standard of correctness for an appropriate identification of the depicted subject. Such a condition is too weak to preserve the conceptual gap between the notions of experience and representation. The *representational* value of an item cannot be assessed just as a matter of perceptual appearance: it is rather a function it plays in a certain context of interpretation. Therefore, an adequate explanation of depiction cannot reduce the represented content of a picture to some kind of experience, not even one governed by conditions of correctness.

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