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Seeing Things in Pictures: Is a Depicted Object a Visible Thing?

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ABSTRACT. When you look at a picture, what can you see? To say that in this scenario the surface of the object in front of you is *all you can see* raises suspicion: when we look at pictures, we typically see what they depict, and this seems to constitute a richer experience than that of simply seeing a surface, even a surface marked in some way. But to say that you can see the object depicted can seem just as perplexing, if we lack an understanding of what depicted objects are, and the nature of their visibility, or the perceptual capacity that enables us to see them. In this paper I propose to understand them as the *looks* of marked surfaces of a certain kind, and I characterize the ability to see how things look as a distinctive perceptual skill.

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Figure 1: Xu Beihong, 1941.

The main question that concerns me in this paper is: what do pictures, as vehicles for a distinctive kind of representation (“depiction”), contribute to our visual lives? Or, more plainly: what sort of experience can you have when you look at a picture? Even more plainly: when you look at a picture, what can you see?

Imagine the picture is the one whose image is reproduced here, made

by the Chinese artist Xu Beihong in 1941, with ink and watercolor on paper. What you are looking at is a thin, opaque object, whose broad, flat surface supports a configuration of marks made with pigment. If we imagine that it's right in front of you, and illuminated well, this description strikes us as a plausible characterization of what you can see when you look at it. But does it give us *all you can see*? We might hesitate to say yes, given that this object depicts a galloping horse, and when you look at it you can see that it does – you can see it as depicting what it does. There are plenty of objects with marked surfaces that do not depict anything, and the perceptual experience they afford seems to be in some way impoverished in comparison to the experience of seeing something like Xu's painting as depicting what it does. Yet it proves difficult to say just how this experience is enriched – to say in what sense, if any, pictures give us the opportunity to see more than what lies on their surfaces.

Wittgenstein expresses the frustration that one can feel in thinking about this question in a remark in *Philosophy of Psychology*. He asks:

When I see the picture of the galloping horse – do I only *know* that this is the kind of movement meant? Is it superstition to think I *see* the horse galloping in the picture? – and does my visual impression gallop too? (175)

The first question suggests one way of accounting for the intuition that seeing something as depicting what it does is enriched in virtue of the

involvement of depiction. It is not just a matter of seeing the picture, but also knowing something about it: what it “means,” or depicts. Perhaps this is something one is in a position to know, in virtue of seeing the picture – something one is able to “figure out” on that basis. But it does not entail some additional thing that one is in a position to *see*. What is visible in this context is nothing other than the depicting surface.

Wittgenstein’s second question expresses encouragement of this view, by suggesting that to think otherwise would be to succumb to magical thinking of some kind.² What kind of magic? One candidate is that this combination of pigment and paper, by some alchemy, conjure a horse. Perhaps they transform into a horse, or perhaps they summon a horse from somewhere else, and then vanish. It would certainly be superstitious to think *that*.

But is there any non-superstitious way of holding that in this kind of context, the depicted object counts as visible? There is one well-respected philosopher who maintained this, namely Richard Wollheim. According to him, when we find out what a picture depicts just by looking at it, this is because in doing so we can see the object it depicts – in a perfectly respectable sense of “see.” It is a special visual ability that enables us to do

² To be clear: I am not suggesting an interpretation of Wittgenstein as holding that “I only know” what a picture depicts. My point here is that the second question seems intended to bring out a way of thinking that could motivate that stance – a way of thinking that Wittgenstein may well reject. For a very under-developed suggestion about the stance that Wittgenstein’s full discussion of this phenomenon points to, see the following footnote.

so, but the ability and the experience it enables is one we can make sense of, without falling under any spell of superstition.

I'll now present Wollheim's attempt to make this intelligible. Then I'll consider certain common objections to his way of going about this, and criticize them with the aim of distinguishing more clearly where his account goes wrong. Then, I'll suggest a way forward: we should draw on the concept of an image, as well as certain ways of thinking about visual appearances, to vindicate the idea that depicted objects are visible when we look at the things that depict them.

1.

According to Wollheim, depiction, or pictorial representation (he sometimes calls it "representation" for short), he claims, is "to be understood through, though not exclusively through, a certain species of seeing" (Wollheim 1980, 205). This species of seeing is precisely the kind of experience we have been considering: seeing something as depicting what it does.³

Wollheim deploys an interesting strategy for pinpointing the kind of

³ Though Wollheim thinks we are to understand depiction through this kind of experience, we must keep in mind that its occurrence is not something that any picture guarantees. This is not just because something could be a picture without ever being seen, but also because viewers can fail to perceive the pictures they see as depicting anything, and they can also misperceive what any given picture depicts. But the kind of experience in question is something that any picture must make possible.

experience in question. He tries to point to a broader class, or “genus” to which it belongs, and then to say what distinguishes it from other “species” in that genus. Thus Wollheim attempts to characterize the experience of seeing something as depicting what it does by locating it in a broader phenomenological framework. He constructs this framework by way of comparisons: by picking out examples of various kinds of visual experience, and articulating their similarities and differences in a way that identifies their theoretically significant characteristics.

Ultimately, Wollheim classifies seeing things in pictures as a species of a *perceptual* genus. That is, everything that belongs to it is a form of seeing, or visual perception, a sub-category of the “family” that contains seeing in general, or as such. To make his case, he starts by referring us to various forms of experience that count as species within the genus of interest.⁴ One is “the seeing appropriate to photographs,” or seeing photographs “as photographs.” Another is “the perception of Rorschach tests.” What Wollheim has in mind here is the *taking* of Rorschach tests –

⁴ Wollheim claims that it is easier to get a grip on the idea of the species than it is to get a grip on the idea of the genus to which it belongs. That is, he thinks it is easier to pick out the important differences between the various species of the genus than it is to get a sense of how they are importantly similar, or how they are united by a shared contrast with other genera (Wollheim 1980). I’m not sure if I share that assessment, but in any case, in this talk I’ll be focusing on the part of the project that Wollheim thinks is more difficult – characterizing the genus, rather than distinguishing its species.

which involves looking at cards printed with “ink blots”⁵ and being asked “What might this be?” A final example is an activity that Leonardo da Vinci recommends to aspiring painters in his *Trattato*: gazing at a “damp-stained wall” or “stones of broken color” and “discerning there” things like “scenes of battle or violent action and mysterious landscapes” (Wollheim 1980, 218).

These cases are gathered together as *prima facie* analogous in some theoretically important way. In an attempt to state explicitly what that is, Wollheim coins two terms that have since become central to philosophical discussion of depiction. He says that what unites their phenomenology is that it is “twofold,” or exhibits “twofoldness.” Though many writers have taken up this term and weighed in on whether our encounters with pictures really do have this feature, it is quite difficult to state what it means. In part, it signifies that the experience is one of seeing *two things*. But it is not just any such experience – the experience of seeing a *pair* of things (e.g. two shoes) would not count as having a “twofold phenomenology” as Wollheim intends the term. To distinguish it, he focuses on the *structure* of the experience. It is a matter of seeing something whose visibility is “generated and sustained” by seeing another. His name for our experience with this

⁵ The cards have not actually had ink blotted on them; they are reproductions of shapes that Rorschach made and selected to form a standard collection on the basis of experiment with the examination of schizophrenic patients.

structure is “seeing-in.”⁶

So the things seen on an occasion of “seeing-in” must not only be two in number, they must also exhibit a certain relationship, or play complementary roles, in the experience. Though they are distinct things, they cannot be seen without having an experience of this structure; seeing the second must come along with seeing the first.⁷ Wollheim expresses this in later work by saying that seeing-in is an experience with two aspects, one which he labels the “recognitional fold” and the other the “configurational fold.”

Wollheim also picks out the genus by relating it to certain fundamental perceptual capacities. He says it presupposes what he calls “straightforward perception,” which is “the capacity that we humans and other animals have of perceiving things that are present to the senses” (Wollheim 1980, 217).⁸ But this does not exhaust what perception is for us,

⁶ The phenomenon get this name from the fact that it can be referred to by the locution “seeing one thing in another”; but Wollheim cautions that his account does not draw much on the grammar of our talk about depiction and related phenomena.

⁷ We can’t say that neither thing can be seen without seeing the other, because it is possible to see a picture without seeing what it depicts. But that does not mean that the experience of seeing both contains as an element some experience of seeing the picture, which could occur independently.

⁸ Wollheim adds a wager about the best way to understand its nature: “Any single exercise of this capacity is probably best explained in terms of the occurrence of an appropriate perceptual experience and the correct causal link between the experience and the thing or things perceived” (Wollheim 1980, 217). The appeal of a “causal theory of perception,” discussed at length in chapter 1, no doubt plays a role in motivating Wollheim’s treatment of the experience of seeing a depiction. But I will read and evaluate

and that we are also endowed with a “special perceptual capacity,” which “allows us to see things not present to the senses” (Wollheim 1980, 217). Seeing-in is the result, or the reward, of exploiting that capacity.⁹

2.

Does this provide us with a way of maintaining that we can see the horse galloping in Xu’s picture, in the face of Wittgenstein’s worry about superstition? Many of Wollheim’s readers have thought not. For the most part they’ve focused on his explication of “twofoldness,” and found him to be unjustifiedly “quietist” about what it amounts to.

For example, Malcolm Budd objects that there is a “lacuna in the account” Wollheim gives, in that the nature of the experience of the depicted object “has been left blank, and it is difficult to see how it could possibly be filled in” (Budd 2008, 196). He arrives there by considering two options for saying what kind of experience it is. The first is to equate it with

Wollheim’s claims about depiction as independent of any commitment on the role of causation in perception.

⁹ Wollheim thinks of this capacity as somehow related to other visual phenomena: “If we seek the most primitive instances of the perceptual capacity with which seeing-in is connected, a plausible suggestion is that they are to be found in dreams, day-dreams, and hallucinations” (Wollheim 1980, 217). But these are not cases of seeing-in, since they “arise simply in the mind’s eye,” where as seeing-in “come[s] about through looking at things present” (Wollheim 1980, 218). The fact that Wollheim seems to consider these cases of *seeing* is puzzling. Hallucination may be *seeming* to see, and day-dreaming or visualizing may amount to *imagining* seeing. But in none of these cases do viewers see anything – much less something that is not present to the senses.

an illusion of the presence of something that is not there – an experience “indistinguishable by the subject from a corresponding instance of face-to-face seeing” (Budd 2008, 196). But this won’t do, because that would be incompatible with seeing the marked surface for what it is, and (thus) incompatible with the experience of seeing something as depicting what it does (Wollheim argues for this himself). The alternative to this, Budd says, is to equate it with “the second principle form of experiential visual awareness – visualizing what is not present to the eyes” – imagining seeing something (Budd 2008, 197). Budd thinks that this is not apt either.

But the question of the aptness of either of these phenomenological proposals (assimilation to illusion or visualization) should not arise, given how Wollheim has presented his view. He has said that the experience of seeing something in a picture is a member of a certain *perceptual* genus – a certain kind of *seeing*. Illusion (seeming to see) and visualization (imagining seeing¹⁰) are categories of visual experience that each contrast with the “genuinely” perceptual (seeing). The conceit of Wollheim’s framework is that the category of seeing itself admits of philosophically significant divisions (and that within those there are further ones as well). If the framework is acceptable, we should not expect the concepts that distinguish between experiences at the broader level of visual experience to be fit for making the distinctions within the category of seeing.

¹⁰ Perhaps, to imagine the visible as such is not necessarily to imagine seeing.

This kind of objection suggests that Wollheim's point in identifying seeing-in as a "perceptual genus" goes unrecognized by many readers. And the confusion that results from this distracts from a different problem with his view. Wollheim's primary way of distinguishing seeing-in from straightforward perception, and for distinguishing its recognitional from its configurational aspect, is to claim that it is not only an experience of seeing a marked surface, it is also an experience of seeing something not present to the senses.¹¹ And the idea of this kind of vision constitutes a magical strand in Wollheim's thinking. It is different from the forms of superstition about pictures that I outlined earlier: thinking that there are ways of combining things like pen and paper to forge instances of things like horses and mountains, or to summon them from elsewhere. Here, the idea seems to be that the things pictures depict are there to see, when we look at those pictures, but they are not there in our midst – they are visible, but they occupy some kind of distinct realm that is discontinuous with our surroundings. But this idea is objectionable in much the same way as the others: it effectively assimilates the seeing of depicted objects to the seeing of things in crystal balls. In reality, it is a matter of conceptual fact that you see only what is present to your senses; to see something just is for it to be present to your visual sense.

But that does not speak against the view that there is an important

¹¹ It is not that it contains these two as elements, it simply is itself both – it is *the experience* of seeing *two such things*, one made visible by seeing the other.

difference between two structures of visual perceptual experience, which can help us to understand what happens when we see something as depicting what it does. Nor does it rule out that the difference is made by the visibility of something in addition to a marked surface – that the experience of seeing something as depicting what it does entails seeing two things, one of them a depicted object. But what sort of thing *is* a depicted object? Wollheim's set up points to a way of homing in on an answer: subsuming the experience of seeing it under a broader, but still distinctive, kind of perceptual experience. The way forward from there does not lie in coining more technical terminology, nor in the acceptance of mysterious forms of visual experience. Rather, it lies in considering the variety of examples identified as instances of it, and looking for the right *familiar* terms to express how they are united. Specifically, I suggest, it involves considering the familiar concept of an image: a depicted object is one species of the broader genus of objects of images. We can unpack that further by connecting it to with some observations about the structure of seeing thing's visual appearances.

3.

We've already noted that the kind of experience in question involves looking at marked surfaces. In his book on photography as an image-making technology, Patrick Maynard provides the following explication of the

relationship between marks and images, which I'll rely on in what follows. Images (of the kind under discussion), he says, are made of marks. But, he points out, we should not think of an image as a *kind of mark*. This is because:

Clearly, *unmarked* parts of surfaces make up parts of images.¹² Therefore we should think of images, in many cases, as the marked surfaces themselves, or parts of them. (Maynard 1997, 26)

Not all marked surfaces constitute images, however. This is made clear by the fact that if something is an image, then there is something to be said about what it is an image *of* – and we are at a loss to say anything about what the average stretch of exposed wood grain is *of*. An image is a special *kind* of marked surface. But what's so special about it?

Another of Maynard's observations about images points us in a promising direction. Maynard suggests that images are "unities comprising both the marked and unmarked parts of the surface in a single overall appearance" (Maynard 1997, 28). This provides a way of distinguishing them – if what it is to have a "single overall appearance" is something that only some marked surfaces can claim. If we think about what a thing's visual appearance is, we can understand how this is distinctive, and how it

¹² The picture reproduced at the beginning of this chapter serves as an example of this.

can account for something like the “twofold” phenomenology of “seeing-in.”

A thing’s visual appearance, or how it looks, is a matter of how it can be seen. This is determined by a variety of factors, most notably illumination, distance, orientation, and color contrast. It is a matter of how a viewer can manage to see it: in what circumstances, and how easily. A thing’s visual appearance, or its look, is what makes it possible for us to see it. But we don’t see things *by seeing how they look*. Nonetheless, a thing’s visual appearance is visible: it is there to be seen, when the thing that has it is there in our midst. But it is hard to see, relative to the thing that has it. It is something we see upon inspection of something we have in view anyway.

I suggest we take images, then, to be surfaces marked in the following way: such that not only are they visible, and highly salient, they have a highly salient visual appearance. The elements of an image – the marks and the unmarked parts of this kind of surface – are *unified* in such a way that how the surface looks is particularly easy to see. The distance between what it takes to see them and what it takes to see how they look is smaller than it is with other things; so that when we encounter them, we are liable to be struck by how they look. In short, with images, it is relatively easy to see how they look.

So, now we can characterize the “genus” of perception that our experience of pictures belongs to by identifying it with the perception of

images as the kind of images they are. This contrasts with “straightforward” perception in that it amounts to seeing not simply visible objects, but visual appearances. We can also use this understanding of images to characterize the two things whose simultaneous visibility accounts for the fact that what is seen on [these occasions is “twofold”]: the former is a marked surface (of a certain kind), and the latter is the visual appearance of that marked surface.

If there is something odd about saying that seeing how the marked surface looks involves seeing something other than the marked surface itself, it is because the latter doesn’t involve looking at anything other than the marked surface itself. The look of the surface is not something that sits on top of or alongside it; it does not occupy another place at which to direct one’s gaze. But this is because the look is not the same sort of visible object as the marked surface that has it. It does not mean that it is not a distinct thing, nor does it mean that it is not *there to be seen*, in a perfectly good sense of those words.

This analysis also allows us to understand the intimate relationship between these two objects of sight, or the way in which we experience seeing one *in virtue of seeing* the other. A marked surface makes its own appearance visible, insofar as we would not be able to see the look of the surface if the surface itself were not there. Moreover, it is clearly in virtue of *seeing* the surface that we manage see how it looks. In that way their relationship is quite different from that of an opaque object and the light that

illuminates it (or an opaque object and the mirror it is reflected in), even though one may see the first in virtue of the second.

This way of thinking about seeing something as depicting what it does diverges from Wollheim's in certain ways, but despite that it upholds some of his core commitments. It maintains the idea that the experience is fundamentally a form of visual perception, in that it involves *seeing* a depicted object, not merely knowing what a picture depicts. I have deployed Wollheim's general strategy of subsuming pictorial perception under a broader genus, and connected that "genus" to a fundamental perceptual capacity. But the perceptual capacity I have pointed to is not that of seeing things that aren't present, but the capacity to see how things look.

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Seeing Things in Pictures

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