

The Conflicts Within Depiction

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ABSTRACT. My article aims to show that Husserl's theory of image consciousness faces some difficulties in explaining the conflict between the image object and the image subject in case of depictive theatrical performance. Husserl believes that when an actor plays a real-life person, he or she depicts that person. However, in the paper, I argue that in some situations it becomes questionable whether the depiction is maintained. For example, when an actor plays himself/herself on the stage, the image object and the image subject overlap and, accordingly, there is no conflict between the two.

i. Depiction

According to Husserl, the image consciousness or depictive consciousness involves three objects: i) the physical image [das physische Bild], that is, the physical thing made from canvas, paper or some other materials; ii) the image object [Bildobjekt], that is, the appearing image or depicting image; iii) the image subject [Bildsujet], that is, the depicted scene or object (Husserl, 2005, p. 21). Image consciousness is depiction because an image object *depicts* another object, the image subject. All three objects in the image consciousness must be distinguishable from each other, but also in conflict because if no conflict occurs, we would have pure perception. Therefore, one could say that the presence of conflicts plays a constitutive role in Husserl's theory of image consciousness. In my paper, I want to show that the conflict between the image object and the image subject is not maintained in all cases that are depictions according to Husserl. I will take as an example the situation in which an artist plays himself/herself on the stage.

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Husserl's examples of depictive consciousness are mostly about paintings and photographs, but he does not rule out sculptures, cinematographic pictures (Husserl, 2005, p. 645) and images created in a theatre play (Husserl, 2005, p. 616) either. John Brough in his article "Showing and Seeing: Film as Phenomenology" uses Husserl's theory of image consciousness to analyse movies. The three moments or objects of Husserl's theory of image-consciousness are described by Brough as follows: the *physical object* is the image's physical support, such as the projector and film stock; the characters we see on the screen are the *image object* and the subject of the image, what it is about, is the *image subject* (Brough, 2011, p. 198). I believe this division can be applied to any cinematographic images. The only difference is whether the image subject is posited as existent or not. The subject is usually a fictional character in fictional movies and a real-life person in documentaries. However, a real-life person can be depicted in fictional movies as well. For instance, Julia Roberts plays Joanne Herring in the movie "Charlie Wilson's War" (2007). Here the image object is the appearing image of a woman on the screen and the image subject is Joanne Herring, a political activist and a business woman who lives in Houston. In addition, there are a few examples of an actor playing himself/herself: in "Ocean's Twelve" (2004) Julia Roberts plays a fictional character Tess who starts to play Julia Roberts in one of the scenes of the movie. Also, we see Bruce Willis playing himself in the same movie. In my view, when an actor plays himself/herself in a movie we do not have any difficulties to call it a depiction but if the same scenes of an actor playing himself/herself are played in theatre then it is not evident that depiction is maintained because the image object and the image subject seem to overlap.

When it comes to theatre play, Husserl is more cautious in calling the theatrical performance depiction and he restricts the possibility to have depiction only to specific situations. The theory of image consciousness as depiction with three objects in it was written by Husserl in 1904/1905. In 1918¹, however, he abandons the idea that every work of fine art must be a depiction and that the image subject must always be presented in the image object. He comes to the conclusion that in case of a theatrical performance we no longer experience depiction.

¹ Text no 18 in *Phantasy, Image Consciousness, and Memory (1898-1925)*

Earlier I believed that it belonged to the essence of fine art to present in an image, and I understood this presenting to be depicting. Looked at more closely, however, this is not correct. In the case of a theatrical performance, we live in a world of perceptual phantasy [perzeptive Phantasie]; we have “images” within the cohesive unity of one image, but we do not for that reason have depictions. (Husserl, 2005, pp. 616)

Husserl believes that, in most cases, when an actor plays on the stage he creates an image – an image of some tragic event or an image of a character in the play – but the image here is only an *image of* [Bild von] and not a *depiction of* [Abbild von] (Husserl, 2005, p. 616). As Husserl puts it, “The actor’s presentation is not a presentation in the sense in which we say of an image object that an image subject is presented in it.”; and he adds, “Neither the actor nor the image that is his performance for us is an image object in which another object, an actual or even fictive image subject, is depicted” (Husserl, 2005, p. 616).² Husserl calls this experience the *artistic illusion* [die künstlerische Illusion], and he makes it very clear that artistic illusion is not an ordinary illusion. An example of an ordinary illusion would be our experience of a wax figure – we first perceive it as a real-life human being and after having realized that it was a mistake, we change our understanding (apperception) of the object and perceive it as a wax figure. In ordinary (sensory) illusion one apprehension has to be cancelled, both cannot exist at the same time – we take it *either* as a real-life person *or* a wax figure. The situation is different in the case of an artistic illusion. We do not begin with a (normal) perception. On the contrary, the artistic “image” is there from the beginning (Husserl, 2005, p. 618). We know from the beginning of the movie that it is an artistic illusion we are experiencing.

Husserl introduces two ideas about theatrical performances which are useful to understand his theory of image consciousness. On the one hand, Husserl says that when we see an artist playing somebody, we don’t take this to be a depiction, although we can say that an artist creates an *image of* somebody. This image created by an artist is non-positional, it belongs to the fictional world and we do not take this to be real. On the other

² Note that Husserl does not abandon the theory of image consciousness in this text, he is only “abandoning” the image subject as the third element of the image consciousness.

hand, an artist can *depict* someone from the real world which means that depiction is involved in theatrical performance as well. It happens when the actor plays a real-life person:

If Wallenstein or Richard III is presented on stage, depictive presentations are surely involved, although the extent to which this depictiveness has an aesthetic function itself is a question we will have to consider. Certainly depictiveness is not the primary concern; rather, it is a matter of imaging in the sense of perceptual phantasy understood as immediate imagination. In the case of a domestic comedy or drama, depiction is obviously omitted [...]. (Husserl, 2005, p. 616)

I agree with John Brough that there is a certain ambiguity in Husserl's theory about the use of "depiction" and "subject" (Brough, 1992, p. 257). In Brough's view, when Husserl says that depiction does not play any part in theatrical presentation, then Husserl has in mind the narrow sense of depiction, because a theatre play is definitely *about* something. The "subject matter" in a broader sense would definitely have its place in the drama (Brough, 1992, p. 258). In my view, to understand whether depiction is involved when an actor plays himself/herself on the stage we do not have to focus on how to define the "subject" (the image subject or subject matter) but to see how to maintain the difference between the image object and the subject. In this way, Husserl's theory of image consciousness that involves *conflicts* within becomes relevant.

2. Conflicts

As previously said, when an actor plays a real-life person – in a movie or in a theatre play – then we have depiction. According to Husserl, one of the conditions of having depiction is that there must be conflicts between three objects in the image consciousness. More precisely, there must be two kinds of conflicts: i) between the physical image and the image object, and ii) between the image object and the image subject. To quote Husserl:

The image object as image object must be the bearer of conflict in a double sense. In one sense (a), it is in conflict with the actual perceptual present. This is the conflict between the image as image-object

appearance and the image as physical image thing; (b) in the other sense, there is the conflict between the image-object appearance and the presentation of the *subject* entwined with it or, rather, partially coinciding with it. (Husserl, 2005, p. 55)

I claim that if all is needed in order for the image consciousness to take place is the first kind of conflict, then no difficulties occur to call it 'depiction' when an actor plays himself/herself on the stage. A conflict between the physical thing and the image (appearing) object is involved in experiencing cinematographic pictures, depictive theatrical performances and also *non*-depictive artistic illusions. It is because the conflict here is between two apprehensions that have the same sensuous content.

Husserl believes that the apprehension of the physical object and that of the image object have the same apprehension contents. These contents are sensuous contents of the perceived object, i.e. the physical object. In other words, the same sensuous contents are interpreted as a physical thing at one time and as the image object at another time. But in pictorial experience, image apprehension displaces the physical object apprehension. It means that the sensuous contents are *used up* for the image appearance, and – since apprehension contents now function as the apprehension contents of the image object – the perceptual apprehension is deprived of apprehension contents (Husserl, 2005, pp. 49–50). However, it does not mean that the perceptual apprehension vanishes: it is still there even if the image object's appearance *triumphs* over the physical thing. For example, pieces of furniture on the stage are actual [wirklich] pieces of furniture as well as phantasy furniture [Phantasiemöbel] when they are used in a theatre play. It means that the same objects are experienced as part of the real world of actual experience and as belonging to the image world (Husserl, 2005, pp. 619–620). But when we follow the play, we experience them as part of the image world.

Since the image object belongs to the fictional world one could say that the conflict here is between fictional, image world and the real, physical world. These worlds can exist simultaneously. As Brough explains it, the apprehension of the physical object and that of the image are different kind of apprehension – one is normal perceptual apprehension and another image-apprehension – and that is why these two apprehensions can exist

simultaneously (Brough, 1992, p. 250). In case of two competing *perceptual* apprehensions, one of the apprehensions has to be cancelled: a figure cannot be a wax figure and a human being at the same time. This sensory or perceptual illusion is not what takes place in experiencing a theatre play. In sensory illusion the conflict is *destructive*, but in image consciousness and also in artistic illusion, the conflict is *constitutive*. To cite Brough, “conflict here plays a constructive constitutive role” (Brough, 1992, p. 251). When we see an actor playing himself/herself on the stage, we understand that he or she is a physical human being we can easily perceive but he or she also appears to us as being part of a fictional world, that is, the theatre play.

The second kind of conflict will be noticed if we compare the way the depicted object appears to us in our everyday life and how it appears to us in a particular picture or pictorial presentation. Husserl’s own example is about looking at a black and white photograph representing a child. The miniature child appearing in grayish colours is not the child that is meant. It resembles to the child but deviates from it in appearing size and coloring. It is only a photographic *image* of the child (Husserl, 2005, p. 20). A real-life child has rosy cheeks and, most likely, blue eyes. It does not follow, however, that the conflict between the appearing image and the depicted subject occurs only in black and white photographs, or that in case of life-size coloured photograph the conflict will not be present. The conflict and, accordingly, depiction is not there only if the appearing of an object in an image is *identical* in every aspect with the appearing of the object itself. To borrow Carreño Cobos’ words, “Were an image to fully resemble and express its subject perfectly, the beholder could no longer take the depicted subject as absent” (Carreño Cobos, 2012), and accordingly we would have pure perception. Both conflict and resemblance must occur, but it must be noted that it is *resemblance* and not *identity* that is needed. To quote Husserl:

If the appearing image were absolutely identical phenomenally with the object meant, or, better, if the image appearance showed no difference whatsoever from the perceptual appearance of the object itself, a depictive consciousness could scarcely come about. This is certain: A consciousness of difference must be there, albeit the subject does not appear in the proper sense. The appearing object is not

just taken by itself, but as the representant of another object like it or resembling it. (Husserl, 2005, p. 22)

As Brough puts it, what is needed is a certain *minimal level of resemblance* if a physical object is to be depicted (Brough, 2012, p. 558); otherwise it would be impossible to understand what the image is about. For instance, when an actor plays a real-life person, a resemblance to some degree with the depicted person is expected from the beholder. But there is never a perfect resemblance or identity between the appearance of an actor and the person he or she is playing – we do not expect Julia Roberts to look identical with Joanne Herring in “Charlie Wilson’s War”.

Taking all this into account, it seems to me that when an actor plays himself/herself on the stage then we must say that the appearing image is “absolutely identical phenomenally with the object meant“ (Husserl, 2005, p. 22) and it will be hard to explain how this is depiction at all. The situation is similar to the possibility of having a *perfect image* described by Nicolas de Warren. As he says, it is only as an ideal that we can speak of a complete *overlap* [Deckung] between the image object and image subject for this ideality defines a necessary *impossibility*:

If we could behold a perfect image, we would paradoxically no longer be conscious of a difference between image object and image-subject, and consequently, we could no longer behold an image of something. A perfect image would suppress the distinction on the basis of which an image is at all possible. (Warren, 2010, p. 324)

3. Conclusion

According to Husserl’s theory of image consciousness there must be a conflict between the physical image and the image object or appearing image and a conflict between the image object and the image subject. The first kind of conflict is present in case of non-depictive artistic illusion as well as in depictive theatrical performance. In my view, the second kind of conflict is absent in depictive theatrical performance if the depicted subject, that is, the real-life person, is the actor himself/herself. Therefore, it becomes questionable whether we can still call it depiction.

References

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