Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics

Volume 13, 2021

Edited by Vítor Moura and Connell Vaughan

Published by

European Society for Aesthetics

Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics
Founded in 2009 by Fabian Dorsch
Internet: http://proceedings.eurosa.org
Email: proceedings@eurosa.org
ISSN: 1664 – 5278

Publisher
The European Society for Aesthetics

esa European Society for Aesthetics

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European Society for Aesthetics

The Pictorial Narrator

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ABSTRACT. This paper argues that paintings manifest something akin to effaced narrators. The account is developed starting from the paradigmatic cases found in the literature, and revised to fit visual cases. I argue, against longstanding objections, that viewers represent all pictorial content mediately. My novel model provides a principled way to distinguish between mediated access that goes via 'empty' or 'vacant' perspectives and ones that are 'occupied' or 'expressive'. In the final section, I briefly sketch out the model and the productive upshots in regard to our concept of pictorial narrators.

In our everyday discourse, we make frequent reference to pictorial narrative. We say that the caves at Lascaux depict hunting stories, that quattrocento paintings magniloquently encapsulate tales of good and evil, and that Hogarth's multipart paintings are humorous and political commentary (Baxandall, 1988; Jones, 2018; Greshko, 2019; Bataille, 1955). Yet, a more precise question concerning narrators and their relation to these so-called pictorial narratives remains overlooked.

Kendall Walton is an exception. In his paper *Points of view in narrative and depictive representation,* he compares literary and pictorial cases (Walton, 1976). He sceptically concludes that when it comes to pictorial narratives, picture viewers can just directly see what goes on. So, no narrator is required. Whereas for novels the narrator plays a crucial role because "he mediates the reader's access to the rest of the fictional world; we know what happens in the fictional world only from his reports about it." (Walton, 1976, p.50)

Yet Walton also notes that some paintings can give us the impression of the kind of person who created them. This kind of intuition has been developed into a persona theory of

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expression by Jenifer Robinson who strengthens 'can' to 'must' in respect of expressive paintings (Robinson, 2005). She says some pictures, for example, Delacroix's *Raft of the Medusa*, contain a psychological trace of the artist who created them and that meaning coheres and unifies through the perspective of the actual painter of the work. The viewer can only adequately apprehend the picture if they appreciate the scene from the artist's emotional point of view as it is implied into the work.[18]

Hence, it is not really clear where theorists stand in regard to the ontological status of *pictorial narrators*. Accordingly, the purpose of this paper is to reflect on the following:

(1) Can paintings manifest something akin to a literary narrator?
(2) If they can, they how might they do this?

In part I, I sketch out the concept of a paradigmatic narrator - as found in novels - which I roughly map onto putative pictorial cases. In Part II I consider some existing friendly and sceptical responses to (1) and reconstruct some suggestions in regard to (2). The evaluation includes building a basic taxonomy of implied, explicit, and effaced narrators. I show that there is a gap in the current literature regarding *effaced* narrators. In Parts III and IV, I work constructively, offering a novel argument that shows it is reasonable to think there are effaced pictorial narrators. My goal being to narrow the skeptic's options rather than offer a watertight explanation for (2).

My argument hinges on a precise articulation of the role that perspectives play *per se* in our engagement with pictures. In the first instance, I draw attention to something that needs to be explained. This is the need to explain the relationship between immediate (direct) and mediated perspectives in respect of pictorial content. The explanation respects the way in which paintings fix their vantage points. I show how this entails that our pictorial representations **must** be mediated, at least in terms of when and where events are seen as taking place, *pace* Walton. In order to see the objects in a Chardin still life, we must shift (imaginatively) into a pictorial perspective that is distinct from our actual perspective.

In the second instance, I show that the ubiquity of mediated pictorial perspectives grounds the explanation for pictorial narrators. Encountering the Chardin from merely a Spatio-temporal

[18] Walton does not endorse Robinson's view and Robinson is not claiming that (a) she develops Walton's intuition or (b) implied painters just are pictorial narrators.

perspective precludes the viewer from seeing the painting as a tender, gentle and loving record of the domestic scene. To see the Chardin this way (richly and expressively) requires that the viewer shift into something like a 'Nagelian' perspective (Nagel 1974). This provides the distinction we need to locate the pictorial narrator.

1. The Narrator

The wealth of historical, biblical, and mythological paintings suggest it is reasonable to think that some pictures do more than depict objects; they can recount events in a way that renders them dramatically intelligible, conveying psychologically infused perspectives, not merely information. Call these 'pictorial narratives'.

But, how do pictures *narrate*? An intuitive answer is that pictorial narratives prescribe viewers to imagine pictorial *narrators*. This makes use of a distinction familiar from the philosophy of literature between narrative (story) and narrator (teller). The distinction is settled in that domain along with the idea that 'story' and 'teller' can be transposed between mediums (Carroll, 2009). Call this the symmetry claim (Diehl, 2009). If one thinks literary narratives imply narrators and one is committed to a symmetry claim, then pictorial narratives imply pictorial narrators.

Meanwhile, Bence Nanay has independently argued that the right account of narrative will "cover both pictorial and literary cases" (Nanay, 2009:119). He notes that while there is an apparent asymmetry in the way the verbal and visual mediums are time-sliced and time-sequenced, this should not prohibit us from referring to 'pictorial narratives' (Nanay, 2009). I will adopt his distinction between mere depictions and pictorial narratives in what follows. Nanay defines a narrative picture using the following bi-conditional.

A picture is a Pictorial Narrative if and only if a suitable spectator is supposed to undergo an experience of 'engaging with narrative' when apprehending it.

The definition invites further questions. I will distinguish between 'mere depictions' and 'pictures that convey psychologically infused points of view' in what follows. In other words, I side-step the thorny issue of sorting out what exactly pictorial narratives are or becoming entangled in definitional worries arising from Nanay's paper.

Despite Nanay's sympathy for the symmetry claim, discussions in the philosophy of *pictures* trend toward scepticism in regard to pictorial narratives and specifically the possibility

of pictorial narrators (Walton, 1976). Yet, there is general agreement that pictures can 'convey psychological points of view'. This has led Kendall Walton to argue that there is "no counterpart to a narrator in depiction" since "one's access to the fictional world is not mediated by another (fictional) person" (Walton, 1976, p.50). On his view, the scope of our scepticism should be both phenomenal - we do not have a sense of going through another fictional person - as well as epistemic - we do not need narrators to "mediate access to the rest of the fictional world.

Roughly, this gives us '*Scepticism'*

Scepticism

(I) Some narratives are pictorial

(II) Our access to picture content is direct (i.e., not mediated).

(III) So, pictorial narratives do not imply pictorial narrators and there is no pictorial equivalent to the literary narrator.

In what follows I intend to challenge *Scepticism* by showing that premise (II) is false and so (III) is unpersuasive.

2. Implied Narrators

In this section, I consider the issue of (1) in terms of implied narrators.

In Book Three of the Republic (392c-8b), Plato argues that any narrative requires the actual author to directly impart the story. They do this either by making their identity deliberately obvious to the audience, or, by embedding their voice parenthetically. That is, by imitating a character in the scene. This view, in weak and strong forms, is a commonplace belief outside of philosophy.

James Elkins, an art theorist, promotes a strong formulation (Elkins, 1999). He claims that artists "cannot distinguish themselves from" their paintings (Elkins, 2000, p.165–166) since oil paint is the painter's "life's blood". This means that a "painter's life becomes …a story told in the thicknesses of oil" (Elkins, 2000, p.5). Elkins' view is ontologically dubious resting on the claim that paintings are literally corporeal since they have digestive and psychological properties. Less strongly, art historian David Rosand has asked if there is a,

> …meaning initiating in the artist, a meaning that may itself be mediated by the imitated subject matter but that resides essentially in the visible traces of the painter's gesture. (Rosand, 1981, p.95)

Whether and how facture provides a conceptual tie between artist and image which is 'picked up' by viewers remains unclear in the paper (Rosand, 1981). Analytic philosopher Robinson has tried to clear this up in her book *Deeper than Reason* and subsequent papers (Robinson, 2017). She argues for a conceptual or psychological link holding between the actual artist, and an implied version of themselves which is implied into the picture and which is later recovered from it by a sort of affective attention (Robinson, 2005). Her view is that we detect e.g. *Kokoschka's* emotions in Kokoschka's paintings. However, the two-step process required to 'connect' viewer and artist has been criticised (Brassey, 2019). Robinson's model remains unconvincing. Specifically, her claim that the viewer infers facts about the artist's psychology by reconstructing an implied persona who is a psychological extension of the flesh and blood artist. This makes the connective tissue linking persona and artist tendentious. As a result, securing the claim that implied artists are a *necessary* condition on seeing narrative content in pictures remains unsecured (Brassey, 2021). Recall that *Scepticism* needs to show that there can be a pictorial narrative without a narrator to remain undefeated. The existing views do not overcome this hurdle.

Walton's explicit scepticism in regard to pictorial narrators is accompanied by the observation that we *sometimes* experience a sense of the artist in our apprehension of the work. For example, when we sense the dementedness of Bosch in Bosch's demented narrative paintings of purgatory and hell. Hence, it is better to interpret his *Scepticism* as merely anti-essentialist. This is consistent with his premise II - we do not **need** an implied agent *to mediate our access* to the pictorial content. While this is a slightly weaker position than an outright rejection of implied artists qua narrators, it does not provide reason to disagree with premise (II). Thus, *Scepticism* (III) stands.

3. Explicit Narrators

Plato also mentions another type of narrator. Explicit narrators are characters who the author mentions parenthetically or by imitating a character's manner.

A pictorial example due to art critic Laura Cumming involves two tiny flicks of paint hidden in the ribbed metal breastplate of St. George, in van Eyck's monumental picture, *The Virgin and Child with Canon van der Paele* (Cumming, 2009). She interprets these flicks to represent van Eyck in the pictorial scene, lending an ironic 'voice' to the story of the "wily old canon sucking up to the mother of God". We can make sense of this philosophically by drawing on the work of Erie Watkins (Watkins, 1979). Watkins's discussion of explicit pictorial narrators further demonstrates that Walton draws an unreasonably strong conclusion. Recall that Walton has claimed that there is "no counterpart to a narrator in depiction, one's access to the fictional world is not mediated by another (fictional) person ... One does not have a sense of going through another person, of "seeing the fictional world through someone else's eyes," as the reader of a literary narrative does. Watkins however argues that explicit pictorial narrators *do* provide a comparable form of mediation in paintings. He cites several examples where a depicted figure in the depicted world acts as a gateway between the actual world and the one we are looking into. These include Peter Brueghel's *The Peasant and the Birdnester* which features a figure placed between the scene and the viewer, with whom the viewer establishes eye contact and who directs the viewer's attention (that is, toward a human figure climbing the tree in the background). We see this also in Nicolaes Maes's *An Eavesdropper with a Woman Scolding* and in the glint of amusement in the frank gaze of Manet's *Olympia.* Sceptics might be concerned that these characters are not explicit narrators in the sense intended by Plato. But does this matter? Watkins's study illuminates that we miss elements of the story when we do not pay attention to what these characters endeavour to show us. Apart from 'breaking the fourth wall' explicit narrators, he points out the sense in which the partial representation of Gaston La Touche caught lasciviously gazing at the wan barmaid in Manet's *Bar at the Folies-Bergere* changes the mood of the scene. By changing the mood, the partially seen character mediates and modifies the viewer's access to the story of the barmaid.

From this, it seems that (1) painters *can* paint something akin to a literary narrator and that (2) they do this by parenthetically embedding an attitude or emotion in one of the characters partially or wholly depicted in the pictorial world. An explicit narrator represented in mirror images will enable the viewer to follow their sightline and this will direct the viewer's attention to particular parts of the scene. The best explanation for this interactive way of looking at the pictures is that the figures were put there to imply that these characters belong in the pictorial world but lie partially outside the depicted scene. Their function is to mediate

the viewer's access to pictorial space.

Given that "the location of those persons seems to coincide with our own" concludes Watkins, "we are left with the illusion that we see the depicted world from their point of view" (Watkins, 1979, p. 383). Thus, while Watkins introduces and explores the possibility of mediated attention to the pictorial content, he still accepts Walton's II premise. Explicit narrators 'seem to coincide' with our direct seeing.

Even if we accept the explicit narrator, this still leaves *Scepticism* equipped to deny that all pictorial narratives require narrators.

4. Mediated access to pictures

In this section, I turn from reviewing what has been said, to offering a novel constructive argument that falsifies *Scepticism* premise II. I begin by more precisely articulating the role that perspectives play *per se* in our engagement with pictures. In the first instance, I draw attention to something that needs to be explained. The explanation respects the way in which paintings fix their vantage points and entails that our representations of pictures **must** be mediated, at least in terms of when and where events are seen as taking place.

It is uncontroversial that all-seeing is perspectival. But what is meant by 'perspectival'? The relevant notion is of a literal Spatio-temporal vantage point or outlook from which objects are seen. Or more precisely, from which *the facing or non-occluded parts of the* object is seen. Our perspective determines how much, what aspect, or which bit of that object is most prominent or salient within the visual field and this restricts or constrains how much of the world is in evidence at any given point in time. Take 'I see the cat on the mat' to be shorthand and unpack it. The longhand version is, 'I have a partial perspective from here and now on the parts of the cat that are presented to the viewpoint I currently occupy'.

Although all-seeing is perspectival, not all-seeing uses the same *kind* of perspective. Actual seeing involves actual perspectives. However, non-actual seeing, that is, visualising and, as I will argue, pictorial seeing involves non-actual perspectives. The significance of this is apparent when we consider three jointly consistent claims:

(a) Actual perspectives entail occupied viewpoints.[19]

In other words, I see *that* cat from my actual perspective which I necessarily occupy here and now.

(b) Pictorial seeing entails a viewpoint.

In other words, to see the depicted cat we must see it from a perspective.

(c) Some non-actual perspectives are unoccupied.

In other words, I can see things from a different perspective than the one I or any other subject occupies.

For instance, suppose I see the cat on the mat by looking at it on the CCTV live feed. The viewpoint of the camera is not my actual perspective – it is a non-actual perspective that is made visible to me via the monitor. Since neither the CCTV camera nor the monitor is a subject, the perspective is best described as unoccupied or vacant.

Now, actual occupied and non-actual vacant perspectives behave differently. When I actually see the cat, each shift of location – whether by a cat or by me - shifts how much of the cat is presented to my actual viewpoint. Contrast this with pictorial seeing. I can shift my position in relation to the picture but how much of the cat is presented remains fixed. This suggests that the seeing appropriate to depicted cats is relatively insensitive to one's actual occupation in actual world space-time. Small shifts in my actual perspective– such as walking from the left to the right of the picture, sitting down, or climbing a few steps of the ladder in front of it - will not change the perspective from which the depicted cat appears. Depicted cats are *stubbornly* presented from a determinate and fixed perspective.[20]

This is puzzling if Walton is right that we look directly at depicted cats just as we look directly at actual cats. My perspective on the depicted cat should be sensitive to changes in my actual perspective. Yet this is not the case.

The puzzle can be solved by noting that there are two perspectives in play when I see

[19] I use 'viewpoint' to stand for the spatio-temporal location the subject occupies.
[20] I put aside complex cases of cubist cats and so on for now.

the depicted cat. My actual perspective and also a *pictorial* perspective. Pictorial perspectives being the fixed and determinate viewpoint to which the parts seen of the depicted cat subtends. This suggests that pictorial seeing is less like actual seeing and more like visualising.

When visualising a cat, I see the cat 'in my minds-eye' sitting on my driveway. Given that I can do this while actually sitting in the library, I must be visualising the cat from a non-actual perspective. Similarly, I can imagine what the cat looks like dancing in a pair of booties. Since I have never actually seen a cat dance in this way, such imagined scenes are also presented to us from a non-actual perspective.

Pictorial depictions operate similarly. A depicted cat can be seen from an unusual angle – from above, from the side, from below - and in each case, this can be in conflict without actual perspective on the picture (directly in front of it a few steps back). In this way, seeing a depicted cat is like visualising a cat. Furthermore, just as I can visualise a cat without imagining myself occupying the perspective on the cat, so too can I pictorially see a cat on the mat from a pictorial perspective I do not imagine myself (or anyone else) occupying.

Now, if pictorial seeing is like visualising in regard to perspective-taking, then pictorial seeing *is always* mediated through a **non-actual** perspective. We have observed that pictorial seeing is insensitive to small shifts in my actual perspective and in this regard it *is* more like more like visualising than it is like actual seeing. We have also noticed that actual seeing always takes place from an occupied perspective. The perspective we actually occupy on the thing seen. Whereas we can pictorially see from a vacant perspective. In this regard, too pictorial seeing is more like visualising than it is like actual 'direct' seeing. Thus, it is reasonable to think that pictorial seeing *is* like visualising in regard to perspectives.

These considerations cast suspicion on *Scepticism* II.

Instead of

(II) Our access to depictions is direct (unmediated).

We should adopt

(IIa) Our access to depictions is indirect because it is always mediated by a non-actual pictorial perspective.

An objection can be raised here due to trompe l'oeil. But to this one can reply that trompe l'oeil can operate either as a picture or as an illusion. When I mistakenly believe I see the cat on the mat when pictorially seeing the trompe l'oeil cat I do so because my actual perspective and the mediating pictorial perspective are coincident, leading to an illusory but false experience of seeing a cat. When I come to realise that I am pictorially seeing a depicted cat, what happens is that the mediating pictorial perspective and my actual perspective have come apart. The change in my actual perspective interrupts and shatters the illusion of seeing a cat in favour of pictorially seeing a cat. Mediated seeing becomes suddenly apparent, but not suddenly manifest.

However, all this only goes as far as to show that when we pictorially see we see a depicted x from a pictorial perspective and this pictorial perspective is not my actual perspective. To be clear, I am emphatically not saying that mediating pictorial perspectives entail pictorial narrators. I am not claiming that when I see the table in the Ikea drawing, I require a narrator to mediate my seeing. In other words, and for clarity,

> (IIa) While our access to picture content is mediated via a not-actual perspective, this can be a mere or *vacant* perspective.

In this section, I have argued that one must see pictorial content from the pictorial perspective. I have also pointed out that non-actual perspectives can be vacant or unoccupied. We can see depicted and visualised objects from what is sometimes called the 'bare' pair of eyes perspective. For example, as we do with botanical and medical drawings.

In this section, I showed that by seeing any depicted object, be it a Necker cube or a Chardin still life, what we are doing is shifting (imaginatively) into a pictorial perspective that is distinct from our actual perspective. This pictorial perspective accounts for the way depicted objects are seen from particular viewpoints. The imaginative shifting accounts for how we experience depictions without having to make our actual vantage points coincident with the spatial location or temporal index implied by the pictorial scene. This shows that contra premise II, the seeing appropriate to depictions is always mediated through a pictorial perspective.

5. Effaced Narrators

I have argued that a complete explanation of our ability to see plants in botanical illustrations must include the mediating pictorial perspective. But some pictures do more than depict. Some pictures capture an attitude, preserving it across time. Cave paintings can capture the urgency of a hunt and Hogarth's *Gin Lane* conveys chaotic desperation. In *Chardin and Rembrandt,* we find an attempt to evocatively unpack this phenomenal difference as a shift from the depictive to the expressive (Proust, 2016). Describing the attention appropriate to Chardin's still lifes, Marcel Proust recounts a,

> journey of initiation into the unknown life within the still life, which each of us can make if we let Chardin be our guide, as Dante was guided to Virgil. (Proust, 1865, p.22)

What Proust intimates is that we might explain our ability to feel this sense of attitudinal or emotional intimacy with a pictorial scene without requiring there to be *explicit* narrators partially or wholly depicted in the picture. His essay confronts both aspects of Walton's scepticism. The phenomenal aspect is confronted by showing that we have a sense of going through another fictional person to appreciate the picture. The epistemic aspect is confronted by suggesting that we need this person to mediate our access to the affective or ambient qualities that give the picture an air of modest tenderness. That is, what Proust calls "things in their most profound aspect" (p. 24). Adequate viewer appreciation requires, Proust continues, that "you yourself will be a Chardin" (p. 13). Note, that Proust does not say you will be Chardin – merely that you must represent a Chardin-like perspective on the scene.

I want to finish by sketching out how this pictorial seeing is best explained. Earlier, we observed with Watkins, that in the Manet, we can just about make out the hazy figure reflected in the mirror as Gaston La Touche. Only once we represented Gaston at the point of origin did it make sense to see the predatory ambiance.

But we could have seen things otherwise. We could replace Gaston as occupant of the pictorial perspective with another, less lascivious occupant – say, a Victor Hugo type. By representing this kind of occupant at the psychological point of origin (the pictorial perspective) we alter what we see. The air of the picture is now infused with outrage at the partially depicted predatory figure looming over the barmaid. Whether or not it is correct to

replace occupants in this way is not my question or pertinent to the point. What is pertinent is that *it is only by representing an occupant* occupying the pictorial perspective that the viewer can access affective, ambient, or psychological pictorial content.

From this, we can draw a distinction between mediating through merely vacant and through *occupied* pictorial perspectives. The addition of an occupant accounts for the difference between seeing a depiction and seeing an expression of an attitude in the picture. This sketch does not prove that represented occupants who are represented as occupying pictorial perspective are explicit or effaced pictorial narrators. But it opens up a productive pathway to investigating that further possibility and it narrows down the options for *Scepticism*. My novel model is friendly to Walton's intuition yet successfully evades relying on philosophically troubling constitutive or conceptual ties with actual artists. Moreover, it is consistent with the insights found in Thomas Nagel,

> Whatever may be the status of facts about what it is like to be a human being, or a bat, or a Martian, these appear to be facts that embody a particular point of view (Nagel, 1974, p. 441).

The significance of Nagel's insight in regard to pictorial narratives should now be clearer. We said that pictorial narratives do more than convey information. They can recount events in a way that renders them dramatically intelligible, conveying psychologically infused perspectives. I have been arguing that they do this by prescribing the viewer to represent a point of view that captures 'what it is like' to hold or feel a particular attitude toward events unfolding in pictorial space. For example, in Chardin's *Fruits and Animals,* we experience "the same pleasure – seized in passing, detached from a moment, deepened, eternalized" that we can experience when actually occupying a perspective on "a sideboard, a kitchen, a pantry or a room where someone is sewing" (Proust, 1865, p.13). This is because the Chardin awakens in the viewer a kind of appreciation or positive attitude toward one's "humble existence" (ibid), rather than the viewer strictly and literally feeling Chardin's actual pleasure. The viewer represents a fictional occupant, "summoned" by the extraordinary colour, facture, and composition of the painting.

In this way, pictures can capture and preserve a record of the psychological. They can appear demented, exciting, sad, outrageously unfair, or thrilling. I have said that in order to access these features, the viewer access to the picture must be mediated by a subjective or

phenomenal perspective. Hence, I argue that the point of view on a pictorial narrative is not going to be exhaustively accounted for in terms of what is presented, or seems to be presented, *to* the pictorial perspective. That would not get us beyond depictions of visible objects. When we come to see the tenderness of the still life, the melancholy of *Nighthawks,* and the anguish of *The Scream*, we do so by mediating our attention through an occupant occupying the pictorial perspective who projects the tenderness, melancholy, or anguish that bathes the pictorial world. Because only something that can experience what it is like to be tender, melancholy, or anguished can mediate our access to these subjective features of pictorial space. It is in this sense, that I submit Walton is wrong and instead insist that we have good reasons to predict pictures do instantiate something akin to literary narrators.

Concluding thoughts

In this paper, I have argued for pictorial narrators. I briefly reviewed existing work in this area and then offered a quick constructive sketch of when and how they arise. I compared depictive and expressive pictures and said that in order to access an attitude or emotion 'trapped' in a pictorial scene, the viewer must represent the mediating perspective and in addition represent it as occupied. Encountering the Chardin from merely Spatio-temporal perspective precludes the viewer from seeing the painting as a tender, gentle and loving record of the domestic scene. To see the Chardin this way (richly and expressively) requires that the viewer shift into something like a 'Nagelian' perspective (Nagel, 1974). That is, one filled with a narrating consciousness who infuses a sense of 'what it is like' to tenderly and lovingly scrutinise these ordinary objects.

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