Beholders’ Shares and the Language of Art*

JOHN KULVICKI

GOMBRICH’S WORK WAS THE STARTING POINT for all philosophical theories of depiction that followed it. Richard Wollheim identifies Gombrich as one ‘to whose thinking on these subjects I am so deeply, so transparently indebted’. Kendall Walton claims that his account of depiction is a direct descendant of Gombrich’s paper ‘Meditations on a Hobby Horse’, which itself was a precursor to Art and Illusion. Nelson Goodman followed Gombrich’s work closely, and initiated a correspondence with him in response to the ‘Hobby Horse’ essay in 1952, a full sixteen years before Languages of Art would see the light of day and at least eight years before Goodman’s first published essay on philosophy of art, which was a review of Art and Illusion.

This essay traces the theme of language in relation to art from Gombrich’s work through some of its philosophical descendants, focusing on how Gombrich and Goodman disagreed about the issue. The famous point of contention between them concerned linear perspective. Gombrich insisted that linear perspective is not merely a convention for depicting space, and thus we cannot attribute its appeal merely to ‘the beholder’s share’. Goodman disagreed. This disagreement brings out very important issues in the study of images and representations of other kinds. The upshot of this paper is that there are at least three senses in which beholders have a share in representation and there are at least two important respects in which images can be like languages. Once we realize this we will be in a position to see that Gombrich and Goodman were quite a bit closer than one might imagine and that each of these thinkers had a much more subtle view than recent caricatures of them might suggest.

Section I sketches the debate between Goodman and Gombrich over the conventionality of linear perspective and the way in which that debate has been received by philosophers. Section II unpacks two senses in which Gombrich understood the beholder’s share in understanding images. One of them concerns recognitional responses to images, and section III shows how this helps explain Goodman’s puzzlement over Gombrich’s treatment of perspective. The other beholder’s share regards expectations concerning symbols. Section IV explains how Goodman developed this idea in a way quite different from Gombrich. It is here that a
third kind of beholder’s share becomes important, and two ways in which images can be like languages become apparent.

I. The Gombrich-Goodman controversy

*Art and Illusion* dedicates itself to unpacking the methods artists have devised for representing the world with images. This is a complicated affair. The challenge is not just rendering a three-dimensional world in two dimensions, but also rendering a world of light and shadow on a uniformly illuminated surface. Just as flat patterns must give the impression of depth, aspects of hue, saturation and brightness must be recruited in the service of rendering shadows, highlights and luminance. Gombrich suggests there are many ways of accomplishing these ends, and whether one way or another is convincing depends in large part on the habits of the day. Famously, Gombrich draws the line between what is conventional and what is not with linear perspective. While techniques for rendering light and shadow are highly conventionalized, certain ways of rendering space, of which linear perspective is the clearest example, are not: ‘Now perspective may be a difficult skill, but its basis, as has been said, rests on a simple and incontrovertible fact of experience, the fact that we cannot look round a corner.’ Habits do not determine whether we can see around a corner. Linear perspective demands a certain spatial relationship between the picture surface and what it depicts. Though the appeal of linear perspective might be merely a matter of habits, its effectiveness is rooted more in biology than it is in culture.

Goodman wrote that Gombrich’s ‘treatment of this subject is often puzzling.’ He went on to argue that perspective is just as conventional as anything else in pictorial representation. Claims of this sort are taken to ground Goodman’s view that depiction and other kinds of representation are like languages. Goodman is a radical conventionalist in that he thinks linear perspective is no more privileged a way to represent space than ‘dog’ is a privileged way of representing canines. Here are a few passages that help to make this point about Goodman’s view and how it has been received over the years:

Almost any picture may represent almost anything; that is, given a picture and object there is usually a system of representation, a plan of correlation, under which the picture represents the object.

For [Goodman], any set of markings on the canvas can, given the appropriate conventions, represent anything. In this sense, painting is like a language.

According to conventionalism, the only representationally relevant relations between pictures and their objects are conventional. In this respect, they are like words. Nelson Goodman, the most influential proponent of conventionalism, is explicit about the similarity between language and depiction.
The same gloss of Goodman is provided by almost every philosophical theorist of depiction since, including Flint Schier, Karen Neander, Dominic Lopes, and John Hyman. While not in accurate, these summaries are at best partial truths because they leave out a key sense in which Goodman thought pictures were like languages. Since it is terribly implausible that linear perspective’s significance is rooted merely in convention, it seems as though Gombrich has the upper hand. But Gombrich’s view is also more subtle than his denial of the conventionality of perspective suggests. The next section aims to explain Goodman’s puzzlement over Gombrich’s treatment of perspective by emphasizing a line of thought in Gombrich that the philosophical community has neglected. This will clear the way for explaining the other sense in which Goodman thought that pictures are like languages and for appreciating its importance.

II. Recognition and Goodman’s puzzlement

Michael Podro points out that ‘for Gombrich, to understand how depiction works we must examine how the painter mobilizes the mechanisms of recognition’. We are visually aware of a landscape when looking at an Impressionist painting, but we are also aware of an Impressionist painting. ‘When we say that the blots and brushstrokes of the impressionist landscapes “suddenly come to life”, we mean we have been led to project a landscape into these dabs of pigment.’ Projection suggests that we put something out there, so what is out there is not wholly independent of its observers. Projection is rooted in the deployment of capacities for recognition, which are quite important for how we see the world generally. Look, and you see the trees, as such, and the mountains, the house on the hill and so on.

Recognition is a perceptual ability that is subject to training and depends in no small measure on the context in which one finds oneself and on the interests that such contexts make salient. ‘Whenever we receive a visual impression, we respond by docketing it, filing it, grouping it in one way or another, even if the impression is only that of an inkblot or a fingerprint.’ The specific character of one’s response depends on what one has the ability to see, what one can recognize, so an important part of the beholder’s share is just the set of those recognitional capacities. These are a result of both our natural endowment and the specific cultural context in which we find ourselves.

These thoughts form the core of what would later be called the ‘recognition theory of depiction’: \( P \text{ depicts } O \text{ only if } P \text{ elicits appropriate observers’ capacities visually to recognize } O. \)

What makes something a picture of an apple is in part the fact that looking at it leads to a recognitional response for apples. The claim is not that pictures are recognitionally identical to apples – they don’t fool us into thinking we are viewing
apples – but that there is overlap between recognitional responses to apples and pictures thereof. When looking at the picture surface, one recognizes apples, a flat surface, patches of colour, and so on. Pictorial content is determined by some subset of the recognitional capacities the picture excites. Texts, like ‘apple’, are recognizable as such, and they can prompt imaginings of apples, but such texts do not secure visual recognition of apples.22

Gombrich’s essays ‘Meditations on a Hobby Horse’23 and ‘Image and Code’24 are forerunners to the recognition theory of depiction and they anticipate a point about resemblance in pictures made by recognition theorists. Taking Konrad Lorenz’s studies as his guide, Gombrich claims in the former essay that:

The ball has nothing in common with the mouse except that it is chasable …. As ‘substitutes’ they fulfill certain demands of the organism. They are keys which happen to fit into biological or psychological locks, or counterfeit coins which make the machine work when dropped into the slot.25

In ‘Image and Code’, published thirty years later, he is still focused on the same point: ‘the greater the biological relevance of a feature, the greater is also the ease of recognition, however remote the objective resemblance may be’.26 Objective resemblance does little work as long as one has a suitably tuned recognitional capacity. He continues: ‘The main point I wish to make here is that the fish which snaps at the artificial fly does not ask the logician in what respect it is like a fly and in what unlike’.27 And from the earlier essay: ‘An “image” in this biological sense, then, is not an imitation of an object’s external form but an imitation of certain privileged or relevant aspects’.28

Schier, and then Lopes, would go on to unpack this point in some detail. ‘The respect in which S resembles its depictum O is this: there is an overlap between the recognitional abilities triggered by S and O.’29 Recognitional overlap accounts for the intuition that pictures resemble what they depict. Notice that this view places few, if any, concrete constraints on surface configuration. That is, it does not insist that pictures of red things must be red, or pictures of quadrilateral things be quadrilateral. Schier continues: ‘I doubt that it will prove possible to give a simple, general account of the similarity between picture and depictum that does not essentially invoke the fact that S and O trigger some of the same recognitional abilities.’30 Given suitable recognitional capacities, any configuration of colour on a canvas could depict anything else. ‘Any design can depict any object provided it is recognizable as of that object.’31 For example, a simple smiley face secures recognition of a face, but of no face in particular. It depicts a face, but not a bearded man’s face, and certainly not Ernest Hemingway’s face. Other, more detailed, images can secure recognition of a face, but also of facial features at a high level of detail. We say of the latter that they ‘really look like’ faces while the smiley face merely suggests a face. For the recognition theorist,
this merely picks up on the fact that the detailed images secure recognition for more facial detail than the cartoonish ones do.

Once this aspect of Gombrich’s work is made clear, it becomes easier to see why Goodman was puzzled by Gombrich’s treatment of perspective. Recognition need not be explained by easily articulated, observer-independent similarities between the picture plane and what it depicts. As mentioned earlier, Goodman was first impressed by Gombrich’s hobby horse essay, which clearly states that “representation” does not depend on formal, that is, geometrical, qualities beyond the minimum requirements of function. That is to say, the most perspicuous specification of the relevant similarities might just be that they provoke similar responses in appropriate observers. Why insist, then, on a special spatial relation between the canvas and the scene it depicts? Linear perspective might be special because one can easily learn to interpret pictures made according to its rules, but that is not central to what makes linear perspective a way of making pictures. It is a pictorial technique only insofar as it secures the appropriate recognition responses from appropriate viewers.

While recognition is very important to Gombrich’s view of depiction, it cannot do its work alone. Deployment of recognitional skills depends in no small part on what one is looking for, what one expects the world to deliver. We have developed a practice of using images and along with it we have trained ourselves to expect certain things from them. These expectations concerning representations are the core motivation for Goodman’s discussion of symbol systems.

III. Symbol systems

It is standard to think of Goodman as the one who stresses the importance of symbol systems in his work, but the roots of this view can be found in Gombrich:

There is a limit to the information language can convey without introducing such devices as quotation marks that differentiate between what logicians call ‘language’ and ‘metalanguage’. There is a limit to what pictures can represent without differentiating between what belongs to the picture and what belongs to the intended reality.

Viewers must differentiate between features of the picture surface and features of the ‘intended reality’. This is no simple perceptual task, akin to ascertaining the colour of a patch of paint. This task involves one’s sense of what makes a painting, drawing, or print the picture that it happens to be.

In visual representation, signs stand for objects of the visible world, and these can never be ‘given’ as such. Any picture, by its very nature, remains an appeal to the visual imagination …. Unless we know the conventions, we have no means of guessing which aspect is presented to us.
Pictures burden beholders with the task of knowing the conventions: sorting out what belongs to them as pieces of canvas and what belongs to the contents they present to us. One could imagine that Jenefer Robinson is talking of Gombrich when she says ‘Understanding what a picture refers to is always a function of the system of symbolizing within which it functions’.35 Her target is, of course, Goodman: ‘Nothing is intrinsically a representation; status as representation is relative to symbol system’.36

But what is it we commit ourselves to when we insist that we must distinguish ‘what belongs to the picture and what belongs to the intended reality’? There are at least two dimensions that matter here. First, one could be interested in piecemeal image-world correspondences. Given that we have such and such a picture what is the scene that it represents? Can we make rules for such correspondences across a range of pictures? The other dimension is the one that Goodman emphasized. To identify some object as a member of a symbol system is to make a (perhaps tacit) judgement about how it relates, semantically and syntactically, to other representations within such a system. To see the distinction between focusing on correlations between images and contents, on the one hand, and general semantic and syntactic constraints on the other, it helps to consider an ancient example of the conventionality debates: Plato’s Cratylus.

Recently, Lynne Nygaard, Allison Cook and Laura Namy published a study that claimed to undermine ‘a fundamental assumption regarding spoken language … [namely] that the sound structure of words bears an essentially arbitrary relationship to meaning.’ Hermogenes supports this fundamental assumption in the Cratylus but, unluckily for him, at the time it was neither an assumption nor fundamental. The Nygaard study suggests that Hermogenes’ luck hasn’t changed. Though many might assume Hermogenes was correct, he was wrong. Not only are there ‘cross-linguistic sound-to-meaning correspondences to which listeners from unrelated language backgrounds are sensitive’ but also these correspondences ‘aid learning relative to entirely arbitrary sound-to-meaning pairings’. In the Cratylus, Socrates comes closest to the view supported by this study, while Cratylus himself occupies a fairly radical position to the effect that a name cannot correspond to something unless it resembles that thing in rather significant respects.

What matters most for present purposes is the way in which Socrates tries to find a middle ground between Cratylus and Hermogenes:39

… the signification of words is given by custom and not by likeness, for custom may indicate by the unlike as well as by the like … custom and convention must be supposed to contribute to the indication of our thoughts; for suppose we take the instance of number, how can you ever imagine, my good friend, that you will find names resembling every individual number, unless you allow that which you term convention and agreement to have authority in determining the correctness of names? I quite agree with you [Cratylus] that words should as far as possible
resemble things; but I fear that this dragging in of resemblance, as Hermogenes says, is a shabby thing, which has to be supplemented by the mechanical aid of convention with a view to correctness.40

Convention is relevant, somehow, as a supplement to resemblance. Moreover, resemblance is a somewhat blunt instrument. It is far from obvious to Socrates that it can be used to pair all words with their meanings. This kind of middle ground is evident in the Nygaard study mentioned above. They do not claim that it is impossible for a word to refer to something in the absence of some significant relationship between word and object. They suggest that:

Although arbitrariness certainly remains a central design characteristic of linguistic structure, these results indicate that language users also can and do exploit non-arbitrary relationships in the service of word learning and retrieval.41

Here they make use of a notion not available to Plato, and thus not something he could have given to Socrates in the dialogue. These scientists do not think it is essential to the structure of a language that the words in it resemble what they are about. In fact, the words can function syntactically and/or grammatically within the language irrespective of whether they bear non-arbitrary relationships to what they are about. They would not suggest that it is essential to being a language that elements within it resemble, or that they have any other kind of non-arbitrary relationship to, their referents. The languages we can learn well typically make use of non-arbitrary connections between words and what they are about,42 even though that is not essential to being a language. One can, and should, I think, read Goodman as making a similar suggestion.

Gombrich focused on whether the picture/object connection is arbitrary, or conventional, and in this most philosophers have followed him. If this is the ground for debate, Goodman comes out as a clear loser, because it certainly seems as though there are non-arbitrary connections between pictures and their contents. In an essay responding to Goodman, Gombrich claims, 'At any rate it appears that learning to read an ordinary photograph is very unlike learning to master an arbitrary code. A better comparison would be with learning the use of an instrument'. In a Socratically concessive gesture, Gombrich continues:

As soon as we approach our problem from this angle, the angle of the ease of acquisition, the traditional opposition between 'nature' and 'convention' turns out to be misleading. What we observe is rather a continuum between skills which come naturally to us and skills which may seem next to impossible for anyone to acquire.43

The point is that certain picture/object correspondences are impressively easy to learn while others are doubtless ‘impossible for anyone to acquire’. In fact, it is difficult to deny this claim, even as it applies to language. With our limited phonetic
and phonological potential one can imagine languages we simply could not learn, names we could never master. Or think about trying to name the integers in a non-compositional fashion: Ernst, Nelson, Gertrude, Frances, etc. That is not to say there is anything of the essence of spoken or written language that requires it to be easily learnable. As a matter of fact, the languages we use are reasonably learnable, but that is far from surprising. Similarly, we might be able to characterize what it is to be pictorial in a way that concerns itself with the structure of such a representational system, without an eye to whether any instance of such a system would be useful to or easily learned by creatures like us.

In response to the first published version of Gombrich’s ‘Image and Code’ paper Goodman said:

But I think as you do that it is ‘not very helpful to divide meanings into those which exist “by nature” and others which are learned’. This seems to diminish the importance of the residual disagreement: I cannot believe that the standard rules of perspective embody the one native and easiest way of achieving and reading a realistic representation. But does innateness really matter much?

Are there ‘plans of correlation’ between pictures and the world that are easier to learn than others? Probably. Perspective might be among them, but Goodman couldn’t bring himself to believe this because, as he endeavoured to show in Languages of Art, perspective can seem quite artificial. Regardless of whether he ultimately wins the day concerning perspective, the important point is that Goodman wants to move the focus in discussing representation away from specific symbol-meaning correspondences and on to the syntactic and semantic structure of representational systems.

For Goodman, pictorial systems of representation are semantically dense, syntactically dense and relatively replete. Linguistic systems of representation are syntactically finitely differentiated, not very replete, and they fail to be semantically finitely differentiated. Diagrammatic systems are often semantically and syntactically dense, but not very replete, and so on. It is beyond the scope of this paper to explicate these conditions. The point is that for Goodman the distinctive marks of representational kinds were not to be found at the level of individual representation-meaning correspondences, but rather in the syntactic and semantic relations that representations bear to one another. He thought that there was a structure to our representational practices, but he understood this structure in a fairly abstract way. It is possible that certain representation-meaning correspondences are easier to learn than others, but that fact will not help to distinguish depiction from language, since certain word-meaning correspondences are easier to learn than others too. The point is not so much that, like languages, there is an arbitrary pairing of representation and content as that, like languages, there are syntactic and semantic constraints on how pictorial systems are structured.
Our representational practices have developed this structure without the benefit of our assistance. We never decided, in any interesting sense of the term, that English should have a subject-verb-object word-order and we never decided to make use of semantically and syntactically dense representations that are relatively replete, like pictures. Things just happened that way. Our representational practices are beholden to us, the creatures that do the representing, but the nature of this dependence does not entail we could make pictures be anything we want them to be. It might in some sense of the word be arbitrary that representational systems have the structure Goodman finds them to have – God did not decree that pictures must be this way – but they are not arbitrary in the sense that we could just decide to do things differently. Goodman thinks he has found the joints at which practice with representations is articulated. Rarely quoted, even though it sits right in the middle of Goodman’s most radically conventionalist claims, he says:

> Among representational systems, ‘naturalism’ is a matter of habit but habituation does not carry us across the boundary between description and representation [i.e. depiction]. No amount of familiarity turns a paragraph into a picture; and no degree of novelty makes a picture a paragraph.48

There is a ‘boundary between description and representation [depiction]’ that is not breached by familiarity with the system being employed. The boundary is structural. Any individual object can be treated as a picture or as a letter in an alphabet, or a word in some language, but only at the cost of accepting constraints on what makes it similar to other possible representations within some system. One cannot satisfy the pictorial and the linguistic constraints at once. Goodman is trying to find the aspects of representations that are characteristic of pictures in a different place than they are typically sought. He in this way responds to the challenge put by Gombrich, who was keenly aware that we had to ‘know the conventions’ and have a way of sorting out ‘what belongs to the picture and what belongs to the intended reality’. Goodman makes room for vast conventional variation within constraints that nevertheless distinguish depiction from description. These constraints on syntactic and semantic structure constitute a third beholder’s share, and a rather important one at that, because these constraints are those within which convention flourishes. It does not seem as though Gombrich ever grasped this point, even though such a theory of of symbolic structure complements Gombrich’s discussion of recognition so well. It fills out the notion of expectation, without which recognition could not do the job required of it.
Summary

One of Gombrich’s well-known discussions of caricature also serves as a worthwhile warning.

If these examples have suggested anything, it is that we generally do take in the mask before we notice the face. The mask here stands for the crude distinctions, the deviations from the norm which mark a person off from others. Any such deviation which attracts our attention may serve us as a tab of recognition and promises to save us the effort of further scrutiny.49

Gombrich and Goodman played a large role in shaping contemporary Anglophone aesthetics and philosophy of art, but with around half a century between us and their most important work, the danger is that masks replace faces. If the goal is to distinguish thinkers from one another, to have convenient places to put them, then the masks suffice. But if the goal is allowing their work to inform what has become a rather complex contemporary philosophical scene, then we need to remove the masks.

Gombrich thought that illusion was important for understanding the history of art and the nature of depiction, but exactly what he meant by illusion is a subtle affair,50 and his work is more directly related to the recognition view of depiction than has been acknowledged. Indeed, recognitional capacities are a key beholder’s share, though not the only one. The other beholder’s share involves expectations concerning symbols. Which features of the object one encounters matter for it being the representation that it happens to be? As suggested above, this is where Gombrich makes room for the study of symbols as Goodman would come to understand it.

We cannot understand our expectations regarding representations without understanding what we encounter as representations. Goodman accepts this and tries to deepen our sense of what treating something as a representation involves. Yes, it involves knowing conventions concerning meaning-representation correspondences, just as Gombrich suggested. But our practice is a bit more complicated than that. Representational kinds are distinguished from one another syntactically and semantically. This impressive regularity in our practice reflects a third beholder’s share. Something about us, as consumers of representations, makes certain kinds of syntactic and semantic structures salient for different purposes. This suggests avenues for investigation that have not been explored fully and thus merit further attention.

Gombrich and Goodman disagreed about linear perspective and related techniques, but this disagreement is an unfortunate foundation upon which to build an understanding of their respective views. Gombrich denied that perspective is conventional in the way that word/meaning correspondences are, but there are also excellent reasons for thinking that this is beside the point when Gombrich’s understanding of depiction is at issue. Gombrich is in many respects the father of
recognition views of depiction, after all, and these views need not privilege perspective constructions, even if they can agree that for reasons external to the theory such constructions are not merely conventional. Similarly, Goodman implausibly insists that linear perspective is merely a convention, not unlike the conventions governing word/meaning correspondences. But this fact obscures the positive account he offers of what pictures are, and the avenues of research such an account reveals. Goodman’s beholder’s share is distinct from the two articulated by Gombrich, not least insofar as it seems to set constraints within which conventions flourish, more than it reveals another set of conventions. All three are worth keeping in sight.
22 There is more to the recognition view than is discussed here. What makes an observer appropriate? What are sufficient (as opposed to mere necessary) conditions on something being a picture? For now, these issues can be left to one side since this core claim of the recognition theorists suffices to illustrate the point about resemblance below.

23 Gombrich, ‘Hobby Horse’ (n. 3 above).


25 ‘Hobby Horse’ (n. 3 above), p. 4.


27 Ibid., p. 286.

28 ‘Hobby Horse’ (n. 3 above), p. 6. Gombrich is not completely consistent on this point. He claims, ‘Image and Code’, p. 297, that ‘Western art would not have developed the special tricks of naturalism if it had not been found that the incorporation in the image of all of the features which serve us in real life for the discovery and testing of meaning enabled the artist to do with fewer and fewer conventions’ [italics added]. Incorporating features of the world in the image suggests pictures resemble their objects in a more profound way than envisaged by the recognition theorists. Lopes, Understanding (n. 16 above), §4.1, stresses a discontinuity between the hobby horse essay and Art and Illusion (he never mentions ‘Image and Code’), and thus he sees Gombrich as a more distant forerunner of the recognition view than the present discussion suggests. Lopes, Sensibility (n. 21 above), ch. 1, seems more amenable to the present view of Gombrich, as is Patrick Maynard, Drawing Distinctions, Ithaca, 2005, p. 97.

29 Schier, Deeper (n. 14 above), pp. 186-87.

30 Ibid., p. 188.

31 Lopes, Understanding (n. 16 above), p. 151.

32 ‘Hobby Horse’ (n. 3 above), p. 4.

33 Art and Illusion (n. 4 above), p. 201. Maynard (Drawing Distinctions, n. 28 above, p. 112) suggests that Gombrich misses this point. It is true that in this remark Gombrich has a specific set of examples in mind, but it seems a stretch to insist that he is unaware of how generally this point applies.

34 Ibid., p. 204.


36 Goodman, Languages (n. 10 above), p. 226.


38 Ibid., p. 181.

39 It is controversial whether this is the right way to interpret the dialogue. See, e.g., the discussion by C.D.C. Reeve in Plato, Cratylus, tr. Reeve, Indianapolis, 1998, xxxiv, xi-xlxi.


41 Nygaard et al., ‘Correspondences’ (n. 37 above), p. 185.


44 Goodman quoted ibid., p. 284n.

45 Goodman, Languages (n. 10 above), pp. 10-19.


47 However, see Lopes, Understanding (n. 16 above), p. 69.

