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Article

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A NAÏVE REALIST ACCOUNT OF DEPICTION[1]

SUMMARY: Reacting against the view expressed by the British art critic John Ruskin that "the whole technical power of the painting depends on our recovery of what may be called the innocence of the eye", Gombrich and Goodman initiated in the 1960s several decades of intense discussions aiming to show that Ruskin was wrong and that pictorial perception is never innocent. This paper intends to partially reinstate the innocence of the eye, by giving a novel account of depiction that argues that pictorial perception is not a special kind of perception but rather perception through a special kind of medium. This account appeals not at all to resemblance, symbolic systems, make-believe, illusory experiences or recognitional abilities but relies instead on the phenomena of transparency and causal mediation. It argues that a painting depicts a scene only in virtue of its instantiation of some visual features that are independent of the existence of symbolic systems, artistic movements and styles, the nature of aesthetic experience and the psychology of the artist.

KEYWORDS: depiction, transparency, naïve realism, Aristotle, Walton, Heider.

1. Introduction

In this paper, I propose to take seriously the idea that a picture is like a window open to the world and explore in detail the view that pictures are transparent media enabling viewers to perceive "objects that are distant in time and space"

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and "that cannot be seen by ordinary means" (Lopes, 1996, p. 193). Although the idea of painting as a window-like aperture to the world already appears in the Renaissance treatise *On Painting* written by Leon Battista Alberti (latin *De pictura*; 1991), there has been little attempt to defend a realist approach to depiction based on the simple idea that a painting is a transparent medium comparable to a pane of glass or a mirror. Unlike recent attempts to capture the phenomenology of pictorial perception by giving an account of pictorial perception in terms of the perception of transparency (Newall, 2015), the present paper intends to explore the view that pictures are transparent, not only to the way they are experienced, but in a realist sense, that is "viewer-independent" (Cavedon-Taylor, 2015, p. 73). The transparency view of depiction I shall defend is an extension of Walton's transparency view of photography to all figurative pictures. Although Walton himself distinguishes between depictive and photographic relations (Walton, 2012), I will argue that all depictive relations are transparent and of the same nature as those exhibited by photographs. Depiction, I will claim, is a relation between a picture—photographic or handmade—and constituents of the physical world which is grounded in causal relations between the world and the picture. While familiarity with a given style or artistic tradition can certainly shape a viewer's interpretation and aesthetic appreciation, the depictive relation itself is, I contend, independent of any particular style or symbolic system, as well as of the intentional states of either the observer or the artist.

The transparency account of depiction defended in this paper is non-intentional and realist in the sense that depiction is explained by appealing to the fact that pictures instantiate some features or relations independently of the way they are perceived. That is, a picture of *O* has intrinsic features by virtue of which it depicts *O*. According to this view, pictures depict a scene in virtue of their transparency, which transmits to the observer some visible features that do not belong to the picture itself. The transparency account is realist in the same sense as mimetic accounts of depiction which explain depiction by the fact that pictures resemble the objects they depict and claim that this resemblance relation is grounded in some features instantiated by the picture and its pictured object (Briscoe, 2016; Hyman, 2015).

Realist views of depiction differ in significant ways, but they agree that depiction is exclusively dependent on some properties instantiated by the picture itself. By contrast, perceptual accounts of depiction (for a nice survey of intentional accounts of depiction, see Kulvicki, 2006b, pp. 537–538), and intentional accounts of depiction more generally, explain depiction by a special mental relation between the perceiver and the depicted object. For example, it has been argued that a picture depicts a particular object *O* because it causes the perceiver to have an illusion of *O* (Gombrich, 1960), because it causes the perceiver to imagine seeing *O* (Walton, 2012), because it causes the perceiver to have a twofold experience of seeing *O* in the picture (Wollheim, 1980), or because it causes the perceiver to mobilize the same recognitional resources he or she uses when perceiving *O* directly (Lopes, 1996). Despite their differences, all these non-

realist accounts of depiction argue that pictorial depiction occurs because pictures cause certain intentional states in their perceivers.

Although this paper addresses the nature of depiction rather than the aesthetics of images, I believe that the contrast between intentional and non-intentional theories of depiction has several important implications for the way aesthetic questions are tackled. As it will be discussed in Section 5, the fact that depiction is rooted in reality rather than in the psychology of the artist or the observer places some constraints on the artist's role in the creative process and imposes some limitations on pictorial fiction. It also has some important implications regarding the understanding of pictorial realism and its alleged "open-ended" ambiguity (Prinz, 2021, p. 67). Building on insights to be found in Leonardo, Fiedler, Heider, Alexander, and Walton, this paper gives a new account of depiction grounded on the transparency of pictures, but it also offers a new perspective on our engagement with pictures, both aesthetic and epistemological.

In the following section, I distinguish the transparency account of depiction from other accounts of depiction. In Section 3, I propose a realist account of transparency inspired by Aristotle, and examine, in Section 4, how this account can be applied to photographs. Building on Fiedler's ideas about art, I argue in Section 5 that painters are merely visual mediators; that is, they use their bodies to relay visual information gathered from their experience of the visual features of objects. I show that paintings, like photographs, can be considered as visual traces that transmit visual information about the external world. I also extend the transparency approach to depiction of non-existent and non-particular objects. In Section 6, I defend the claim that pictorial seeing is not different in nature from face-to-face seeing and confront, in Section 7, the transparency account of depiction with the other main philosophical alternatives. I conclude the paper by considering the implications of the transparency account of depiction for a general theory of pictorial realism.

2. The Transparency Account of Depiction

The transparency account of depiction defended here claims that pictures give direct access to the objects or scenes they depict and rejects the claim that the perceptual relation to the depicted object is mediated by a perceptual relation to the picture itself. What we perceive when looking at a picture, according to this account, are not the visual properties of the picture itself but those of the object *O* it depicts, when *O* exists, or some real visual properties independent of *O*, when *O* is a generic object or a *fictum* (Sections 5.2.3 and 5.2.4). Whereas most accounts of depiction argue that pictures *represent* the visual properties of their depicted object, the transparency account defended here argues that pictures *present* or *display* or *show* those properties or some existing properties independent of *O* when the picture depicts *ficta* or non-particulars. What a picture displays are therefore not its own intrinsic properties but some visual properties independent of the picture itself.

Although the present account shares Lopes' view that transparency is "the key to explaining experiences of pictures of all kinds" (Lopes, 1996, p. 181), its understanding of what pictorial transparency amounts to is fundamentally different from Lopes' approach. Lopes' transparency account of pictorial transparency mainly rests on the idea that counterfactual dependency is at the core of the transparency exhibited by pictures. Yet, although one can acknowledges that some causal dependency is necessary for a picture to depict a scene, counterfactual dependency does not explain how pictures are endowed with the capacity to present visual properties which they do not have. The fact that the "marked, coloured surface" (Lopes, 1996, p. 192) of a picture can be a reliable source of knowledge about a depicted scene does not explain how the visual properties beyond the picture itself can be *visually accessible* to the observer who looks at the picture.[2] Pictorial transparency cannot be limited to the fact that pictures are caused and counterfactually dependent upon their subject, it must also explain how visual properties of the depicted objects can directly shape the viewer's experience.

Pictures are like windows because they are transparent apertures that allow the information contained in the light coming from depicted objects or properties to reach the observer. So conceived, pictures literally extend the observer's visual reach beyond the picture itself to the depicted object and its visual properties. Unlike opaque surfaces, which present "a barrier beyond which the eye cannot pass (Katz, 1935, p. 8), pictures, like windows, correspond to a particular region of the visual field where visual obstacles have been removed.

As the window-like approach to pictures suggests, the transparency account of depiction views pictorial perception as fundamentally similar to nonpictorial perception, and, like the naïve realist view of nonpictorial perception, it asserts that pictorial experiences are presentational in the sense that they are constituted at least in part by or depend on their depicted objects and some of their qualities. In both pictorial and nonpictorial experiences, the phenomenal character of the perceptual experience is explained by mind-independent objects and their qualities.

Although it is mediated by pictures, pictorial perception is direct in the sense that what helps to constitute the perceptual experience are the depicted objects themselves and their properties. Pictorial perception is direct because the pictorial medium does not interfere with the visual properties it conveys. Although depicted objects are perceived thanks to pictures, we are not aware of the pictures' visual properties in pictorial perception. Pictures mediate perception just as corrective glasses and optical instruments do. They give a direct access to visual information which is not otherwise accessible.

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[2] Unlike the present account which argues that the transparent pictorial medium itself is not perceived, Lopes maintains that pictorial experience is twofold and that pictures "represent the visual world through visual properties" (1996, p. 192) which are counterfactually dependent on, and isomorphic with, the visual properties they represent.

The claim that pictorial and nonpictorial perception are essentially the same is therefore directly linked to the fact that pictures, being transparent, have essentially the same role as all other visual media. The goal of the next section is to understand this mediating role and to flesh out the notion of transparency to which it is essentially related.

3. The Nature of Transparency

In optics, transparency is the physical property of a material that allows light to pass through it. Although the notion of transparency is rooted in the science of optics, philosophers and psychologists use it frequently to describe perceptual experiences. The "transparency thesis" concerning perceptual experience, as it is commonly called, states that the attempt to carry out introspective observation of our perceptual experiences reveals nothing except mind-independent objects and their properties. When attending to our perceptual experiences, we look right through them—that is, we look directly at their objects—and do not discern any intrinsic features of the experience itself. It is therefore claimed that a perceptual experience is transparent "in the sense that we 'see' right through it to the object of that experience, analogously to the way we see through a pane of glass to whatever is on the other side of it" (Kind, 2003, p. 226). In a similar vein, Newall argues that pictorial perception exhibits the same general features we experience when seeing through a transparent medium. Although pictures are not physically transparent, he argues, pictorial perception is a kind of transparent perception or an experience involving a "transparency illusion" (Newall, 2015, p. 131). According to Newall, pictures are indeed transparent in the sense that they cause *experiences of transparency* in the viewer, but they are not transparent in the realist sense explained by Cavedon-Taylor, because their transparency is not "viewer independent" (Cavedon-Taylor, 2015, p. 73).

Appeals to transparency are widespread in philosophical theories of perception and pictorial perception, but few philosophers have tried to understand transparency for its own sake or to explain how it relates to visual perception in a nonmetaphorical way. Although optics defines transparency clearly by identifying it with the capacity of a material to transmit light, the relevance of its definition of transparency to perceptual experience is not obvious. As psychologists and philosophers have recognized, there is a sense of transparency that goes well beyond its restricted sense in optics. As Metelli explains:

> What do we mean when we say that something is transparent? In fact, the term has two meanings. If we are referring to the fact that light can pass through a thing or a medium, then the meaning of "transparent" we intend to convey is physical; if, on the other hand, we mean to say that we can see through something, then the meaning we intend to convey is perceptual. The distinction would not be very important if physical and perceptual transparency were always found together. Such, however, is not the case. (1974, p. 91)

What, then, is perceptual transparency and what is its relation to physical transparency?

As is often the case, the answer can be found in Aristotle. According to Aristotle, transparency is not a property of an object or material that is contingently located between the perceived object and the perceiver. It is a property of the visual medium itself, without which vision cannot occur. Johansen summarises his view thus: "There has to be something in between your eye and the object for you to see it. That is what Aristotle calls the medium. Aristotle takes the medium of sight to be light, the actuality of the transparent" (1997, p. 39).

The implication is thus that transparency is omnipresent in vision and not only in some material, as explicitly characterized by optics. Transparency is the fundamental property of the visual medium that allows visual qualities to reach the eye. There would be no vision without transparency. In *De Anima*, Aristotle famously argues that colours—the proper objects of vision—are visible only through a transparent medium. Now, the transparency that is required for vision to occur is manifested in experience by the fact that we see objects at a distance. By transmitting light from the perceived object to the perceiver, a visual medium like air or water creates an environment where visual perception can take place without obstruction. Unlike "nontransparent bodies, such as opaque solids, [which] are perceptually impenetrable" and "impose visual resistance" (Kalderon, 2018, p. 13), transparent media offer an openness through which sight can pass.

As Aristotle recognizes, physical and perceptual transparency correspond not to different realities, as Metelli claims, but rather to two faces of the same property. It is only because visual media are transparent that light can travel continuously from the perceived object to the perceiver, and it is only because there is no visible obstacle between the perceiver and the perceived object that sight can reach a distant object through a transparent medium. In other words, a visual medium by definition does not interfere with the information it conveys. It must therefore be invisible and hence transparent.

Although the transparency of some materials can be explained in terms of their capacity to transmit light, in Aristotle's account transparency it is not limited to this capacity. Aristotle characterizes as transparent anything that can mediate the perception of visual properties. In this sense, both mirrors and photographs are transparent, because both allow the perceiver to perceive the visual properties of the objects they mediate. Although they are not transparent in the restricted optical sense, they are transparent in the sense that they transmit to the perceiver the information conveyed by light. As defined by optics, transparent materials mediate visual properties of distant objects by allowing light to pass through them, but the central property of a visual medium is its capacity to be "a condition on the visibility of other things" (Kalderon, 2018, p. 235). Now, what matters in order to transmit visible properties to the perceiver is not the capacity to transmit light itself, but the capacity to transmit characteristic patterns of light rays caused, in part, by the perceived objects. What is visible is not

the light itself but the visible properties of objects, which are nothing other than the properties (color, shape, texture, etc.) that cause objects to interact with light in a particular way. Transparency, even in its optical sense, cannot therefore be reduced to the disposition to transmit light but must be understood as the capacity to transmit the information conveyed by light. As a medium, light conveys sensible qualities of the perceived object to the perceiver. It is not itself the perceived object (Johansen, 1997, Chapter 2).

4. The Transparency of Photographs

Understanding transparency as the capacity to transmit information conveyed by light is central if we are to grasp how photographs can store and transmit visual information of objects which are not in the vicinity of the observer. Most accounts of photography suppose that our experience of photographs is mediated by our perception of marks on a two-dimensional surface. This is just what the transparency thesis denies. According to the transparency view of depiction, it is indeed because photographs are transparent, and hence invisible, that our visual access to photographed objects is possible. Photographs do not transmit visual information from photographed objects by reproducing or mirroring this visual information on their surfaces. They rather transmit information by relaying it without interference and alteration. This difference is crucial since it explains how visible properties located beyond the photograph itself can directly reach into and shape the experience of the observer.

Unlike glass and water, photographs, mirrors and other reflective surfaces do not mediate visual perception of distant objects by allowing light to pass through them. They mediate visual perception by relaying the structural unity of the information contained in light. To understand this kind of mediation, we must understand the distinction between perceptual object and medium spelt out by Fritz Heider in *Thing and Medium* (1959).

Like Aristotle, Heider addresses the problem of perceiving at a distance and suggests that a special kind of mediator between the perceiver and the object perceived is needed in order to carry the perceptual information from the perceived object to the perceiver. This perceptual mediator, he argues, should be able to interact causally with the perceived object and the observer, but also to guarantee that this causal mediation occurs without interference. That is, it is crucial that media, as intermediaries, do not interfere with the information they convey. Otherwise, the information would be not only about the perceived object, but also about the medium itself. As Heider stresses,

> the configuration of light rays which meets my eyes, is coordinated to the object, the stone, in a special way. Even a small change of the surface of the stone changes the stimulus configuration. *It is not coordinated to any specific properties of the mediator*. (1959, p. 3; emphasis added)

As stressed by Heider, perceptual media convey perceptual information about perceptual objects not only because there is a causal and a counterfactual dependency between the medium and the object, but also because the medium and the object are of different nature. Heider distinguishes between things, which are internally conditioned, and media, which are externally conditioned. The fact that media are externally conditioned corresponds to the fact that their parts are causally independent of each other. Any air molecule can move freely without affecting the way the other air molecules behave. By contrast, all the parts of an internally conditioned object are interdependent. By moving the back of a chair in one direction, for example, we induce a motion of its legs. (cf. Heider, 1959, p. 8)

The notion of externally conditioned entities explains how media can causally contribute to perception without being part of its phenomenal content. Because the medium's parts are causally independent of each other, the medium as a whole can remain undisturbed by a particular process even while the medium's parts are directly affected by it. As Heider writes:

> The process on the surface of the stone, which reflects the light rays, is a process which is conditioned by the substratum […]. The fact that this particular kind of process occurs, namely, one which contains waves of particular lengths arranged in certain patterns, is determined by properties of the stone. The process in the medium, on the other hand, is conditioned externally. What happens in it is dependent on the form of the impinging process; the special state of the medium is to a high degree irrelevant for the form of the process in it. (1959, p. 4)

Rather than their capacity to replicate or mimic visual information of visual objects, it is their capacity to be externally conditioned, or in other words, shaped by visual objects that make certain entities apt to carry information about external objects. Unlike perceptual objects which are internally conditioned, perceptual media are unstructured and therefore shapable by external objects. By changing the direction and the frequencies of the light rays composing the incident light, coloured surfaces change the incoming the light and impose their own structure on the reflected light. On the contrary, visual media, like mirrors or glass, preserve the structural organisation of the incoming light and therefore do not affect the information it conveys.

Although most visual media allow vision to reach distant objects by offering a direct passage to the light structured by external objects, some opaque materials can serve as visual media by relaying the structural organization of visual objects in a different way. This is the case with screens and photographs. Consider for example the simple case of a shadow play in which hands are used to project shadows of different shapes on a wall. While the silhouettes cast upon the wall derive solely from the positioning of hands and fingers, the perception of these shadows relies on the wall's physical properties. It is because the wall's uniform surface reflects independently each incoming ray of light, that we can discern the visual effects crafted by the strategic placement of hands. As Heider

stresses, we perceive distinct and distant configurations of light rays insofar as there is a medium able to transmit those configurations without imposing its own structure on them.

This principle extends to more intricate scenarios involving light projection onto a screen, such as the early photographic device known as the camera obscura. This simple optical apparatus, resembling a sealed box with a small aperture and an internal screen, operates by allowing only a single ray of light from each point on an object outside the box to pass through the aperture and reach the screen within. As light travels in straight lines, each point on the screen receives light from a specific point on the object, resulting in a configuration of reflected rays that mirrors the object's light-reflecting surfaces. According to Heider, when observing light projections on a screen, our perception is directed towards the external causes shaping the arrangement of light rays rather than towards the screen itself (1959, p. 17).

Heider's explanation of visual media explains how a uniform surface functions as a mediator and why, in this context, the surface's physical characteristics go unnoticed, rendering it transparent to the observer. The transparency of screens is attested phenomenologically by the observation that the colours perceived on the screen, when it reflects light from an external object, do not appear to belong to the screen but rather to the surface of the object perceived through the screen. For instance, suppose you place a red apple outside a camera obscura. The redness you will perceive on the screen appears to belong not to the surface of the screen but rather to the perceived apple.

The same reasoning applies to photography. A camera obscura projects light from a scene through a small aperture onto a screen, while a photographic camera uses a lens to focus selected light rays onto light-sensitive film or electronic sensors. These recorded patterns can then be displayed on a screen or printed. Similar to the coloured shapes observed on a camera obscura's screen, the chromatic patterns in a photograph result from a complex causal process that relies on the individual correlation of the multitude of points, or pixels, on the photograph's surface to properties of the light rays selected by the lens. As Heider noted, photographs act as mediators: film and paper can record and retain distinctive light patterns from the photographed subject. In this sense, photographs are a special kind of trace—akin to footprints in sand or impressions in wax. Heider explains:

> Something static, too, can serve as a mediator, and such mediators are generally called traces. Changes in the position of parts of solid bodies, or changes on the surfaces of soft materials are traces though which we can recognize their causes. Again we find the same relations. The trace is more characteristic of the source the more possibilities of change the mediator had at the moment at which the trace is produced, that is, the more it pictures that which produced the trace […]. If the substratum of the trace loses its mediator characteristics […], the trace becomes permanent and the material cannot serve for further mediation. This is what occurs

> in every "fixation", whether applied to photographic film or a drawing; the hardening of a plastic mass in casting serves the same purpose. (1959, pp. 21–22)

Building on Heider's distinction between perceptual objects and media, we have seen that the transparency of photographs and images produced by optical devices, like a camera obscura or a digital camera, is caused by a complex causal chain that guarantees that the visual properties of a photographed scene are transmitted to the observer without interference. Yet, unlike photographs, handmade pictures do not seem to be constrained in this special way. What can be depicted in a painting is indeed extraordinarily varied and does not seem to be limited to real or existing objects like photographs. This fact alone seems to distinguish paintings, and handmade pictures in general, from photographs in a significant way. The difference between the way photographs and paintings are generated motivates Scruton's famous claim that photography lacks aesthetic value. He argues that because photographs merely record objects' appearances, they do not express thoughts and therefore cannot be objects of aesthetic interest. Scruton's argument relies on the fact that, unlike paintings, the creations of the photographer are constrained by the presence of the photographed objects. Because it has a transparent relation to its object, a photograph is interesting "only because what it portrays is interesting and not because of the manner in which the portrayal is effected" (Scruton, 1981, p. 593).

Although my paper addresses the nature of depiction rather than the aesthetics of images, Scruton's view is relevant because it embodies a widespread misconstrual of the nature of painting and of the painter's role in the creative process. In the next section, I argue, against Scruton's claim, that transparency is not exclusive to photographs but indeed is essential to all figurative pictures. I show that irrespective of whether the painter has observed, remembered, or simply imagined the pictured object, a figurative painting always involves a transparent relation with pictured objects or their properties that is akin to the transparency exhibited by photography.

5. The Transparency of Handmade Pictures

Photographs are transparent media in the Aristotelian sense because they enable the viewer to see the photographed scene by transmitting the visual properties of the scene captured by the camera. As argued in Section 4, photographs are indeed transparent in a realist sense. Like other visual aids, such as mirrors, eyeglasses, telescopes, and microscopes, they give us "a new way of seeing" (Walton, 1984, p. 251). Through a complex causal process of capturing and transmitting the particular arrangement of light rays reflected by an object's surface, a photograph, like any other visual medium, gives access to visual properties of objects distant in time and in space. But what about images that do not rely on a mechanical instrument to capture the properties of the light reflected by a depicted scene? What about images that rely on a painter's eyes and

hands rather than a camera's lens and film? Must we say, like Walton, that such images are not genuinely transparent but only *fictionally transparent* (cf. Walton, 1984, p. 256)?

No. If paintings lack the genuine transparency of photographs, the transparency thesis concerning photography loses its theoretical appeal. The transparency thesis concerning photography asserts that photographs do in fact capture and transmit the visual features of the photographed objects and that the presence of a photographer or viewer therefore plays no role in the causal process. What matters is that the photograph transmits those features and nothing more. Consequently, if a photorealist painting can transmit the same features a photograph can, it does not matter whether it is a painter rather than a photographer who has produced the image. What is perceived through a photograph and what is perceived through a painting that transmits the same features of an object must be identical. This is what a realist account of transparency amounts to.

Unlike most accounts of pictures, the present account holds that handmade figurative pictures are transparent in a realist sense and that their transparency is therefore akin to the transparency exhibited by photographs. Whether we perceive an elephant in a photograph or in a painting made by an artist who has never seen a real elephant face-to-face does not really matter. As I will show, what we perceive in both cases is a real elephant or certain properties of a real elephant or certain properties of more than one elephant.

A likely objection is that this cannot be the case, because painters can paint whatever they want; that is, they can paint without the constraints reality imposes on photographers. Painters would seem to be free from the long chain of causes and effects that guides the work of photographers, who need to be at a particular place in a particular moment to capture the scene a given photograph transmits. Painters, in contrast, can paint anything from seascapes to historic battles without leaving their studios. It would seem that all that is necessary for the production of a handmade picture is the painter's own intentions, thoughts, and skills.[3]

I argue, on the contrary, that the freedom of realist painters is a myth and that their work, like the work of photographers, is constrained by what it portrays. I maintain that the intellectualistic myth, according to which the artist's mind is "filled with an imaginative experience, which he transfers to the canvas" (Alexander, 1925, p. 9), obscures what is in fact necessary for making realistic paintings and that it crucially overlooks the constraints reality imposes on the artist's work.

[3] See, for example, Vasari's comments on Leonardo: "the greatest geniuses sometimes accomplish more when they work less, since they are searching for inventions in their minds, and forming those perfect ideas which their hands then express and reproduce from what they previously conceived with their intellect" (1998, p. 290).

5.1. Painting What Is There

Before dealing with the difficult question of fictive objects, I shall spell out what is involved when artists paint or draw what stands before their eyes.

Observational drawing—or drawing from life—is a complex activity that consists in drawing while attending in alternating fashion to the scene being observed and the picture being drawn. It is often held that in drawing from life the painter undertakes a complex sequence of actions: observing a scene, storing its visual characteristics in the mind, initiating and guiding a manual action, and finally comparing the picture obtained with the model or scene perceived.

This approach to observational drawing is, I believe, misleading because it intellectualizes the creative process and ignores the constitutive role of perception in drawing. Contrary to what is often assumed, the act of drawing does not begin only after the process of observation is complete. Rather, drawing is a complex activity that involves continuous and uninterrupted perceptual activity. Guided by what the artist perceives, the artist's hand produces visible marks on the paper; conversely, these marks guide the artist's ongoing observation of the scene or object. This continuous process constitutes a loop in which the artist's hand and the pencil serve as a transmission belt between the object or scene and what the artist draws. This is precisely the idea put forward by Fiedler, when he argues that sight is privileged, because there are activities which are, in a precise sense he spells out, a continuation of sight:

> What a liberation it must appear to be when we discover in ourselves the possibility of doing in the domain of sight something that other senses do not allow us to do: to realize for the eye what the eye delivers to consciousness. We thus enter a domain of external activity that is no longer opposed to those internal processes in which the life of sight unfolds but follows on immediately from them and presents itself as a continuation in the domain of external activity of these processes. If something that appears to the immediate perception of the eye or to representative consciousness occasions in us a simple gesture, which is supposed to indicate something to be seen, it is sight, and sight alone, that is here at work. (Fiedler, 1887, p. 84–85)

Sight and activity, he continues, may form aspects of one and the same process:

> Sight, which first delivers the sensations and perceptions of a visible thing, now sets in motion the external mechanism of the human body so that what was hitherto given to it only by internal processes undergoes a new and wider development in which the capacity of expression proper to human nature can serve its goals. It is one and the same process which, beginning with sensations and perceptions, finally unfolds in expressive movements. *One must thoroughly free oneself from the conception that distinguishes two different processes, one that ends with the development of visual representations, the other that begins with an attempt to externally imitate the inner representations.* (Fiedler, 1887, p. 85; emphasis added)

As Fiedler observes, in observational drawing "the eye paints for the eye through the hand". This idea is supported by Tchalenko, Nam, Ladanga, and Miall (2014), who show that drawing does not rely on visual memory but on a direct mapping of perception onto motor action. During gaze-shift drawing—where the eyes alternate between the original and the picture—the hand often continues drawing while the eye is still on the model, showing that the visual system drives the hand in real time rather than encoding details for later reproduction (Tchalenko, Nam, Ladanga, Miall, 2014, pp. 330–331).

Fiedler expounds this view further in the course of considering the special abilities of artists. What distinguishes artists from non-artists, he argues, is not their observational capacities but their capacity to embody those perceptions and express them:

> The artist is not distinguished by a special visual talent, not by the fact that he is able to see more or more intensely, that he possesses in his eyes a special gift of choosing, of summarizing, of transforming, of ennobling, of transfiguring, so that in his achievements he reveals only achievements of his seeing. On the contrary, he differs in that the peculiar talent of his nature enables him to pass directly from vivid perception to vivid expression; his relationship to nature is not a relationship of perception but a relationship of expression. (Fiedler, 1887, pp. 99–100)

Although observational drawing relies on seeing, what characterizes artists is what Fiedler calls their expressivity, that is, their capacity to externalize what they perceive (whether or not this externalisation deserves to be called expression is not a question which will be dealt with here). To paraphrase Fiedler, the artist draws for perception, not from it. Visual artists are not merely observers; they are also mediators who use their bodies to relay the visual information gathered from sight. Unlike the bodily movements initiated by active agents, which are *internally* conditioned by their goal, the movements of the artist's hand must obey the artist's eye with a minimum of interference. Artists are indeed mediators whose hand movements, guided by what they perceive, are *externally* conditioned (Section 4). Like the Aristotelian medium, the artist is the causal link between the perceived object and the perceiver. Moreover, because the artist serves as a visual medium, what matters is the artist's capacity to transmit visual features without distortion. To be able to transmit a variety of visual objects, the movements of the artist's hand must therefore be as responsive and nuanced as possible. The fine motor skills developed by an experienced artist play an important role in this respect: they enable the artist's hand to closely follow what the artist's eye perceives, thereby maintaining contact with the object being drawn and ensuring that the picture will accurately transmit visual features perceived by the eye.

When drawing or painting from life, the artist's role is therefore essentially the same as the that of the photographer in producing photographs. The process by which an artist's bodily movements transmit to the canvas what his or her eyes capture is parallel to the process by which a camera's lens transmits to the

photographic film what it captures. Of course, these processes exhibit many differences, but it is essentially the same process that guarantees that photographs and drawings are constitutively shaped by the visual world. To invoke a famous Aristotelian example, drawings and photographs are shaped by the perceived object in the same way a block of wax is shaped by a seal (Aristotle, 1984, III12 435a).[4] The visible features of the depicted object leave a special kind of trace on the artist's paper or photographer's film, and such traces are not, as is often assumed, mere imitations or representations.[5]

This discussion of observational drawing offers, I believe, a new perspective on pictorial realism and depiction by stressing the similarities between photographs and observational drawings. I argue that if we perceive things through photographs as we perceive things through mirrors or eyeglasses, then we must consider the possibility that certain handmade pictures are transparent in the very same sense—that is, transparent in a realistic sense, not only in a phenomenological one. Like photographs, observational pictures capture visual features of existing objects and store them for future and distant perceivers.

Can my conclusions regarding observational drawing and painting from real life be extended to all realistic pictures? If not, what distinguishes observational drawing from other kinds of realistic pictures?

5.2. Painting What Is Not There

Although the activity of drawing or painting from life is often foundational for acquiring and developing the skills needed to produce realistic pictures, many realistic handmade pictures are not the result of direct observation. One can paint

[4] Traces and imprints have long been a focus of philosophical reflection, from Democritus to Derrida. Following Caston (2020), I hold that Aristotle's famous image of wax impressed by a signet-ring is more than a convenient analogy. It is a concrete example of how information can be carried and transmitted through a medium. A block of wax sealed by a signet-ring is not merely any piece of wax with a certain shape and contours—it is a medium that encodes information about a specific ring. In this way, the impressed wax can be said to be *about* an object distinct from itself, much as a figurative picture refers to something beyond its own material form.

As Caston emphasizes, the example is significant because it models a form of information transmission that requires no consciousness. He writes:

> Something can receive information without having any cognition or indeed awareness of it at all. Aristotle's example makes this clear. Sealing wax is completely without cognition or consciousness, much less intelligence. What is essential is that the resulting state is *about* the cause from which it originates. Intentionality in this minimal sense, of *carrying information*, will extend to some inanimate things. But it does not occur in the vast majority of natural changes. (Caston, 2020, p. 24)

[5] Heider explicitly endorses the view that photographs and drawings are special kinds of traces that can serve as mediators (pp. 15–16). I am grateful to Kendall Walton for drawing my attention to the possible similarities between photography and footprints.

from another picture or a photograph, paint from memory, or simply paint some non-existent object realistically. I consider these three cases in turn in order to explore their relations to a transparency account of pictures.

5.2.1. Painting From a Picture

An artist can paint from life or from a picture or from a photograph. But what is depicted by the painting in this latter case? Does the painting depict the original picture or photograph, or does it depict the subject of the original picture or photograph? Although this question might seem complicated, the answer given by the transparency account of depiction proposed here is very straightforward. If a modern painter reproduces Leonardo's *Mona Lisa*, what is depicted in this modern painting is Lisa Gherardini herself, Leonardo's model, and not Leonardo's painting or its content (for a different view, see Kulvicki, 2006, pp. 87–93).

Because realistic paintings are transparent, they give the viewer access to visual features of the objects they depict. Therefore, by transitivity, as long as the picture is shaped by the same visual features that shaped the original painting, the visual access to the depicted object is preserved. This situation perfectly mirrors the case of transparent materials. The presence of more than one pane of glass between a perceiver and a perceived object does not affect the perceiver's visual access to the perceived object—as long as the panes of glass are transparent.[6]

5.2.2. Painting From Memory

If one views memory as a means of storing and retrieving visual information, the case of pictures painted from memory does not pose a significant challenge for a transparency account of pictures. As long as we accept the minimal requirement that an artist can transfer to a canvas visual information gathered by sight and stored in memory, the case of painting from memory is not substantially different from the case of observational drawing—except, of course, for the distortions possibly caused by the malfunctioning or limits of the artist's memory. A picture drawn or painted from memory can therefore serve as a transparent visual medium that transmits to the perceiver the visual properties of the remembered object.

[6] Colored panes of glass can affect the colors of the object perceived. To handle this case, it is possible to argue either that colored glass is not perfectly transparent or that perceiving objects through colored glass gives us access to different, but real, colors (Mizrahi, 2010).

5.2.3. Painting Non-Existents and Non-Particulars

The difficult case for a transparency account of pictures is, of course, the case of pictures that depict non-existents. Because there are no unicorns or dragons, pictures of unicorns and dragons do not present unicorns and dragons on the basis of a transparent relation to unicorns or dragons.

Another problem for the transparency approach to depiction is presented by generic pictures. Not all pictures seem to depict particulars. The shape of a pedestrian on a road sign, for example, does not depict a particular person. In contrast with face-to-face perception that relates perceivers and particulars, it seems possible for pictures to depict something without depicting something in particular. To argue, as I did, that we directly perceive visual features of depicted objects seems therefore problematic since non-particulars do not have visual features.

Should we then retreat and admit that the transparency account of pictures cannot work in this particular case, since it cannot explain pictures of non-existents and non-particulars?

I believe we should not. Realistic pictures of non-existent and non-particular objects, like all realistic pictures, are shaped and constrained by reality in ways as demanding as any of those already described. Depicting dragons depends on reality in the same sense that depicting any existing animal, such as a horse or an elephant, depends on reality. When painting a horse, artists rely on the appearance of real horses. Even when artists do not paint a particular real horse, they nonetheless depict visual properties of certain real horses. As explained above, pictures transmit visual properties of objects. The bearer of these visual properties can be a single object, such as when the hand of the painter transfers to the canvas the visual properties of the model posing in the studio or when the photographer captures through the lens of a camera the profusion of details and motifs belonging to a baroque Sicilian church. But the bearers of the visual properties transmitted by a picture can also be numerous and diverse. This is the case, for example, in Tiepolo's painting of Alexander's famous taming of Bucephalus. Although the visual properties of Bucephalus as depicted by Tiepolo are probably not derived exclusively from a single horse perceived or remembered by Tiepolo, these visual properties belong, I contend, to particular horses. According to the transparency account of pictures proposed above, regardless of whether a handmade picture depicts an object the artist has perceived face-to-face, remembered, or perceived through another picture, the picture transmits visual properties of the external world to the perceiver. Now, the painter who wants to depict a horse, but not necessarily a particular horse must rely on his or her acquaintance with the visual appearances of particular horses nonetheless. The kind of perceptual knowledge or recognitional abilities necessary to paint horses is therefore grounded in the artist's perceptual contact with particular horses. Although the painter is not compelled to transfer to the canvas the visual appearance of a particular horse, painting a horse that looks like a horse requires the artist to

assemble on the canvas some visual properties characteristic of horses' appearances.[7] Then, contrary to what is often assumed, when drawing a horse, the artist does not draw mere lines or shapes but literally draws visual properties of horses, such as their silhouette, their proportions, the relative positions of their constitutive parts, etc. This is true even in the case of a minimalist sketch. As we have seen, to be able to transmit visual characteristics of a horse to a perceiver, a picture must be shaped by visual properties of real horses.

5.2.4. Painting Ficta

Realistic pictures can depict fictive objects, like unicorns and dragons. I contend that a depiction of fictive objects, like any depiction of existing objects, depends on real appearances. Although fictive objects do not exist, the depiction of fictive objects nonetheless relies on how things appear in the external world. The more realistic a picture is, the stronger is this dependency. Consider the general constraints imposed by optical laws. Realist pictures obey these laws and accurately depict the way objects and materials interact with light.[8] Regardless of whether a painting is the work of a 17th-century Dutch master or a 19th-century French impressionist, it will be realistic only if it captures how light affects the different parts of the scene depicted. It does not matter whether a painting pictures a unicorn, Lisa Gherardini, or a peaceful seascape; to be realistic, a picture must accurately convey the distribution of light in the environment, the shapes and colors of proper and cast shadows, the position-dependent intensity of light, the shapes and materials of objects, etc. But a realistic painting also contains extensive information about the specificities of each object constituting the depicted scene. For example, to portray a young woman—remembered or imagined—a painter must be able to convey the particular appearances of skin and hair and therefore to transmit the visual properties of hair and skin stored in memory.[9]

According to Leonardo, an early friend of the sort of view defended here, painting fictive objects is not different from painting existing objects, because both rely on the same constraints imposed by reality. A painter of fictive objects

[7] A myth about Zeuxis, one of the greatest of Greek painters renowned for his realistic paintings, which is related by Cicero and Pliny, illustrates nicely this idea. The story goes that Zeuxis, when commissioned to paint the portrait of Helen of Troy for the temple of Croton, did not select one model among the most beautiful maids of Croton, but instead assembled and combined the features of five different maids because "he did not think that he could find all the component parts of perfect beauty in one person only" (Cicero, 1949).

[8] Not all realist pictures depict optical and lighting properties, but when they do, to be realistic, they must not transgress optical laws. For a nice survey of the painters' errors in depicting shadows (Casati, Cavanagh, 2023).

[9] Consider for contrast, the unrealistic appearance of Giovanna Tornabuoni in Ghirlandaio's portrait whose "flesh is presented as somewhat wooden and the hair as artificially, almost metallically, stiff" (Brown, 2010, p. 215).

has only the relative freedom of bringing visual properties that belong to different real-world objects into relation with one another on the canvas. In the chapter *How to Make an Imaginary Animal Appear Natural*, Leonardo writes:

> It is evident that it will be impossible to invent any animal without giving it members, and these members must individually resemble those of some known animal.
>
> If you wish, therefore, to make a chimera, or imaginary animal, appear natural (let us suppose a serpent); take the head of a mastiff, the eyes of a cat, the ears of a porcupine, the mouth of a hare, the brows of a lion, the temples of an old cock, and the neck of a sea tortoise. (Da Vinci, 1961, Chapter CCCLIII)

As far as depiction and realism is concerned, it is the world that steers the hand of the painter. The painter's freedom is to play with these constraints or to infringe them at the expense of realism. But the constraints that constitutively shape a realistic picture always depend on the world as it is and not on the painter's will.

6. The Innocence of the Eye

Goodman and Gombrich are right to criticize Ruskin for holding an impoverished account of vision which reduces our visual experiences to an awareness of "flat stains of colour", failing therefore to acknowledge the complexity of visual perception of coloured objects in space. The eye is never innocent according to Gombrich because "we do not observe the appearance of colour patches and then proceed to interpret their meaning […], to see is to see 'something out there'" (Gombrich, 1961, p. 260). Furthermore, painting and appreciating paintings are by no means "innocent", necessitating thorough training and education.

However, I contend that there is something correct in Ruskin's remark that figurative "painting depends on our recovery of what might be called the innocence of the eye" (1856, p. 22) and that visual experiences of children and painters are of the same nature. Hence, insofar as face-to-face perception is considered innocent, so too should pictorial perception be considered innocent. In contrast to explanations that describe pictorial perception as requiring a specific kind of perception or psychological attitude towards handmade pictures, the transparency theory of depiction attributes the special visual contact with depicted objects and properties to the inherent nature of the pictures themselves, rather than to the mental state of their viewers.

The perception of Piazza San Marco thanks to a Canaletto painting is made possible in the same sort of way as the perception of Mars is made possible by a telescope. And neither situation necessitates anything beyond the observer's usual perceptual capabilities. In both instances, it is the picture's and the telescope's proper ability to convey the visual information carried in light that ena-

ble the perceivers to see depicted and distant objects—no special psychological dispositions toward the picture or the telescope are needed from the perceivers.[10]

Pictorial perception is, then, not so much "innocent" as "naïve" in the sense used by naïve realists to stress the fact that perceived objects and their properties are the only constituents of perceptual experience. The transparency account of depiction claims that pictorial perception is constituted by what is depicted. It is the qualitative features of the depicted objects only that shape the visual experience of the observer. Neither the qualitative features of the medium itself—the painting—nor the observer's sensations contribute to this.[11]

Although a picture carries visual information about what it depicts, the picture itself is transparent and its own visual properties remain unseen. I contend indeed that denying "that we really see the picture surface" is not "an odd and somewhat desperate view" (Nanay, 2018, p. 164), but that it is rather the only view that can free pictorial perception from the limits of the canvas and explain how pictures disclose visual properties of something external to the picture itself.

However, the fact that pictorial seeing involves a direct experience of the visual properties of the objects depicted does not exclude the possibility of perceiving the properties of the physical painting itself, such as the texture of the canvas and its colours. What the transparency account claims however is that seeing Mona Lisa and seeing the canvas on which Leonardo has painted his model are two different and incompatible experiences. Observers can alternate between these experiences, but they can never enjoy them simultaneously. Although pictorial seeing and ordinary seeing are not ontologically different, they both give

[10] Face-to-face perception and perception through media such as mirrors, telescopes, or pictures are of the same nature: the observer's visual experience is shaped by the qualitative properties of the perceived object. Neither the properties of the medium itself (e.g., the mirror, telescope, or painting) nor the observer's sensations contribute to this experience. However, these experiences differ in how vision coordinates with the motor system and other sensory modalities. For example, vision in a mirror requires modified perceptual-motor coordination compared to face-to-face perception. These differences manifest at a metaperceptual level, where control-oriented monitoring underpins our awareness of our own perceptual processes. Moreover, perceptual experiences vary in the way they appear—whether they seem real, immediate, or familiar. Beyond their visual appearance, these experiences establish a specific relationship between the perceiver and the object, influencing how the perceiver is disposed to interact with it (Mizrahi, 2019). This framework is explored in Section 7.2 of the current paper to explain why face-to-face and pictorial perception, while similar in conveying visual content, exhibit distinct phenomenological characteristics.

[11] However, most pictures do not only depict. And it is often the interplay between the figurative and non-figurative elements in a picture that causes aesthetic experiences and reveals the artist special style (Section 8 of the current paper). This paper is strictly limited to depiction and does not therefore engage with these phenomena and the fascinating questions about aesthetics and art they suggest (for the imperceptibility of perceptual media, see Mizrahi, 2018).

access to a different portion of the world.[12] Pictorial perception is no different in this respect from the perception obtained through a prosthetic device. If you look through a telescope, microscope or periscope, you gain access to a portion of the world that is inaccessible to the naked eye, but at the same time you lose the ability to simultaneously perceive the objects around you. Looking into a painting is not different in this respect. It gives access to visual properties of depicted objects and properties, but it prevents observers from seeing the properties of the canvas lying just before their eyes. (Briscoe, 2016, p. 68–69; Mizrahi, 2021, p. 8–9; Newall, 2015, p. 144)

Having sketched the outlines of a transparency account of depiction, I will now flesh it out by comparing it to alternative views and addressing some challenges.

7. Alternative Accounts

7.1. The Resemblance View

Resemblance views of depiction hold that depiction depends on a relationship of resemblance between the picture and the depicted object. Resemblance views come in many flavors and differ in various ways. Due to space limitation, I limit the discussion to Hyman's and Briscoe's accounts.

Hyman proposes that for a picture to depict an object *O*, the picture's surface depicting *O* must have the same occlusion shape and the same aperture colors as *O*. According to Hyman, occlusion shapes, which are the shapes projected from objects onto an intersecting plane along a specific line of sight, explain the resemblance between pictures and depicted objects while remaining immune to subjectivity. Although an occlusion shape is perspectival, in the sense that it is relative to a particular viewpoint, Hyman argues that it "is not merely a feature of the viewer's experience. It belongs to optics, not psychology" (2015, p. 202). Although an occlusion shape is indeed not subjective, Hyman's view entails that the role of occlusion shapes is akin to the role played by appearances or retinal images in subjectivist accounts: they multiply the objects perceived in order to reconcile incompatible apparent properties. Thus, a circular coin perceived in a painting does not only look circular, it also looks elliptical:

> […] the face of the coin is really circular and its occlusion shape, relative to an oblique line of sight, is really elliptical. And there is no reason why it should not look as it really is in both respects, which by and large it does. (Hyman, 2006, p. 79)

[12] An allusion to this point is to be found in Magritte's *La condition humaine* series where, unlike more usual situations, the scene depicted by a painting matches perfectly what lies behind it.

As stressed by Hyman, the concept of an occlusion shape is a concept belonging to geometrical optics which is designed to capture the shape projected from an object to an intersecting plane along a given light of sight. Thus, occlusion shapes and intersecting planes are in Hyman's account purely geometrical properties. They are neither actual, nor particular. It is therefore unclear how they can be perceived. Moreover, resemblance between occlusion shapes may perhaps explain why two objects are similar or are perceived to be similar, but it seems to be of little help when it comes to explaining why one object depicts another object.

The role of occlusion shapes and projection is very different in the framework prescribed by the transparency account of depiction. Some occlusion shapes and projections are indeed actual and particular and can therefore serve as mediators. This is the case for example of cast shadows. The particular shape of a cast shadow is indeed externally conditioned by the shape of an opaque object *O* which obstructs the passage of light. Unlike the object *O*, which structures the light according to its own shape, shadows do not have a proper shape, since their shape depends at any time on the shape of *O*. A shadow, being thus externally conditioned by *O*, transmits the shape of *O*.

The same line of thought applies to photographs and handmade pictures. When the chromatic discontinuities on a photographic paper or a canvas are externally conditioned by some external objects, these chromatic discontinuities do not belong to the paper or the canvas, but rather to the scene they mediate. Although we can see the stroke on the paper as a stroke and a region of a wall as being shaded, the unitary shape exhibited by the picture and the shadow does not belong to the paper or the wall, but rather to the external objects which determine the unity of their shape.

Unlike Hyman's view, the transparency account of depiction does not therefore attribute to a perceived circular coin an additional elliptical occlusion shape, but rather explain why a particular elliptical projection on a paper or a wall can transmit the circular shape of a coin.[13]

[13] The resemblance view and the transparency view diverge in their accounts of how visual properties are instantiated in a picture. The transparency view posits that a medium instantiates visible features in a fundamentally different way than a visible object. Rather than replicating the visible properties of a depicted object—which would render the medium itself visible—the medium serves as a conduit, transmitting those properties without embodying them (see Burnyeat, 1995; Caston, 2020; Johansen, 1997 for the distinction between replication and transmission). This distinction helps explain why Heider differentiates between genuine and spurious unities when describing the changes undergone by a medium. Although a medium can acquire a "unitary form" from the object it transmits, the unity it displays is "spurious", because this structure is entirely dependent on the causal influence of the object. The object's form is causally transmitted; the medium itself remains formless or unstructured. This clarifies why certain processes function as mediators. As Heider notes:

The transparency account of depiction shares important features with Briscoe's deep resemblance theory. For Briscoe, pictorial and face-to-face perception are of the same explanatory kind, because pictures display visual properties that elicit the same perceptual mechanism as face-to-face perception:

> When you have an experience as of a S-shaped object in pictorial space, the very same discriminatory, selective capacity is triggered by the light reaching your eye as would be triggered by the light reflected from a S-shaped object seen face-to-face. (Briscoe, 2016, p. 53)

According to Briscoe, depiction is not representational but substitutive in the sense that pictures "present viewers with nonrepresentational substitutes or surrogates" (2016, p. 66) that resemble the depicted object. A picture depicts an object *O* in virtue of the visible attributes of a virtual model *M* perceived in the picture and not in virtue of the viewer's capacity to correctly interpret the visible marks on the picture's surface. Like the transparency approach to depiction proposed here, Briscoe's deep resemblance theory breaks with a widely held view of depiction according to which depiction is representational and anchored in the way we perceive the pictorial surface.

However, Briscoe's theory differs from my account by rejecting the transparency of pictures and by employing similarity relations to explain depiction. According to Briscoe, although we see visual properties in pictures directly, these properties are not the properties of the objects depicted by the pictures. These properties belong to virtual models that "share certain visual appearance properties with" the objects they depict (Briscoe, 2016, p. 46). Although Briscoe claims that the proper object of pictorial experience is a virtual model and not the depicted object itself, he concedes that "even if pictures do not exhibit what we could call subject transparency, they often exhibit property transparency" (2016, pp. 73–74).

Like Briscoe's account, the transparency account I defend here is presentational as opposed to representational, but it avoids the cost of introducing virtual models, because it maintains that only the depicted objects themselves are perceived. Like Briscoe, I maintain that understanding pictures is nothing like interpreting signs or visual cues on a surface. But I deny, contra Briscoe, that pictures depict objects "by presenting virtual models of objects and scenes in pictorial space" (Briscoe, 2016, p. 46). Pictures present visual properties exhibited by the external world itself and therefore exhibit a deep resemblance with their depicted objects in a trivial sense. Indeed, nothing resembles the depicted object more than the depicted object itself.

> The light rays which meet the eyes are messengers from the object and represent it. This representation of one entity by another is brought about by the close coordination between the two. The mediator processes which meet our sense organs are spurious units; they have unitary form not because of their own character but because they are coordinated to objects. (Heider, 1959, p. 6)

7.2. The Illusion Theory and the Twofold View

The transparency account of depiction defended here shares important features with Gombrich's view. In *Art and Illusion* (1960), Gombrich claims that pictorial and face-to-face perception are of the same nature. Contrary to the twofold account of pictorial perception, Gombrich's account of pictorial perception does not involve the perception of the picture's physical surface features. What makes a picture depictive is it capacity to cause in us a "visual experience of a kind that we know from our encounters with reality" (1982, p. 181). Pictures produce a kind of illusion in the spectators since, in looking at a picture, they perceive objects which are not there. Although most pictures are not deceptive in the sense that "we rarely get into situations in which the eye is actually deceived" (1960, p. 246), sometimes they are. This is the case of *trompe l'oeil* paintings which "fool the eye" and deceive the spectators by making them believe that the object depicted is really present in front of them. For Gombrich, the existence of *trompe-l'oeil* confirms the identical nature of pictorial and face-to-face perception, since perceiving some pictures can cause the spectators to believe they are perceiving the depicted objects.

Wollheim presents a contrasting viewpoint in arguing that pictorial perception possesses a distinctive phenomenology that prevents spectators from perceiving depicted objects as physically present. In his analysis, when individuals look at pictures, they simultaneously apprehend both the two-dimensional surface and the depicted objects. Wollheim identifies this dual awareness as constitutive of pictorial experience. Consequently, he contends that *trompe l'oeil* paintings do not qualify as authentic pictures because they fail to elicit the twofold perceptual experience that genuine pictures cause in viewers.

Who is right? Gombrich or Wollheim? Are *trompe l'oeil* paintings genuine pictures? If not, what are they? If pictures are of the same nature as face-to-face perception, why are we not fooled by other pictures too? As rightly pointed by Wollheim, any theory of depiction must give an account

> of what is distinctive phenomenologically, and not just causally, about seeing something or someone in a representation. It tells us what is experientially different about, for example, seeing Henry VIII in Holbein's portrait, as opposed to seeing him face to face. (Wollheim, 1980, p. 143)

So, why is the phenomenology of pictorial seeing different from face-to-face perception if they are experiences of the same kind?

The transparency of depiction gives an original answer to these different questions by holding that figurative paintings transmit real visual properties to the perceivers. In accordance with this view, pictures are not inherently deceptive, nor are they fundamentally different from face-to-face perception; rather, they serve as real sources of information by conveying visual content that might not be directly accessible to the observer otherwise. However, under certain

circumstances, as with *trompe l'oeil* paintings, pictures can indeed be deceptive by causing in the perceiver an inappropriate feeling of presence.

Unlike Gombrich, who attributes to pictures the capacity to cause quasi-illusions in perceivers and Wollheim, who attributes the special phenomenology of pictorial perception to its particular twofold nature, I argue that the special phenomenology of perceiving pictures is not perceptual but affective. Following Dokic (2012), I rely on the sense of presence to ground the contrast between the phenomenology of pictorial and face-to-face experiences.

Visual perception is not limited to its sensory content. The tomato on the kitchen counter perceived by Sam does not only appear red and round, it also appears real, actual, immediate or familiar. On top of the looks or appearances they reveal, perceptual experiences present a particular relation to their intentional objects which anchors the way the perceiver is disposed to interact with the perceived object. One way to interpret the distinctive phenomenological features associated with the perceptual consciousness of bodily presence, familiarity or absence is to conceive these experiences as constituted by various kinds of metaperceptual feelings "which reflect a specific kind of affective experience caused by subpersonal monitoring of (perceptual) processes" (Dokic, Martin, 2013, p. 118). What distinguishes Sam's visual experience of the tomato in front of him and Maria's experience of the tomato depicted in a painting is not their intentional properties, but rather the occurrent and non-occurrent feeling of presence manifested in these experiences. As summarized by Dokic: "In a nutshell, what is specific to pictorial experience is that it involves the perception of a worldly partial appearance which is unaccompanied by any sense of the presence of what it is an appearance of" (Dokic, 2012, p. 404).

The metaperceptual approach to the sense of presence accounts for the fact that the phenomenology of two perceptual experiences can be different without having to endorse any difference between the intentional properties of the visual experiences. It is therefore possible to hold, contra Gombrich, that pictorial experiences are not illusory and that they are constituted by real visual properties and, contra Wollheim, that the phenomenological difference between pictorial and face-to-face experiences is not perceptual.

8. Conclusion: A Realist Approach to Pictorial Realism

According to the view defended here, properly understood, realism is not a system, movement, or style. Realism depends not on the artists but on the pictures they create.

A picture can be realistic only if it conveys by transparency visual properties of real objects. Paintings, and images in general, are the proper bearers of pictorial realism. According to this view, a style, system, or movement can be described as realist only in virtue of the paintings or other pictures it includes.

Like many visual properties, transparency (or opacity) exists on a continuum. Unlike perfectly transparent objects—which are invisible—a translucent object,

such as frosted glass or fine fabric, remains partially transparent while still being perceptible. Transparency and visibility are, in this sense, opposite qualities: the more transparent an object is, the less visible it is, and vice versa. An object can thus be both visible and transparent only insofar as it is neither fully transparent nor fully visible (cf. Mizrahi, 2018).

From this perspective, a painting's realism can be understood as its degree of transparency. The more a painter intervenes in the visual properties of a scene—through stylistic or expressive techniques—the less the work is transparent and adheres to realism. Yet this very intervention highlights the painter's presence and the materiality of the painting itself.[14]

This tension between realism and expressivity recurs throughout art history. Painters draw attention not only to the scene depicted but also to the canvas as an object and to the act of painting, rather than treating it as a mere window onto reality. Vincent van Gogh, for instance, states he privileges expressive freedom over exact depiction what he expresses in a letter to his brother Theo written in Arlen on 18 August 1888: "Because instead of trying to render exactly what I have before my eyes, I use colour more arbitrarily in order to express myself forcefully" (van Gogh, 1888).

Schiff, on his part, theorizes this in terms of transparency and opacity:

> [T]ransparency converts a picture surface into an immaterial plane—according to the usual metaphor, a window—that renders visible what lies beyond it, the world of traditional pictorial representation […]. For the modernist, self-expression becomes most evident when the normative look of represented objects is transformed by the material substance of paint applied to a surface […], every picture may seem to possess both transparent and opaque features. Obviously, transparency facilitates vision, while opacity impedes vision's course. (Schiff, 1991, p. 131)

Similarly, Pepperell notes the tension between materiality and representation:

> Turner's Rain, Steam, Speed (National Gallery, London, 1844) presents us with a mass of vigorously applied paint, the handling of which pronounces its material properties. We also see a locomotive engine pulling carriages across the Maidenhead Railway Bridge through heavy rain. The paint here functions both as matter spread over a surface and as sky, brick, steam, metal, water, clouds, and fields […], the materiality of the surface "interferes" with our recognition of the forms. (Pepperell, 2015, p. 2)

Greenberg situates this historically, contrasting the Old Masters' concealment of the medium with Modernism's openness:

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[14] I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer of this journal for prompting me to clarify this point further.

> Realistic, naturalistic art had dissembled the medium, using art to conceal art; Modernism used art to call attention to art […]. Under Modernism, these same limitations came to be regarded as positive factors, and were acknowledged openly. Manet's art became the first Modernist pictures by virtue of the frankness with which they declared the flat surfaces on which they were painted. (Greenberg, 1965/1982, p. 6)

Although realist paintings are always constrained by the visual properties of the external world, the artist decides which properties to transmit through the canvas or another medium. Figurative pictures vary in realism depending on what they choose to convey. Whether working within or reacting against tradition, artists always select which visual features of depicted objects to emphasize. Warhol's screen prints (e.g., the *Marilyn* series) display colours incompatible with reality; early Cubist paintings present spatial layouts combining multiple viewpoints in "impossible" ways; stick figures ignore most visual constraints, retaining only basic shapes and proportions.

Through these choices, figurative pictures may more or less resemble direct visual experience, making them more or less realistic. Regardless of degree, however, all pictures remain partly shaped by the external world, independent of the artist's intentions. Pictorial realism is thus polymorphous, its diversity rooted both in the richness of the visual world and in the varied ways artists engage with it.

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