Kristóf Nyíri:

Pictorial Truth

0. Introduction

The concept of pictorial truth refers, first of all, to truth in the sense of seeing the world as it really is. We speak of pictures – sights, views – opening up before us. In the spirit of common-sense realism I will argue, in the first section of the paper, that those pictures very much tend to be veridical. In the second section I will assume that we can also speak of pictorial truth in the sense of correct depiction, that is, resemblance. Of course pictures – drawings, paintings, photographs – resemble the objects they depict in a limited manner only; however, as in particular Arnheim and Gombrich have shown, resemblance in the sense of structural equivalence, and equivalence in the form of possible response, can certainly obtain: Goodman's extreme conventionalism and relativism are misguided. Bringing up the problem of correct depiction I will touch on children's drawings on the one hand, and the issue of linear perspective on the other. – Now while I take the notion of pictorial truth to be covering veracity also in the sense that images can correctly state *facts*, in the third section I will argue that *static* images – *single* static images – can only achieve this if they are complemented by captions. Statements can be made with a sequence of images (in this case captions need not be necessarily relied on), or indeed with moving images. One should however note that the term "statement" is here used in a transposed mode of speech, as it were metaphorically. Metaphor is the topic of the fourth section of the paper: I side with the view that the metaphors used in everyday thinking and in science express essential aspects of reality – they are literally true. However, I stress that understanding a metaphor essentially involves experiencing mental images. In the fifth section I conclude by emphasizing that not only is it possible to convey truths via images, but also that in a fundamental sense it is *only* via images that truths can be conveyed at all.

1. The World Viewed

The above section title is borrowed from Cavell.[1] In his epilogue to the enlarged edition Cavell writes of "a more or less vague and pervasive intellectual fashion, apparently sanctioned by the history of epistemology and the rise of modern science, according to which we never really, and never really can, see reality as it is", of "a general dismissal of reality" that "depends upon theories (of knowledge, of science, of art, of reality, of

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[1] Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film,* enlarged edition, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979.

realism) whose power to convince is hardly greater than reality's own", and mentions Heidegger and Wittgenstein as philosophers influencing his resistance to anti-realist skepticism.[2] When referring to the former, Cavell has the work *Being and Time*[3] in mind. I myself would add here a reference to Heidegger's *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*,[4] a book that provides, in the span of a few pages, some brilliant answers to the fundamental questions of pictorial representation.[5] Heidegger discusses the image in the sense of likeness ("copy", in particular the photograph), but above all he wants to take the expression "image" in its "most original sense", "according to which we say that the landscape presents a beautiful 'image' (look)".[6] As to Wittgenstein, a focused text by him on the issue of realism and visual perception is the so-called Part II of his *Philosophische Untersuchungen*,[7] for details see my paper "Wittgenstein as a Common-Sense Realist"[8]. And very unequivocal is a remark he jotted down in 1950: "Being and seeming may, of course, be independent of one another in exceptional cases, but that doesn't make them logically independent; the language-game does not reside in the exception."[9]

Mainstream philosophical-psychological theory on visual perception today does not lean towards realism. We are being told that what is mirrored on the retina at any given moment is very different from what one, as it were, sees; what one actually sees, today's mainstream theory concludes, is a mental construct rather than an aspect of some unique objective reality. I believe this conclusion is wrong. I side with, say, Rudolf Arnheim and the realist Gestalt tradition he represents; and with Ernst Gombrich and his relentless opposition to relativism. As Arnheim puts it in a memorable passage: human cognition reflects "the objective structure of physical reality as conveyed to the mind through the senses. To this objective structure art, science, and the common sense of practical life strive to do justice. In emphasizing the objective conditions of reality, I try to counteract the destructive effects of philosophical relativism."[10] Or as Gombrich wrote in a seldom-quoted paper: "there is a limit to perceptual relativism. What looks like a leaf to modern European must also have looked like a leaf in fairly distant geological epochs."[11]

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 165.
[3] Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, first published as vol. VIII of *Jahrbuch für Phänomenologie und phänomenologische Forschung*, Halle a. S.: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1927. English translation: *Being and Time*, transl. by John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1962.
[4] Martin Heidegger, *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik*, Bonn: Friedrich Cohen, 1929. English translation: *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, transl. by Richard Taft, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997.
[5] I touch on this briefly in my volume *Meaning and Motoricity: Essays on Image and Time*, Frankfurt/M.: Peter Lang Edition, 2014, pp. 18 f.
[6] Heidegger, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, p. 64.
[7] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), transl. by G. E. M. Anscombe, 2nd edition, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958.
[8] *Conceptus*, vol. 42, issue 101–102 (2017), pp. 51–65.
[9] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Colour*, ed. by G. E. M. Anscombe, transl. by Linda L. McAlister and Margarete Schättle, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977, p. 29.
[10] Rudolf Arnheim, *New Essays on the Psychology of Art*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1986, p. xi.
[11] E. H. Gombrich, "Illusion and Art", in R. L. Gregory – E. H. Gombrich (eds.), *Illusion in Nature and Art*, London: Duckworth, 1973, pp. 193–243, this passage on p. 200.

2. Correct Depiction

Modern common-sense thinking is fundamentally realist. However, contemporary common sense faces a major problem when it comes to the specific issue of children's drawings. In drawings, common sense today expects the rules of naturalism and linear perspective to obtain. Children's drawings of course do not conform to those rules. Hence common sense, as also most of the earlier literature on children's drawings, regards these attempts at representation as deficient. By contrast, more recent literature, mainly under the influence of Rudolf Arnheim, emphasizes the creativity of children's drawings,[12] claiming, too, that realism has many varieties, and that children's drawings, just like modern art and non-Western art, can display a degree of realism which drawings observing the rules of linear perspective often cannot. Still, it is possible to maintain that naturalism and linear perspective should be regarded as essential cognitive and cultural achievements. Here Arnheim and Gombrich, though both epistemological realists, have diverging views.

Gombrich coins a formula he calls the "eye-witness principle". According to this principle, "perspective enables us to eliminate from our representation anything which could not be seen from one particular vantage point.[13] So "if you want to follow the programme of the eye-witness principle of not including in your picture anything that is not visible from a given point, you can and indeed you must stick to the method of central perspective which the camera has taken over from the painter". Perspectival drawings/paintings enhance visual credibility, they are experienced as visual truths, creating a "feeling of participation". Gombrich acknowledges and indeed stresses that "perspective cannot and need not claim to represent the world 'as we see it' ";[14] the crucial point he makes is that perspectival representation, and in particular the photograph, provide objective information in a way a non-perspectival hand-made image definitely does not.[15]

3. The Moving Image

As I indicated above by way of introduction, single static images can plausibly conjure up a scene, or correctly depict a given view, but they trivially cannot convey what the state of affairs is they show; they cannot convey statements. In Wittgenstein's famous formulation: "Imagine a picture representing a boxer in a particular stance. Now, this picture can be used to tell someone how he should stand, should hold himself; or how he should not hold himself; or how a particular man did stand in such-and-such a place; and so on."[16] The picture of course becomes unequivocal once it is complemented by a caption. But it can be disambiguated also by making it into an item in a series of pictures – a series can tell the story a single image cannot. Comics typically combine picture sequence with bits of text – speech bubbles. Other conventional graphic

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[12] Cf. esp. Claire Golomb, *The Child's Creation of a Pictorial World*, 2nd ed., Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004.

[13] E. H. Gombrich, "Standards of Truth: The Arrested Image and the Moving Eye", in W. J. T. Mitchell (ed.), *The Language of Images*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980, pp. 181–217, this passage on p. 193.

[14] *Ibid.*, pp. 197, 202, 209.

[15] Cf. *ibid.*, p. 211.

[16] *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 11e.

elements – for instance speed lines – are also added. And note how easily even very young children understand these conventions. It can be shown how such conventions actually emerge from real visual phenomena.[17]

Animated picture sequences are especially well suited to convey unambiguous narratives. And film and video – all possibilities of technical manipulation notwithstanding – are the ultimate carriers of mediated pictorial truth. Let me just come back to Cavell. Asking the question "What is film?", he begins to formulate an answer by quoting two theorists he finds particularly important: "Erwin Panofsky puts it this way: 'The medium of the movies is physical reality as such.' Andre Bazin emphasizes essentially this idea many times and many ways: at one point he says, 'Cinema is committed to communicate only by way of what is real.'"[18]

4. Image and Metaphor

In his introduction to the volume *Philosophical Perspectives on Metaphor*, the editor quotes the following passage from the famous essay "On Truth and Falsity in Their Ultramoral Sense" by Friedrich Nietzsche: "A nerve stimulus, first transformed in a percept! First metaphor! The percept again copied into a sound! Second metaphor!"[19] In the original German it is the word "Bild" – picture, image – that stands for "percept". Transposed meaning, Nietzsche suggests, is not a primarily linguistic phenomenon. A bodily feeling might give rise to an inner visual image, which in turn might become translated into a verbal formula. Nietzsche's essay was published posthumously in the early 1900s; I believe to detect a faint echo of it in Titchener's hypothesis that words are grounded in kinaesthetic images.[20] Titchener of course strongly influenced Arnheim. Significantly, there is an early paper by the latter in which he writes: "we speak without hesitation of a 'soft tune', thus applying a quality of touch to sounds, or of a 'cold color', thus relating temperature to an optical phenomenon. … words like 'cold', 'sharp', 'high', 'dark' have partially lost their specific perceptual connotation for us… this linguistic phenomenon itself bears witness to the fact that it is natural for man to rely on qualities that different senses have in common. These similarities … provide the bases of metaphoric speech in poetry."[21]

In the same paper Arnheim refers to Murry[22] and to Brown[23]. "Metaphor", Murry wrote, "is as ultimate as speech itself, and speech as ultimate as thought." Quoting a familiar metaphor, Murry stressed that that metaphor was *necessary*, "because we find

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[17] On how e.g. speed lines arise, see John M. Kennedy, "Metaphor in Pictures", *Perception* 11 (1982), pp. 589–605, on this particular issue cf. pp. 591–593.

[18] Cavell, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

[19] Mark Johnson, "Introduction: Metaphor in the Philosophical Tradition", in Mark Johnson (ed.), *Philosophical Perspectives on Metaphor*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981, pp. 3–47, this quote on p. 15.

[20] Edward Bradford Titchener, *Lectures on the Experimental Psychology of the Thought-Processes*, New York: Macmillan, 1909, see esp. pp. 176 f.

[21] Rudolf Arnheim, "Abstract Language and the Metaphor" (1948), in Arnheim, *Toward a Psychology of Art: Collected Essays*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966, pp. 266–282, this passage on p. 275.

[22] John Middletown Murry, "Metaphor" (1927), in Murry, *Countries of the Mind: Essays in Literary Criticism*, second series, London: Humphrey Milford / Oxford University Press, 1931, pp. 1–16.

[23] Stephen J. Brown, S.J., *The World of Imagery: Metaphor and Kindred Imagery*, London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1927.

that there is no way of saying what we want to say … save by this metaphor or one of its variations", there is an "absence of genuine alternatives", indeed the quality here conveyed "could not have been perceived without the metaphor". Thus "metaphor appears as the instinctive and necessary act of the mind exploring reality and ordering experience. It is the means by whieh the less familiar is assimilated to the more familiar, the unknown to the known". To "attempt a fundamental examination of metaphor would be nothing less than an investigation of the genesis of thought itself". Through an apt new metaphor, we discern "resemblances between the unknown and the known".[24] What Murry next wants to argue for is that there is merely "a formal difference between metaphor and simile and image", "metaphor is compressed simile". However, he points out, not every image is a "visual image"; we should reject "the suggestion that the image is solely or even predominandy visual". "The image may be visual, may be auditory, may refer back to any primary physical experience" – Murry here specifically mentions those "metaphors which describe the process of thought itself as a grasping or apprehension".[25] Partly under the influence of Murry, but assembling a great many other sources, too, Brown by contrast indeed focuses on the role of the visuual/pictorial. As he puts it, metaphor amounts to an "imported image coming vividly before our mental vision, while the notion which is the real subject of the discourse momentarily fades into the background, and is seen only through the image".[26] To recall Nietzsche: specific mental images can be construed as visual metaphors, with those images standing for physical/motor responses to physical stimuli. Verbal metaphors on their part essentially rely on mental images. It is this latter insight Brown is clearly a proponent of.

5. Word and Image

Another passage by Brown takes me to the end of this paper. "The use of metaphor ... involves no sacrifice of truth. But I think we may go further and say that it may express a portion, or at least an aspect, of the truth which would not otherwise find expression."[27] I believe metaphor, when functioning as metaphor, functions because it conjures up images. Metaphoric language cannot be reduced to non-metaphoric language because the visual foundations of thinking actually cannot be eliminated. Sacrificing images would amount to sacrifice truth. As I have suggested by way of introduction, it is the image that serves as the fundamental vehicle of truth. And not only is it the case that, ultimately, only images can convey truths; I would go further and say that in a sense images cannot be but veridical. Of course there are fictitious paintings, and of course there are manipulated photographs (and films and videos, as I have noted in sect. 3 above). But even these are made up of visual segments that reflect elements of reality. As to photography, the most dramatic formulations here are probably those by Roland Barthes.[28] The photograph, writes Barthes, attests that "what I see has indeed existed", photography "offers an immediate presence to the world". "No writing", Barthes goes on, "can give me this certainty. It is the misfortune … of language not to be able to

[24] Murry, *Countries of the Mind*, pp. 1 f.
[25] *Ibid.*, pp. 3 f.
[26] Brown, *The World of Imagery,* p. 50.
[27] *Ibid.*, p. 73.
[28] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, transl. by Richard Howard, New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1981.

authenticate itself." Barthes sides with the "realists", of whom, he writes, he is one and of whom he was already one when he asserted that the photograph was "an image without code".[29] An image without code – is that not a felicitous formula for the idea of pictorial truth?[30]

[29] *Ibid.*, pp. 82, 84, 85, 88.

[30] I am indebted to Petra Aczél, Júlia Sipos and Eszter Deli. On the occasion of one of the very first Visual Learning Lab monthly research seminars, in her talk "Visual Rhetoric" (May 5, 2010, see http://vll.mpt.bme.hu), Aczél referred to Barthes and the idea of uncoded iconic messages. Almost exactly six years later, on Apr. 6, 2016, both Sipos and Deli brought up in their VLL talks the topic Barthes on the veracity of photographs, these two latter papers have been published as Júlia Sipos – Eszter Deli, "Képi reprezentáció és hitelesség a 21. századi médiatartalom előállításában / Új ecset, új vászon: A modern képkorszak lehetőségei és kihívásai", in András Benedek – Kristóf Nyíri (eds.), *Visual Learning Lab Papers* 2016/1, Budapest: BME GTK Műszaki Pedagógia Tanszék, pp. 3–30.