

Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art

Depiction

In this lecture...

- Pictures may represent fictional or real objects. They refer to these objects, just like words do.
- Words represent things by being arbitrarily associated to them. How do pictures represent? This is the problem of pictorial representation, or DEPICTION.
- RESEMBLANCE between picture and depicted object is an intuitive solution, but it poses several problems.
- A more convincing theory of depiction appeals to the notion of SEEING-IN. This is the experience of seeing an object in another (e.g. seeing a rabbit head in the clouds).

The problem of depiction

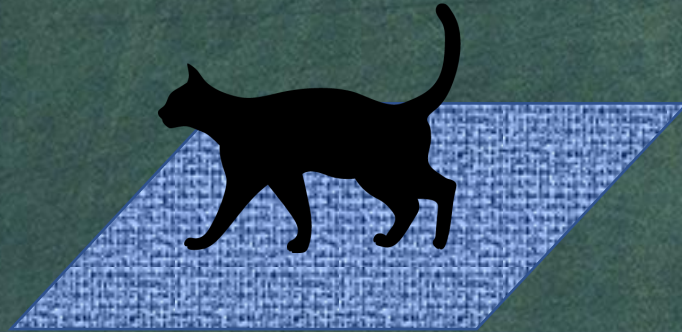
- Theories of depiction investigate the way pictures acquire their referents (the objects they represent).
- The connection between pictures and the objects they represent seems more intimate, less arbitrary, than the one between words and their referents.
- Theories of depiction can be divided into two main categories. SYMBOLIC/STRUCTURAL theories conceive of pictures as particular kinds of symbols. PERCEPTUAL/EXPERIENTIAL theories explain depiction by appealing to features of our experience of pictorial representations.



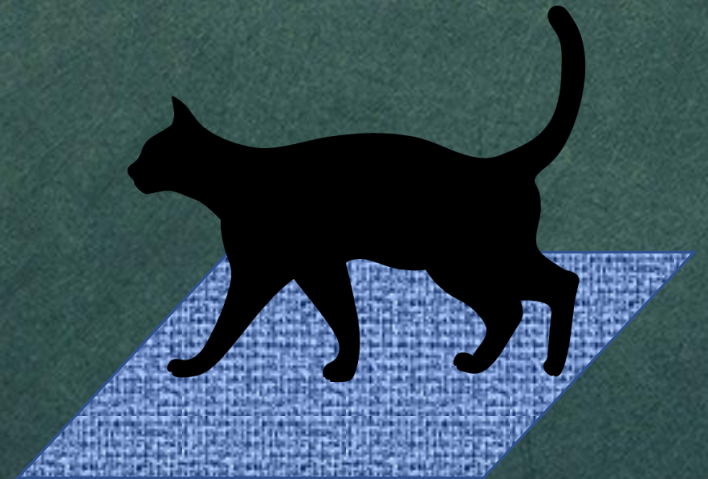
Lucian Freud painting a portrait of Queen Elizabeth II

Symbolic/structural theories

The cat is on the mat



The cat is on the mat



Resemblance

- It is intuitive to think that depictions represent objects because they look like, or resemble, such objects.

“特別像!”

- This would explain why pictorial representation is not as arbitrary as linguistic representation: resemblance between a and b requires a and b to share properties, presumably of a specific sort (e.g. visual properties), and not every two objects share such properties.

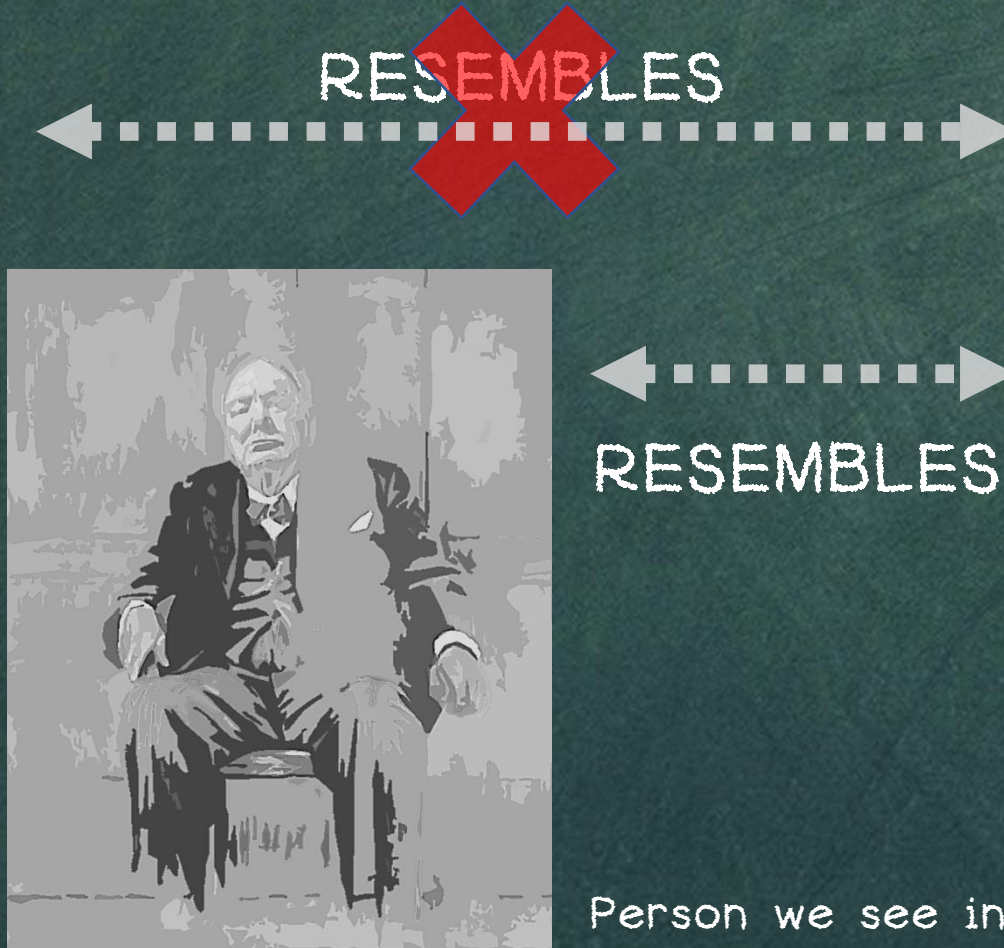
Resemblance

- But resemblance cannot be all there is to depiction.
- FIRST, it may be the case that a picture P resembles (under some relevant aspect) object a more than object b , but we cannot conclude from this that it is a depiction of a , rather than b .
- SECOND, resemblance is a SYMMETRIC relation, whereas depiction is not (if x resembles y , then y resembles x , but when x depicts y , y normally does not depict x).
- THIRD, the resemblance we experience between the picture and the depicted object seems to depend on a more fundamental experience.

Seeing-in and resemblance



Picture's surface



Depicted content
(Churchill)

Person we see in the picture

“By looking attentively at old and smeared walls, or stones and veined marble of various colours, you may fancy that you see in them several compositions, landscapes, battles, figures in quick motion, strange countenances, and dresses, with an infinity of other objects. By these confused lines the inventive genius is excited to new exertions.”

(Leonardo da Vinci, *A Treatise on Painting*, chapter CLXIII)



Leonardo da Vinci,
Self-portrait (1512)



Street art in Angera, Italy
(2016)

Seeing-in

- The philosopher Richard Wollheim (1923-2003) proposed to consider seeing-in as the experience that is characteristic of pictorial representations.
- In seeing-in experiences, we see an object “in” another object (e.g. we see a face in some pencil marks, or a rabbit in the clouds).
- According to Wollheim, whenever we see X in Y, we are also at the same time aware of seeing Y (contrast this with the experience of mistaking one object for another).
- Wollheim calls this TWOFOLDNESS, and considers it the central feature of seeing-in.

Twofoldness

- Wollheim holds that it is possible, and in fact required, in experiencing depictions, for us to be simultaneously aware of two things:
 - (1) The material support of the picture, e.g. a painted canvas. This is the CONFIGURATIONAL fold of the experience.
 - (2) The pictorial content of the picture, that is, the object(s) it depicts. This is the RECOGNITIONAL fold of the experience.
- TWOFOLDNESS is the feature of experiences that possess both a configurational and a recognitional aspect.

“[...] if I look at a representation as a representation, then it is not just permitted to, but required of, me that I attend simultaneously to object and medium. So, if I look at Holbein's portrait, the standard of correctness requires me to see Henry VIII there; but additionally I must – not only may but must – be visually aware of an unrestricted range of features of Holbein's panel if my perception of the representation is to be appropriate. [...] This requirement upon the seeing appropriate to representations I shall call 'the twofold thesis'.” (Wollheim 1980, 142)



Hans Holbein the Younger, *Portrait of Henry VIII*
(c. 1537)



Rembrandt, *Portrait of Jan Six* (1654)



Seeing-in and depiction

- There are many experiences of seeing-in that involve objects that are not pictures (we see X in Y, but Y is not a picture).
- An additional element is necessary to characterize pictorial representations. This is the INTENTION of the picture's maker (artist).
- Of the various objects one can see in a picture, the ones it depicts are those that the artists intended to depict.



Photographic representations

Bob the ginger cat has a twin brother, Rob, who looks just like him.

A photograph of Bob may therefore look just like a photograph of Rob.

What is it that determines the representational content of the photograph, that is, whether the photograph is a photograph *of Bob* or *of Rob*?

In other words, what is the STANDARD OF CORRECTNESS of photographic representations?



Bob the ginger cat

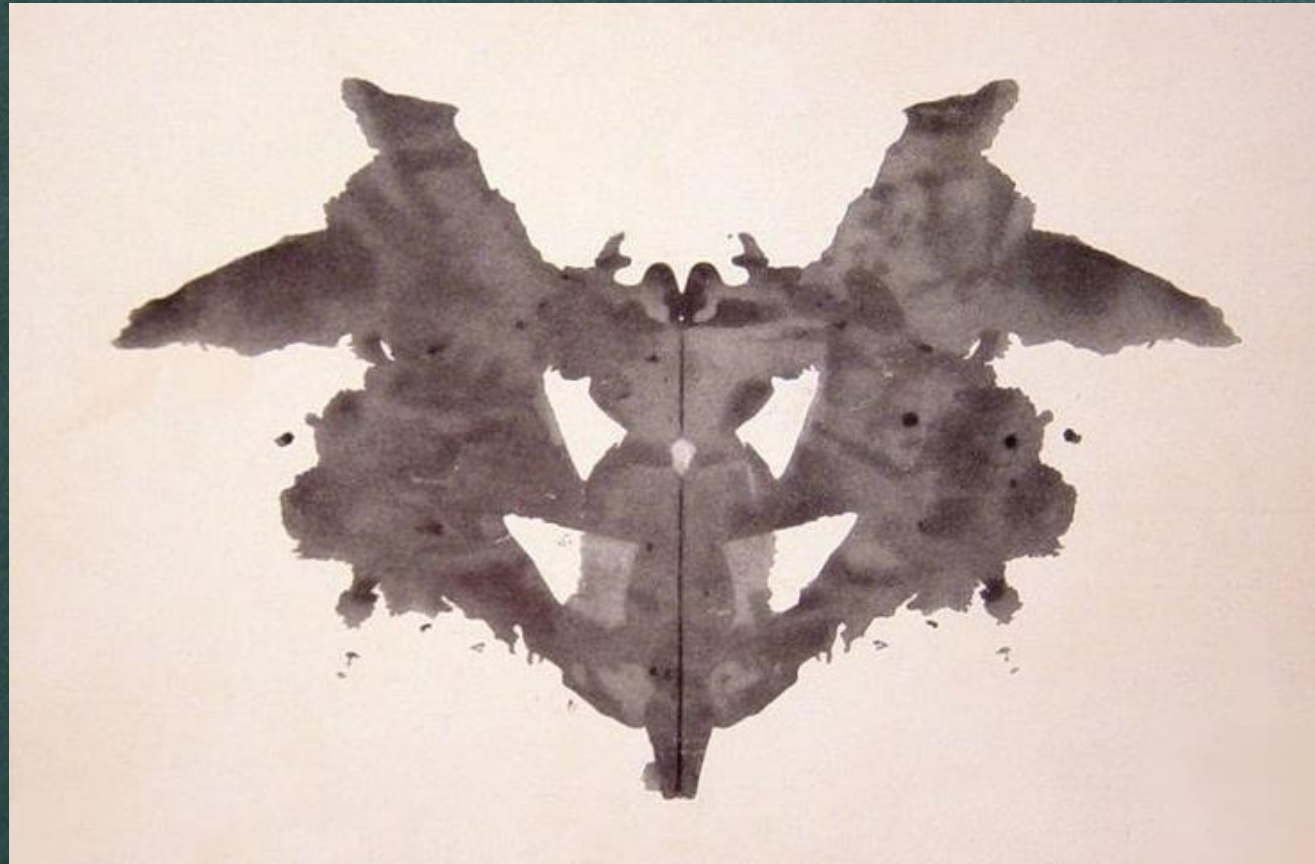


Rob the ginger cat

Whether the photograph depicts Bob or Rob is determined by the identity of the actual cat who was photographed.

A CAUSAL CHAIN from representation to represented object is required to *photographic* representation.

(I could still use Rob's photograph as a representation of Bob, but then it would no longer represent *photographically*)



A Rorschach inkblot.
What's the standard of correctness in
this case?

Difficult cases: Trompe l'oeils



Dutch or Flemish Artist, *Trompe l'Oeil*
of an Etching by Ferdinand Bol (c. 1675)