Representation

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A relation holding between a picture (or three-dimensional object) and some other thing, in virtue of which the picture (or image) is said to be, in some special sense, ‘of’ that thing. The picture (or image) need not be a work of art, and the thing that it is ‘of’ may be either an object (where this includes a person or other animal as well as an inanimate thing) or an event. This is a very abstract characterization, and for a more specific account it is necessary to examine the various theories of representation (outlined in §3 below). These theories draw on, and are largely justified by, the pre-theoretical intuitions that we have about representation, but the number of theories in circulation indicates how mixed and how seemingly at odds with one another these intuitions are, as well, perhaps, as some vagueness or artificiality in the concept itself. Most theories, as here, discuss pictures (and other two-dimensional representations), but the theories can also be adapted, if care is taken, to three-dimensional forms, such as sculpture.

1. Intuitions about representation.

The intuitions we have about representation are on two different levels. Some are on the general level, and these refer to the nature of representation itself. Others are on the specific level and refer to individual pictures. Intuitions on the specific level are of two kinds. The first concerns what individual pictures are of: so, if we start with representations of objects we can be intuitively certain that the well-known portrait of Henry VIII (1536; Madrid, Mus. Thyssen-Bornemisza) by Hans Holbein the younger represents that monarch, or that a certain *poesia* by Titian represents the goddess Diana, or that one kind of Nuba body painting represents a butterfly, though no butterfly in particular; and, if we move on to representations of events we can be intuitively certain that a well-known photograph represents the signing of the Munich Agreement, or that the Parthenon frieze represents the battle between the Lapiths and the Centaurs, or that a certain Saljuq dish represents the siege of a fortress, though no fortress in particular. The second kind of specific intuition concerns whether some individual picture that is in some sense ‘of’ a thing other than itself is so in the special sense relevant to representation: that is, whether it *represents* what it is of, rather than suggesting or otherwise depicting it. So we can be intuitively certain that, although Holbein’s portrait represents Henry VIII, John Constable’s *Hadleigh Castle* (1829; New Haven, CT, Yale Cent. Brit. A.) does not represent sorrow (it expresses it), or that Titian’s *Flaying of Marsyas* (*c.* 1576; Kroměříž Castle) does not represent the tragic strength of the human body (it is a metaphor for it). There are also, however, issues about individual pictures on which intuition is silent or ambiguous. Is a map, for example, a representation? Are abstract paintings representational? Does Titian’s representation of Diana also represent the model from whom he painted?, and so on. These are again questions that any adequate theory of representation must take into account.

2. Further divisions of representational content.

The examples of representational painting given above show not only the range of our intuitions about what pictures represent but also the range of things that pictures can represent. The scope of representational content is something to which any adequate theory of representation must do justice. For, in addition to the division of representational pictures into representations of objects (people and other entities) and representations of events, there are two other divisions that cross-classify representational content. First, there is the division into representations of real objects or events (Henry VIII, a butterfly, the Munich Agreement, the siege of a fortress) and representations of fictitious or mythological objects or events (Diana, the battle between the Lapiths and the Centaurs). Secondly, there is the division into representations of particular objects or events (Henry VIII, Diana, the Munich Agreement, the battle between the Lapiths and the Centaurs) and representations of objects or events that are merely of a particular kind (a butterfly, a siege of a fortress). The following test illuminates the second division: told that a painting represents, for example, a battle, we might ask which battle. If this question admits of an answer, then, whether or not we or anyone else knows the answer, the picture represents a particular thing (in this case, an event). If the question does not admit of an answer, the picture represents a thing merely of a particular kind.

Two observations on these divisions are called for. In the first place, representations of fictitious or mythological things generally illustrate pre-existent fictions or myths, for example ancient Greek myths or the lives of the saints. But this is not necessary: a picture can, through representing an object or event, actually bring the myth or fiction into existence, as in Hogarth’s *A Rake’s Progress* (1832–5; London, Soane Mus.), or a modern comic strip. Secondly, with representations of things that are merely of a particular kind, the kind itself may be very broad or schematic, but it need not be. With the Nuba body painting perhaps all we can say is that it represents *a* butterfly. But there can also be cases where the kind is very detailed or specific, as in Vittore Carpaccio’s *St George Baptizing the Heathen King and Queen* (from the scenes on the *Life of St George* painted for the Scuola di S Giorgio degli Schiavoni, Venice, 1502–*c.* 1508), the left-hand part of which represents what might be characterized as ‘a group of Turkish musicians in exotic clothes playing on drums and trumpets, with evident skill, music that traditionally heralds the arrival of a royal party’. Such a picture represents musicians of a highly detailed kind, but, still, no particular musicians. Some theories of representation conflate these two divisions. This is the case with Goodman’s *Languages of Art* (1969), which applies to representations the following test: does it follow from the fact that a certain picture represents a certain thing, that there exists something or other which that picture represents? By this test representations of fictitious objects or events are classified with those of objects or events merely of a particular kind.

3. Theories of representation.

While they might not explicitly define representation, theories of representation define it implicitly by giving the conditions under which individual pictures can be said to ‘represent’ whatever it is that, in the appropriate sense, they are of. Theories in circulation include the following, named, here, solely for convenience:

Illusion theory

, according to which a picture represents a thing (object, event) only if it gives a spectator the false perceptual belief that he is actually looking at that thing.

Resemblance theory

, according to which a picture represents a certain thing only if it looks to a spectator like that thing (or produces in a spectator an experience that is like the experience of looking at that thing).

Seeing-in theory

, according to which a picture represents a certain thing only if a spectator sees that thing in the picture.

Make-believe theory

, according to which a picture represents a certain thing only if a spectator is entitled to make-believe that he is actually looking at that thing.

Information theory

, according to which a picture represents a certain thing only if it conveys to a spectator through his looking at the picture the very information that he would receive if he were actually looking at the thing itself.

Semiotic theory

, according to which a picture represents a certain thing if it belongs to a symbol system that contains rules or conventions that pair off the picture or part of it with the thing in question.

The Semiotic theory apart, all these theories account for what a picture represents by reference to a certain kind of experience or response, partly or wholly perceptual, that the picture elicits in a spectator: although, in the case of the Make-believe theory, the experience is heavily mediated by convention, and, in the case of the Information theory, the precise nature of the experience or response is left (for some) objectionably open. According to the Semiotic theory, experience is necessary in order to find out what the picture looks like, but it has no further role to play in fixing what a picture that looks that particular way thereby represents.

4. Representation and the artist's intention.

Precisely because the first five theories do, in their different ways, rely on the spectator's experience to fix representational content, they have to guard themselves against idiosyncratic experiences that actual spectators may have in front of pictures through deficiencies or peculiarities of knowledge,

sensibility or biography. For instance, that an enthusiast for old films, ignorant of the 16th century, should see the actor Charles Laughton (who was well known for his portrayal of Henry VIII) in Holbein's famous portrait (see fig.) ought not to incline a supporter of the Seeing-in theory to conclude that the picture represents Charles Laughton. To eliminate such idiosyncratic experiences from waywardly determining what is represented, a natural direction in which to turn is towards the artist's intention (*see* Intention). In order to retain plausibility, all five 'experiential' theories of representation, which have so far been expressed in terms of a necessary, not a sufficient, condition, need to insist that the spectator's experience that assigns representational content must be in conformity with the artist's intention.

Although this proposal enjoys the support of intuition, it is open to misunderstanding. For, in the first place, it may be said that, by requiring of the spectator knowledge about what went on in the mind of the artist, it makes representation in large measure inaccessible. But this overlooks at least three facts: that generally the spectator comes to a representation with a large, if largely unacknowledged, body of relevant information; that representations are, to a considerable degree, if not transparent, then at least translucent as regards their makers' intentions, and, if they were not, representation as a practice would not have survived; and that, for every spectator, there are some representations whose history has become so obscured that they are indeed inaccessible, and it is the duty of adequate theory to recognize this fact. Secondly, it might be maintained that the introduction of artist's intention into a theory of representation makes representational meaning arbitrary, for a picture will, on the new proposal, represent whatever the artist wants it to. But the appeal to the artist's intention is proposed so as to adjudicate between different experiences that a spectator might have on looking at the artist's picture. So, if an artist makes a picture intending it to represent a certain thing but the result is such that no spectator can experience it in the appropriate way, his intention is irrelevant. Appeal to the artist's intention is appeal to *fulfilled* intention, and, in so far as the artist fails to fulfil his intention, there is no representation.

With the Semiotic theory (*see* Semiotics) there is no need for appeal to the artist's intention. The rules or conventions of the symbol system suffice. Indeed there is no room for such an appeal. For a given picture represents what the symbol system decrees it does, no matter how the spectator experiences it and no matter how the artist intended it. The Semiotic theory expressly assimilates representational meaning—indeed pictorial meaning generally—to linguistic meaning. And, although what a speaker means by his words depends on his intentions, what his words mean does not. Their meaning is independent of his intentions.

It is for its assimilation of pictorial to linguistic meaning that the Semiotic theory recommends itself to some, for this seems a natural part of any general theory of signs. However, it is also feasible that, if there is such a general theory, it would hold on a more abstract level, something which some semioticians certainly believe. Against what is here called the Semiotic theory, there are some powerful intuitions. In the first place, we seem able to identify what individual pictures represent without being initiated into a symbol system, and experimental results confirm this. Indeed, neither pretheoretically nor theoretically do we have even the idea of a pictorial system. Secondly, once we are able to grasp what any one picture represents, then we are able to identify what indefinitely many pictures represent, given only that we can identify in the world the things represented. Someone who can, for example, recognize the picture of a cat can, on the strength of this, recognize the picture of any animal as long as he knows what that animal looks like. Thirdly, shown a representation of something that we cannot identify in the world, we can thereby come to recognize that thing when we

next encounter it. Children learn to recognize many things through first being shown representations of them. None of these three capacities that we have *vis-à-vis* representations has recognizable analogues in the domain of language.

5. Representation and perception.

The weight of intuition appears to favour an experiential theory of representation, and, specifically, one according to which the determining experience is predominantly perceptual (*see* Perception). From this point of view the Information theory seems deficient, for there are many ways in which information may be conveyed about an object or event, and they are not all predominantly perceptual. A graph that exploited colour coding and the thickness or thinness of the line could equal a Dutch 17th-century painting in the quantity of information it contained about a room or a battle, but it would not be a representation. A landscape picture in which the colours were shown veridically would differ from one in which they were inverted, in that in the former the colours are represented and in the latter they are not, although from both we can derive the same information. Arguably the Make-believe theory can be criticized in a related fashion, for, having stipulated that a picture represents some object or event if we are entitled to make-believe that that thing is before us, the theory grounds the legitimacy of what we make-believe in convention. Constraints that the theory places upon these conventions of make-believe separate the theory from the Semiotic theory: it is an open question whether it does so sufficiently. Convention certainly extends the scope of representation, but this does not imply that representation is foundationally conventional.

Of the three perceptual theories, the Illusion theory is undoubtedly the most venerable. From Pliny the elder's famous account of the contest between Zeuxis and Parrhasios onwards, it has been traditional to praise the representational artist as a wizard of visual deception. But it seems less likely that such praise reveals an underlying theory than that it manifests a rhetorical trope. The Illusion theory certainly encounters real difficulties. For, even if it were maintained that good, or great, representation involves illusion—something which is in itself dubious—it is evident that representation can occur without subversion of perceptual belief. Sir Godfrey Kneller's portraits do not persuade us that the ladies of Charles II's court are actually before us. Again, the Illusion theory cannot allow the medium to make a distinctive contribution to representation. Indeed it must maintain that, once the paint surface is recognizable, representation is inhibited.

Initially the Resemblance theory, which is sometimes confused with the Illusion theory, although it is evident that they posit very different kinds of experience in the mind of the spectator, has much to recommend it. Representation seems inseparable from resemblance, and it seems that a natural way of identifying the representational content of a picture is to say things like, 'It looks like a butterfly', or 'It looks exactly like the signing of the Munich Agreement'. But on reflection this last consideration seems less to support the Resemblance theory, more to expose the confusion upon which its appeal rests. For, in making such remarks, we are surely asserting a resemblance, not between the picture itself (or some part of it) and the represented thing, which is what we should be doing if the Resemblance theory were correct, but between what is correctly seen in the picture (or some part of it) and the represented thing. But what is correctly seen in a picture is an idea that itself involves representation, and therefore it cannot be appealed to in an account that attempts to ground representation. As to pictures themselves, it has been observed that what they most resemble is other pictures. If this observation is denied force, it can be so only for reasons that do not favour the Resemblance theory.

For what it overlooks, the Resemblance theory also overlooks: that there is no such thing as resemblance *tout court*. Resemblance is always resemblance in a certain respect. Now, if there were some respect in which representational pictures resemble most what they represent, it seems unlikely that this respect could be identified without again invoking representation.

This line of criticism of the Resemblance theory not only leaves the Seeing-in theory the survivor of the original field, but also favours that theory by suggesting that the kind of resemblance properly associated with representation is dependent upon what is seen in the picture. To assess the theory, it is necessary to grasp the nature of the experience upon which it depends. Seeing an object or event in a representation manifests a special perceptual skill, which is confined to certain species and is probably innate (*see* Psychology and art). Infants only a few hours old react differentially to drawn faces. This capacity is prior to representation both logically and historically: logically, in that we can see things in surfaces that neither are, nor are believed by us to be, representations, for example clouds, stained walls; and historically, in that most likely our remotest ancestors could do this before they started to decorate the caves they lived in with representations of the animals they hunted. What is distinctive about seeing-in as an experience is its dual aspect, whereby, within a single experience, we are aware at the same time of the marked surface presented to us and of some absent thing visible in it as behind or in front of something else. The hypothesis of 'twofoldness', first proposed (by Albert Einstein) as a way of accounting for the fact that, when we look at a representational painting from one side, its content is not perspectivally distorted, has received some experimental support, but basically it depends on capturing the character of our experience of representation. It runs counter to, for example, the view (espoused by E. H. Gombrich) that our perception of a representation oscillates between seeing the surface and seeing the thing represented.

When we see things in clouds or stained walls, we are entitled to see what we may, but, when we see things in representations, there is something that it is correct to see. This introduction of a standard of correctness, which derives from the fulfilled intentions of the artist, constitutes, according to the present theory, the difference that representation makes to seeing-in.

The connection proposed between representation and seeing-in encourages a redrawing of the boundaries of representation along a stretch where in fact our intuitions are not strong. If we think that representation occurs just where the sense of depth is perceptually evoked, then maps turn out not to be representations, but many abstract paintings are best thought of as representational. In other words, there turn out to be both figurative representations (e.g. of kings, insects, the signing of treaties) and abstract representations (e.g. of cubes, grids, and planes of colour one behind another). If some abstract pictures are regarded as non-representational because they encourage awareness of the surface but do not invoke the sense of depth, then perhaps some other pictures should also be excluded, for the complementary reason that they encourage the sense of depth but block awareness of the surface (e.g. *trompe l'oeil*).

In some late 20th-century discussions the terms 'seeing-in' and 'seeing-as' have been used interchangeably. Since both are quasi-technical, a good policy would be to reserve the former term for the special (and comparatively specialized) perceptual skill just discussed and to use the latter term to record a feature of ordinary perception: namely that, except in very basic cases, what we see is penetrated and organized by concepts. With this distinction stable, the analysis of the sort of experience we have in front of representational pictures, in virtue of which their content is assigned,

may be carried a step further forward. Our experience has the form that we not merely see *x* in *y*, but we all but invariably see *x* as *f* in *y*; *in* a marked surface we see something *as* some particular object or event or *as* an object or event of some particular kind.

6. What can be represented.

A fundamental intuition is that what can be represented coincides with what can be seen, but if we combine this with different views of the visible, we get different accounts of representability. A very restrictive view of the visible equates it with mere sensory input without benefit either of conceptualization or of background information. Such a view underlies Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's thesis in *Laokoon* (Berlin, 1766), which conjoins the premiss that pictorial signs or elements are not given to us in any temporal order with the view that each sign or element can capture only what is apprehended by the eye in the transient moment. Hence painting, unlike poetry, cannot treat of events that unfold in time (*see* Lessing, Gotthold Ephraim).

This restrictive view of the visible appears among theorists who, like Lessing, embrace the constraints it imposes upon representation, hence upon painting, and among those who, dissatisfied with these constraints, think that painting can, through a very special exploitation of its resources, circumvent these contraints. In this vein champions of Cubism or Futurism—not necessarily reconstructing the motives of the artists themselves—have contended that certain bold pictorial innovations were necessary (and sufficient) for painting to represent the hidden spatial aspects of an object or the temporal dimension of an event.

Less restrictive views of visibility admit that, say, solid objects (and not just the surfaces of objects), or events extended in time (and not just transient moments), can be seen, hence represented. What these views share is the recognition that what we see depends upon how we structure or conceptualize the sensory input, and where they differ is about what concepts can do this. For instance, can we *see* a woman as not just holding a sash in one hand and a needle in the other, but as sewing the sash, or as sewing the sash for her lover, or (perhaps) as sewing it for a lover who will never return? Where do we draw the line and say that, beyond this point, no further background information can modify our visual experience?

It must be recognized that the issue of the scope of representation is not that of the properties that a represented object or event can have. It is that of the properties that it can be represented as having. It is unproblematic that there can be a representation of a woman who is actually sewing a ribbon for her absent lover. But can she—the theory of representation needs to know—be represented as doing this? There is one kind of representation that seems in this respect to be singularly awkward, and to this we now turn.

7. Representations of particular objects or events.

It is clear that the role that certain representations play in our lives depends on their being taken as representations of particular objects or events, for example the head of the sovereign on modern coinage, or the image of a saint placed over an altar dedicated to him or her. For this reason, as well as others, a theory of representation must find room for such things. However, it may be argued that, although we can see someone as a person of an indefinitely fine-grained kind, we cannot go beyond

this and see someone as the very person he or she is. There are no concepts unique to particular things that we can use to structure our perception to this end: hence there can be no representations of particular things. All that can be represented are things of a highly specific kind: the further reference to particular things is, the argument goes, achieved only by extra-pictorial means, for instance the title under a portrait or the legend round a coin.

This argument, which was employed by Erwin Panofsky to distinguish pre-iconographical from iconographical meaning, overlooks one special perceptual capacity that we have. This is the capacity to recognize particular things—for instance particular objects, but above all, particular people—by their overall appearance. Recognizing particular objects is involved less with bringing them under concepts and more with applying names (where these are available) to them. Historically, such a capacity has been developed only for things of certain restricted kinds: we do not have it for pineapples, cobwebs or socks, for example, not because objects of these kinds are indiscriminable, but because individuality in these areas is of no great interest to us. Only where this capacity has evolved do we come across representations of particular objects.

If we ask how precisely are representations of particular objects and our powers of particular recognition related, one suggestion, which fits in well with the general theory of representation, is that a picture represents the particular object that the artist successfully intended to be recognized from the picture by a spectator. Two difficulties confront this suggestion. The first is that, in the case of any representation of a particular thing, there will be spectators who have not developed a recognitional capacity towards the thing represented. Consequently the intention ascribed to the artist should be merely that any spectator who can recognize the thing in question will recognize it in the picture. Secondly, and more seriously, there will be some representations of particular things about whose appearance not even the artist knows enough to form a recognitional capacity, as with Christ, Plato or Diana. One way of resolving this difficulty is to posit in such cases a recognitional capacity that the artist feigns and that he successfully intends the spectator to feign. Since this capacity is feigned, the artist will introduce into the pictures other cues that indicate the identity of the thing represented. So the artist will inscribe on the picture a name or identifying description (e.g. 'INRI' above the crucified Christ), or he will introduce a symbol that tradition associates with the individual (e.g. the eyes on a plate to indicate St Lucy), or he will show the individual participating in an event famously ascribed to his biography (e.g. Diogenes throwing away his bowl), or he will stress some part of the individual's clothing or accoutrements for which there is an evolved recognitional capacity (e.g. an early pope depicted wearing the triple crown). But it is to be observed that these cues on their own do not make the picture a representation of some particular thing. For this the fiction of a recognitional capacity with which the cues collude is necessary (*see* Iconography and iconology).

Worthy of attention at this point is a kind of representation that is a halfway stage towards the representation of particulars. What the artist does in such cases is to draw upon the very skill that he would exercise if he were aiming at representing a particular thing: he tries to capture the individuality of a thing. But he does so without the intention, or the expectation, that a spectator of the picture should have, or even feign to have, a recognitional capacity for that particular thing. Examples of such representations would be still-lifes 'drawn from life', or scenes painted with the aid of models. The spectator is not expected to recognize the particular apple or the actual model, but the artist goes to the same pains as if he were, and this effect is transparent.

8. Photography and representation.

When discussing theories of representation in the visual arts it is, finally, necessary and illuminating to consider the case of photography. Photographs have enough special features, stemming from the processes of photography, to make their place within a theory of pictorial representation problematic. First, it is the causal history of the photograph and not the intention of the photographer that determines what the photograph is of. If the photograph represents anyone or anything, it is always the model or what lay before the lens. Secondly, a photograph—the most modern techniques apart—stands in a unique relation to reality. From what a photograph is of, we can infer what exists, and this has led to the special evidential status of photographs. It also leads to the view that we look 'through' photographs to the world they show us. Thirdly, the production of photographs can be achieved automatically, or in the absence of a photographer. What is significant here is that, where there is a photographer, the formation of the photographic image is only partially under his control. All the weight is borne by what is done either before the camera is clicked, by means of composition or invention, or by later editing. In this way photography differs widely from most 19th- or 20th-century ideas of painting as work and harks back to earlier, more intellectualized, conceptions of art. Fourthly, the scope of photographic images is unclear. If, as seems natural, a photograph is defined in terms of certain selected mechanical processes, we have to include, alongside the more familiar kind of image, x-rays or infra-red photography, where the kind of resemblance relevant to representation is eliminated, or at least attenuated. What photographs are, whether they are expected to fall under a theory of representation, and (to some degree) the status of photography as a medium of art, are interrelated issues, on which intuition is non-declarative.

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See also

Perception

Perception, §i: Matching picture and scene

Perception, §i, 2: Matching picture and scene: Context, contrast and constancy

Perception, §ii, 1: Pictorial depth cues

Perception, §ii, 1: Pictorial depth cues

Perception, §ii, 1: Pictorial depth cues

Perception, §ii, 2(iii): Deliberate distortions within the picture

Perception, §ii, 3: Information from pictures

Perception, §iii: Perceptual organization

Perception, §iv: Recognition and learning

Photography, §ii: History and influence

Psychotic art

External resources

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