Canny Resemblance

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Introduction

Depiction is the form of representation that distinguishes figural from abstract paintings. Both abstract and figural paintings can represent: a slash of red paint may symbolize lust, and a painting of a lamb may symbolize Christ. However, all and only figural representations depict. I will use the term 'picture' to refer exclusively to figural representations. A picture may symbolize Christ in virtue of depicting a lamb. The scope of this essay is limited to depiction and to pictures.

Accounts of depiction attempt to specify the relation between picture and object in virtue of which the former depicts the latter. Resemblance accounts hold that the notion of resemblance is necessary to the specification of this relation. While various resemblance accounts have been proposed, each has significant limitations, leading to growing skepticism about the possibility of providing an adequate resemblance account of depiction. For example, Dominic Lopes (2006, 26) has recently asserted that “fatal difficulties have made resemblance theories historical curiosities.” My aim in this essay is to provide a resemblance account of depiction that does not suffer the limitations of other such accounts, and thus to prove him wrong.

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1. The Task at Hand

There are at least two philosophically interesting questions about depiction. First, there is the metaphysical question of what it is for one thing to depict another. Second, there is the epistemological question of how we are able to work out that one thing depicts another. These two questions are related: we interpret a picture by determining that it bears some relation to an object in virtue of which it depicts that object. Any adequate answer to one question must be consistent with an adequate answer to the other. One could not answer the epistemological question without either presupposing some answer to, or simultaneously answering, the metaphysical question. Some accounts of depiction seek to answer both questions. Such accounts must specify a relation whose existence between two objects is both necessary and sufficient for one to depict the other and whose existence between the two objects interpreters could, in principle, ascertain without first knowing that one depicts the other. These accounts must then explain how interpreters who do not know that one depicts the other are able to determine the existence of this relation. However, some accounts seek solely to answer the metaphysical question. It is possible to do so without either addressing or presupposing any particular answer to the epistemological question. One might, for example, analyze depiction as involving a certain form of reference, without saying anything about how we can work out whether or not the relevant referential relation obtains.

One could answer the metaphysical question by explaining what features a representation must have in order to depict its object and thereby count as a picture. Alternatively, one might aim, more ambitiously, to explain what features something must have in order to depict an object, thereby counting as both a picture and, consequently, a representation. Accounts of the former kind must identify a set of features possession of which is both necessary and sufficient to make a representation depictive. They might appeal either to features that the representation possesses in its own right or to features that it possesses in virtue of its relations to other representations in the system of which it is a member (see, for example, Goodman 1976; Kulwicki 2006). Such accounts will explain what distinguishes depictive from nondepictive representations, but will have few further explanatory benefits. In particular, they will not explain what makes a picture have the depictive content it does, or belong to the system it does, or what makes it a representation at all. One who wished to explain these things could supplement such an account with a general theory of representation. However, because these accounts take for granted that pictures have the depictive content they do, and because a general theory of representation will not address the etiology of depictive content in particular, this approach will not help to answer the epistemological question of how we work out what pictures depict.

To answer the epistemological question, one needs an account of the second kind. To give such an account, one must identify a relation such that one object's bearing it to another is both necessary and sufficient for the former object to depict the latter. One will thereby provide sufficient conditions for being a representation, explain what makes something a member of a depictive representational system, explain what it is for something to have a certain depictive content, and provide sufficient conditions for being a representation with that content. This route does not require one to identify necessary conditions for being a representation or having a certain content since one's concern is only with depiction and depictive content, not with a general analysis of representation or of content.

The two kinds of account are not independent of one another. In particular, the explanans of an adequate account of the first kind comprise explananda for an account of the second. An adequate account of the latter kind will provide a unified explanation of why pictures possess those features that distinguish them from other representations. In assessing such accounts, therefore, it is important to consider their ability to explain those features that are generally held to distinguish depictive from nondepictive representations. Nevertheless, such accounts may also play a crucial role in determining what these features are. An account that provides a unified explanation of why pictures possess several of the features that we take to be distinctive of depictive representation, but denies that some other such features are in fact so distinctive may thereby give us reason to revise our judgments regarding the features that distinguish depictive from nondepictive representations.

My aim, in what follows, is to provide a resemblance account of depiction that both answers the metaphysical question and goes a considerable way toward answering the epistemological question. I will argue that depiction is governed by respects of resemblance that are either intended by their makers to obtain between picture and object, or are related indirectly to intentions through stylistic conventions. In section 4, I explain how we are able to work out that one thing bears such an intention-based resemblance relation to another. In section 5,
I build on this epistemic story to provide an exact specification of the resemblance relation such that one object's bearing it to another is both necessary and sufficient for the former to depict the latter. In section 6, I argue that my account explains most of the features that are commonly held to be distinctive of depiction, but shows that some such features are not in fact so distinctive. In preparation for my positive account, I first examine the problems that confront resemblance accounts and how rival resemblance accounts attempt to address them.

2. The Difficulties for Resemblance Accounts

Three difficulties for resemblance accounts appear to be relatively easily overcome. First, as Goodman (1976, 4) noted, resemblance is a reflexive and symmetrical relation, while depiction is neither. However, this is a problem only for accounts that claim resemblance is sufficient for depiction. It is consistent with the claim that resemblance is merely necessary for depiction.

Second, resemblance is ubiquitous. This threatens to trivialize the claim that resemblance is sufficient for depiction. While pictures resemble the things they depict, they also resemble every other thing in at least some respect. Moreover, there are many things they resemble more than their objects. For example, a painting of a seascape resembles a still life painting in more respects than it resembles the scene it depicts. Most resemblance theories overcome this difficulty by claiming that resemblance in a particular respect is necessary for depiction. So long as pictures resemble their objects in the relevant respect and do not also resemble every other thing in that respect, this makes the appeal to resemblance genuinely explanatory.

The third problem is that of explaining the depiction of nonexistent objects. For one thing to resemble another, both must exist. However, many pictures depict things that do not exist. This is true of pictures depicting fairies and the like and, less obviously, of both pictures that misrepresent existing objects as having properties they do not possess, and those that depict objects of a certain type without depicting any specific particulars of that type. There are two ways of solving this problem. The first is to construe the resemblance relation counterfactually, such that a picture depicts the thing it would resemble in the relevant respect, did that thing exist. The second is to construe the relation as one of experienced, rather than actual, resemblance. This overcomes the difficulty since one can experience a picture as resembling something that does not exist.

However, a further difficulty threatens to undermine resemblance accounts. Lopes identifies two constraints on an adequate resemblance account of depiction and argues that, in order to meet one, resemblance accounts must violate the other. The diversity constraint requires an adequate account of depiction to accommodate the whole range of pictorial styles and types (Lopes 1996, 32). This includes, for example, realistic and cubist paintings, line drawings, and split-style pictures. The difficulty for resemblance accounts is that there does not seem to be a single respect in which pictures in each of the various styles of depiction resemble their objects. For example, impressionist paintings generally resemble their objects in respect of color, but not always in respect of shape, while black and white outline drawings resemble their objects in respect of shape, but not always in respect of color. It seems the only way a resemblance account could meet this constraint is by allowing different respects of resemblance to govern different instances of depiction. This approach would not succumb to the problem of the ubiquity of resemblance, so long as the respect or respects of resemblance governing each instance of depiction were respects in which the picture at issue resembled its object and did not resemble all other things.

According to the independence constraint, an adequate resemblance account must appeal only to resemblances that interpreters can access without prior knowledge of depictive content (Lopes 1996, 17-18). This constraint applies only to those accounts that seek to explain both what it is for something to depict an object and how we are able to work out that it does so. One might provide an adequate solution to the former, metaphysical problem, in terms of resemblances whose existence interpreters can grasp only once they know what a picture depicts.

Lopes thinks that the independence constraint is particularly problematic because we become aware of some resemblances between a picture and its object only once we know that the picture depicts that object (17). However, we need not be conscious of the resemblances that govern depiction before we know what pictures depict. If picture interpretation were an unconscious process, it could exploit resemblance relations without our being conscious of their obtaining. Nevertheless, resemblance accounts that seek to explain our ability to interpret pictures still need to show that such unconscious interpretative mechanisms could exploit the resemblances at issue without prior access to the object described.
pictures' depictive content. Lopes argues that the only way a resemblance account could meet this constraint is by taking the same respect or respects of resemblance to govern all instances of depiction. He claims that, if the respects of resemblance underlying depiction differed from case to case, one would have no way of knowing what respects of resemblance governed a given picture until one knew what it depicted (19).

If Lopes is correct, any resemblance account that seeks to explain both what pictures are and how we interpret them will violate either the independence or the diversity constraint. Accounts that allow the respects of resemblance governing depiction to vary seem unable to meet the independence constraint, while those that take the same respects of resemblance to govern all cases of depiction seem unable to meet the diversity constraint. I will now examine current resemblance accounts, all of which take the latter of these approaches, to determine whether they indeed succumb to this problem.

3. Current Resemblance Accounts

Christopher Peacocke (1987), John Hyman (2006), and Robert Hopkins (1995, 1998) all construe depiction as governed by resemblance in respect of shape. Moreover, the particular shape properties in terms of which each characterizes this resemblance are so similar that, for present purposes, we can treat them as identical. Each is akin to the outline or silhouette presented by an object or by the marks on a picture surface, relative to some viewpoint. Following Hyman, let us call this property occlusion shape. Occlusion shape abstracts from the dimension of depth and can therefore be shared by both two-dimensional surfaces and three-dimensional objects. For example, when viewed from front on, an elliptical mark on a surface will present the same occlusion shape as a circular disk viewed from an oblique angle. According to Peacocke, Hyman, and Hopkins, while depiction may exploit a variety of different respects of resemblance, resemblance in occlusion shape is alone necessary for depiction.

These three accounts are distinguished by their conceptions of both the resemblance relation and its relata. Hyman characterizes the relation as one of actual resemblance, while Peacocke and Hopkins construe it as one of experienced resemblance. Peacocke and Hopkins are therefore committed to the psychological salience of the resemblance relation, while Hyman remains neutral on this issue. Hyman and Hopkins take occlusion shape to be an objective, nonintrinsic property of pictures and their objects, and thus hold that the resemblances that govern depiction relate pictures and their objects directly (although Hopkins remains neutral regarding whether the resemblances experienced as holding between the two actually obtain). Peacocke, by contrast, takes occlusion shape to be an intrinsic, sensational property of our experiences of pictures and their objects. Consequently, he holds, experiences of resemblance in occlusion shape relate pictures and their objects only indirectly, by relating our experiences of each.

3.1 The Depiction of Nonexistent Objects

Peacocke's and Hopkins's accounts are better equipped than Hyman's to explain the depiction of nonexistent objects. Firstly, some pictures depict things that could not exist. Because Hyman denies that the resemblances governing depiction need be psychologically salient, he must adopt the counterfactual solution to the problem of the depiction of nonexistents. However, it is hard to make sense of the claim that Escher's drawings depict the impossible things they do because they would resemble those things did they exist. By contrast, it makes perfect sense to say that we experience the drawings as resembling things that could not exist.

Misrepresentation presents another problem for the counterfactual approach. A drawing could misrepresent a man as fatter than he really is. The accounts under consideration must hold that such a picture bears the relevant resemblance in occlusion shape, not to the man as he actually is, but to the man as he is depicted as being. Since the man-as-depicted does not exist, Hyman must hold that the picture of the man would resemble the man in occlusion shape were he fatter than he actually is. However, as Hopkins (1994, 434) points out, the picture would also resemble in occlusion shape anything whatsoever if it had the shape the man is represented as having. Hyman is thus unable to explain why the picture misrepresents the man, rather than any other object. Peacocke and Hopkins can avoid this problem since they can hold that we experience (our visual experience of) the picture as resembling in occlusion shape (the visual experience we would have of) the man as fatter than he is. By maintaining that this experience is of the phenomenal type whose content includes the man, but none of the indefinite number of other objects that would present the requisite occlusion shape were they shaped differently, they can explain why the picture misrepresents the man, rather than any of those other objects (Hopkins 1994).
This highlights the relative specificity of the relation of experienced resemblance, in comparison to that of actual resemblance. The former relation may obtain between a picture and just one of many objects with the same shape, color, and texture, whereas a picture that bears the latter relation to one object with certain basic appearance properties will bear it equally to all objects with just those properties. Consequently, experienced resemblance accounts are better able to explain why a picture depicts one among a group of existent particulars with the same basic appearance properties. This problem for nonpsychological construals of the resemblance relation is exacerbated when that relation is construed counterfactually, such that it ranges over both existent and nonexistent objects. Nevertheless, so long as it takes into account only the basic appearance properties nonexistent objects would have if they existed, the resemblance relation provides some purchase on the nature of the thing depicted. However, when it is further broadened to take into account properties things could have, were their visual properties different from those they either do have, or would have, did they exist, it ceases to provide any purchase at all on the nature of the thing depicted. Any adequate nonpsychological resemblance account must explain what role resemblance plays in governing cases of depictive misrepresentation.

3.2 Diversity and Independence

None of the three accounts meets both the diversity and the independence constraints. They have difficulty meeting the diversity constraint because there are many pictures that do not present the requisite resemblances in occlusion shape to their objects. For example, figure 1 depicts a normally shaped person, although it presents the relevant resemblance in occlusion shape, not to a normally shaped person, but to an emaciated person with a gargantuan head.

Peacocke suggests solving this problem by appeal to intermediary objects:

A stick figure drawn with just a few straight lines can depict a person. Perhaps this is possible because a three-dimensional stick structure can be perceived as similar in shape to the axis of the main parts of the human body, and the drawn stick figure is presented in a region of the visual field experienced as the same in shape as that in which such a three-dimensional stick figure could be presented. (Peacocke 1987, 397–98)

Hopkins elaborates on this suggestion in the only thorough attempt to reconcile resemblance accounts with the diversity constraint. Although the solution Hopkins proposes is applicable to all three accounts, I will, for convenience, discuss only its application to his own. He argues that pictures have two levels of content, the first of which, the content of seeing-in, is determined by experienced resemblance in occlusion shape and the second of which, pictorial content, is determined by the content of seeing-in and picture makers’ intentions (Hopkins 1998, 128). The content seen-in the stick-figure drawing is an emaciated person with an enormous head because that is what it is experienced as resembling in occlusion shape. Its pictorial content—what is actually depicted—is a person of indeterminate shape. The picture maker’s intentions constrain which of the properties included in the content of seeing-in are included in pictorial content (129). Although what is seen-in the stick-figure drawing is a person with abnormally thin limbs and a huge head, its pictorial content excludes the latter two properties because, although the picture’s maker intended a person to be seen-in the picture, he or she did not intend a person with emaciated limbs or an enormous head to be seen-in the picture. Pictorial content can thus be indeterminate in ways that the content of seeing-in is not.

This appeal to makers’ intentions as determinants of pictorial content is partly motivated by considerations about the sorts of things that count as pictures. We may experience clouds, split milk, and coffee grounds as resembling other things in respect of occlusion shape, although none is a picture. Pictures are artifacts: products of intentional human actions. Since makers’ intentions play a role in determining whether or not something is a picture, it seems reasonable to ascribe

1. In the case of mechanically produced pictures, such as photographs, Hopkins takes causal history, rather than intentions, to be crucial to determining pictorial content. I ignore this complication here. In section 4, I propose an intention-based resemblance account that encompasses both mechanically and manually produced pictures.
to them some role in determining pictorial content. On Hopkins's account, intentions both constrain the contribution that experienced resemblance in occlusion shape makes to pictorial content and determine which further respects of experienced resemblance, if any, contribute to pictorial content. For example, because its maker did not intend a black-and-white person to be seen-in it, the color of the stick-figure drawing is irrelevant to determining pictorial content. In other cases, however, color contributes to pictorial content because picture makers intend objects of a certain color to be seen-in their pictures.

We do not generally have any access to the intentions with which pictures were produced, independently of the pictures themselves. Nevertheless, Hopkins argues, we are able to work out what a picture's maker intended to be seen-in it—and thereby identify its pictorial content—by appeal to considerations about the kinds of things the world contains, the kinds of things that are generally depicted, and the ways in which pictures can be produced (137-38). For example, we work out that the maker of the stick-figure drawing did not intend a person with an enormous head and stick-like limbs to be seen-in his or her picture by appeal to such facts as: the world does not contain such people; such people are not normally depicted; and it is difficult quickly to produce a drawing that captures the precise occlusion shape of an object.

Because it can explain the depictive content of a wider range of pictures, Hopkins's two-level account of depictive content comes closer to meeting the diversity constraint than Peacocke's or Hyman's accounts. Nevertheless, it can meet the diversity constraint only by violating the independence constraint. Hopkins's account of how we identify pictorial content depends on what is seen-in a picture providing some purchase on the nature of the thing depicted. It is only because what is seen-in figure 1 is a person that appeal to considerations such as those Hopkins identifies could enable us to identify the picture maker's intentions, and thus its pictorial content. However, the picture also resembles in occlusion shape a four-legged animal seen from a point above and behind its back legs. Indeed, many pictures have occlusion shapes that fail to indicate much at all about the objects they depict. For example, the occlusion shape of Vuillard's *Two Women Drinking Coffee* is not, on its own, sufficient to indicate that the picture depicts two women.

Actual resemblance in occlusion shape undetermines the nature of the objects depicted. Since Hopkins holds an experienced resemblance account, he can exploit the greater specificity of the latter relation and argue that figure 1 depicts a person and figure 2 depicts two women because that is what they are experienced as resembling in occlusion shape. However, because the actual resemblances in occlusion shape give so little purchase on the nature of the objects depicted, it is implausible that we would have the relevant experiences of resemblance in occlusion shape unless we had prior knowledge of the pictures' depictive content.

Hopkins might acknowledge this, but claim that his interest is in answering the metaphysical question of what it is for something to depict an object, not the epistemological question of how we work out that it does so. The fact that many experiences of resemblance in occlusion shape depend on prior knowledge of depictive content does not preclude one from answering the metaphysical question by appeal to

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2. Although his comments (1998, 130-34) suggest he sees his account as providing an answer to both the metaphysical and the epistemological questions.
experienced resemblance in occlusion shape. Granted, such an answer to the metaphysical question must be consistent with an adequate epistemological story about how we work out what pictures depict. However, so long as we do experience pictures as resembling their objects in occlusion shape, there is clearly some story to be told about how these experiences are produced. Even if they result from prior identification of depictive content, there will be some such epistemological story with which Hopkins’s appeal to experienced resemblance will be consistent. Nevertheless, because the processes that give rise to the experiences of resemblance that govern depiction could differ from case to case, Hopkins might deny that there is any unified account to be given of how we work out what pictures depict.

3.3 The Role of Intentions

However, Hopkins’s appeal to intention threatens to undermine even his metaphysical story. While he can invoke intentions in providing this story without explaining how we are able to identify them, we must in fact be able to identify them if his metaphysical account is to succeed. It is not obvious, though, that we are able to do so. While Hopkins provides a story about how we do so, it does not explain our ability to access the intentions that govern some pictures’ content. For example, we are able to interpret pictures with unusual, fantastical depictive content. However, knowledge of the kinds of things that exist and the kinds of things that are generally depicted are of no help in identifying the intentions of a picture maker with unusual representational aims (Abell 2005a). This suggests that knowledge of makers’ intentions may not in fact be essential to identifying depictive content. Any resemblance account that appeals to picture makers’ intentions in explaining what it is for something to depict an object must provide good reason for believing that interpreters are able to work out what those intentions are.

Moreover, the role Hopkins gives intentions in determining depictive content prevents him from accommodating either of two forms of inadvertent depiction. It seems that, in cases where one produces marks that one intends to be experienced as resembling one object in occlusion shape (for example, a swelte man), but which are instead experienced as resembling a different object in occlusion shape (for example, a fat man), one fails to depict the former object, but inadvertently depicts the latter. However, on Hopkins’s account, the resultant picture does not depict a fat man, despite its experienced resemblance to one. To explain such cases, resemblance accounts must give resemblance priority over intention in determining depictive content.

A further form of inadvertent depiction occurs when, rather than being intentions to depict something other than what is depicted, picture makers’ intentions provide only a partial characterization of the depicted object. This occurs when certain of the categories to which the object belongs figure in their intentions, but others do not. For example, when presented with a weeping willow, a picture maker who does not know what willow trees are might form the intention to produce marks that will be experienced as depicting a tree with long drooping branches. Despite lacking the intention to produce marks that are experienced as resembling a willow, it seems that, in depicting a tree with drooping branches, he or she inadvertently depicts a weeping willow. Because Hopkins (1998, 77) holds that, for a picture to depict something $F$, its maker must intend it to be experienced as resembling in occlusion shape something $F$, he cannot explain why this picture depicts a willow, and not merely a tree with drooping branches.

None of the three resemblance accounts discussed provides an adequate answer to both the metaphysical question of what it is for something to depict an object and the epistemological question of how we work out that something depicts an object. Accounts like Hyman’s, which are neutral regarding the psychological salience of the resemblance relation, fail to provide an adequate answer to the former question because they seem unable adequately to explain the depiction of nonexistent objects. Moreover, this neutrality prevents Hyman from exploiting the only available strategy for reconciling the claim that depiction is governed by resemblance in occlusion shape with the diversity constraint. By contrast, while this strategy is available to accounts like Peacocke’s and Hopkins’s, which take the relation to be psychologically salient, they can adopt it only by violating the independence constraint because the psychological salience of the resemblance relation seems, in some cases, to depend on prior knowledge of depictive content. The best such accounts can hope to do, therefore, is to answer the metaphysical question. In what follows, my task will be to provide an alternative resemblance account capable of answering both questions.

3. Please note that I no longer hold the positive thesis about depiction proposed in that paper, which is inconsistent with the account presented here.

4. My thanks to an anonymous referee for alerting me to this problem.
4. Intention-Based Resemblance

I propose to meet the diversity constraint by allowing different respects of resemblance to govern different instances of depiction, such that there is no single respect of resemblance that is necessary for depiction. An instance of depiction might be governed by resemblance in respect of any combination of the following determinable properties (among others): occlusion shape, texture, tonal relations, apparent size relations of parts relative to a point, relative spatial location of parts, local color, and aperture color relative to a point (color as it appears at that point when seen through a reduction screen which isolates color from the distorting effects of environmental features such as ambient light and nearby areas of differing color).

The respects of resemblance governing depiction may be of any of three distinct kinds. Some are resemblances in respect of objective, intrinsic features of pictures and their objects, such as texture. Others are resemblances in respect of objective, non-intrinsic features, such as occlusion shape and aperture color, both of which are relative to a point. Finally, some are resemblances in respect of response-dependent features. For example, some paintings mimic the effect of simultaneous contrast, which occurs in conditions of bright illumination when the edges of areas of differing tone meet. This makes dark tones appear darker and light tones lighter than they actually are at the point where the edges meet. Rather than simply reproducing the differences in tone or hue that cause this effect, painters such as Seurat use darker and lighter tones of paint at the intersection of areas of differing tone (Newall 2006). The resultant resemblance does not obtain between objective properties of picture and object, since the tones or hues of the picture differ from those of the object, but rather between the experiences that picture and object induce in us.5

These various respects of resemblance may be more or less abstract. A picture may be governed by resemblance in respect of its most determinate local color or occlusion shape properties, or in respect of some more abstract property of either kind. For example, figure 1 resembles a person, not in respect of its most determinate occlusion shape, but in respect of its very abstract occlusion shape, while figure 3 resembles a man playing a saxophone in respect of some more determinate, but still not maximally determinate occlusion shape, and resembles a woman’s face illuminated from one side in respect of fairly abstract tonal relations. Construing depiction as governed by resemblance in respect of more or less abstract properties obviates the need for a construal of pictures as exhibiting degrees of resemblance in a given respect.

Picture makers’ intentions determine which, among the various possible respects of resemblance, govern any particular instance of depiction. This way of unifying the resemblances that govern depiction looks, at first glance, as if it will violate the independence constraint. As I have just argued, it is not obvious that we are able to identify picture makers’ intentions independently of knowledge of depictive content, yet the adequacy of this proposal depends on our having some way of doing so. In this section, I will show that my proposal meets the independence constraint by identifying several different relations that a respect of resemblance may bear to picture makers’ intentions, each of which enables the resemblance at issue to be identified without prior knowledge of depictive content. I will argue that depiction is governed by just those respects of resemblance that bear one of these relations to picture makers’ intentions.

We are not always able to identify the intentions with which a representation was produced. Nonetheless, this does not mean that intentions can play no role in determining representational content. H. P. Grice (1957, 1989a, 1989b) has argued that utterers’ intentions determine both utterers’ meaning and sentence meaning. The following account of the ways in which picture makers’ intentions determine the

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5. There is also an objective resemblance between picture and object in respect of more abstract tone and hue. However, resemblance in this abstract respect cannot explain why Seurat’s paintings depict their objects as illuminated by bright light.
respects of resemblance that govern depiction is heavily indebted to Grice’s account of nonnatural meaning and its role in determining sentence meaning.

We are able to infer a person’s intentions from both his or her ordinary purposive behavior and her communicative behavior and its products. In the former case, we identify his or her intentions by identifying the outcome he or she is likely to desire his or her behavior to have, and then attribute to him or her the intention to achieve that outcome. For example, seeing a woman climbing along a tree branch at the end of which a hat is caught, one may identify the retrieval of the hat as the outcome she desires, and thus attribute to her the intention to retrieve the hat. However, our ability to grasp the desired outcomes of communicative behavior and its products depends on our having previously grasped communicators’ intentions to achieve those outcomes (Carston 2002, 44). Suppose that, in the middle of a Tarkovsky film, I turn toward you and raise one eyebrow. Unless you already know that I intend to inform you of my desire to leave immediately, you will not be able to identify that outcome as a desired effect of my behavior. Similarly, suppose we share an office and, in your absence, I leave a pile of your old newspapers in a prominent place on your desk. Unless you have grasped my intention to inform you of my desire that you remove the newspapers from the office, you will be unable to identify the outcome I desire my leaving them there to have.

Nonetheless, we are frequently able to identify communicators’ intentions, in part because those intentions are reflexive: communicators intend their intentions to be recognized (Grice 1957). When I raise my eyebrow at you, I do so with the intention of getting you to recognize my intention to inform you of my desire to leave the cinema immediately. Likewise, I leave the papers on your desk with the intention of getting you to recognize my intention to inform you of my desire that you remove the papers from the office. Because they are intentions that one’s intentions be recognized, communicative intentions ensure that communicators cooperate with their audiences by making their intentions as obvious as possible. Such cooperation does not alone suffice to explain audiences’ ability to identify communicators’ intentions. The proper explanation for this ability is a matter of considerable debate.6

However, its existence is not in question. We frequency succeed in identifying communicators’ intentions from both their communicative behavior and its products.

Our ability to identify the intention-based respects of resemblance that govern depictive content results from this more general ability to identify people’s intentions from the products of their communicative behavior. It is not possible to provide a complete answer to the epistemological question of how we interpret pictures without weighing into the debate about how we identify communicators’ intentions. Nevertheless, I will argue that our ability to identify intentions from the products of communicative behavior encompasses the ability to identify, by looking at a picture, the respects in which it is intended to resemble its object. In doing so, I will both establish the legitimacy of appealing to intentions in explaining what it is for something to depict an object and make considerable progress in explaining our ability to interpret pictures.

The main reason one might doubt that our ability to identify intentions from the products of communicative behavior could encompass the ability to identify intended respects of resemblance is the ubiquity of resemblance. There are simply too many different respects in which a picture may have been intended to resemble its object, one might think, for us to be able to identify, from among them, those respects that were in fact intended unless we already know what the picture depicts. However, two considerations show this doubt to be unfounded.

First, there are significant restrictions on the respects of resemblance that can govern depictive content. Depiction is a visual (or, as I will later argue, a perceptual) form of representation: only resemblance in visible (perceptible) respects is relevant to what pictures depict.

Second, the ability to interpret some representations unconditionally requires the ability to distinguish which, among an indefinite number of elements, are picked out by communicators’ intentions. To see this, note first that, to interpret many representations, we must appeal to background information provided by the context in which

6. Different explanations of this ability are proposed by Grice (1975, 1978), Sperber and Wilson (1986), and Carston (2002). The correct explanation of this ability may have consequences regarding the psychological salience of the resemblances that govern depiction. If, as Sperber and Wilson (2002) contend, this ability turns out to be the result of largely modular processes, we need not experience the intended respects of resemblance between picture and object as obtaining. However, if this ability turns out to be the result of conscious inferences, these intended respects of resemblance must be psychologically salient. My account is compatible with both these possible outcomes since it remains neutral regarding their psychological salience.
they were produced. This is necessary, for example, to interpret both
indexicals and conversational implicatures. Note, second, that there are
not always independent constraints on the background information
relevant to interpretation. While it is part of the literal meaning or char-
acter of the indexical ‘you’ both that it should be assigned a reference
in context and that the background information relevant to reference
assignment concerns the identity of its addressee, there are no such
convention-governed constraints on the aspects of context that deter-
mine what utterances conversationally implicate. For example, what, if
anything, an utterance of “the evening news has just started” conver-
sationally implicates depends on background information which can-
not be identified independently of the context at issue. There is an
indefinite amount of background information that is potentially
relevant to the interpretation of conversational implicatures, including
information about the preceding conversation, the physical environ-
ment in which and the time at which the utterance occurs, and the inter-
locutors’ common knowledge and expectations. Finally, note that the
contextual information relevant to interpreting implicatures is precisely
that to which the speaker intends to draw one’s attention. To understand
“the evening news has just started” as implicating “hurry up or you’ll be
late,” one must understand the speaker as intentionally drawing one’s
attention to certain features of context, such as that the evening news
begins at seven, that one has a meeting at eight, and that it takes about
an hour to travel to the place where the meeting is to be held. The
fact that we are able to work out that it is this information to which
the speaker intends to draw our attention, rather than any of the indefinite
amount of other information embedded in the context at issue, shows
that the sparseness of the resemblance relation is no impediment to
our ability to identify intended respects of resemblance.

To work out what “the evening news has just started” conversa-
tionally implicates in the context described above, one must have access
to considerable background information, which is available only in a
fairly specific context. Our ability to identify intentions from commu-
nicative behavior and its products enables us to interpret conversational
implicatures by picking out, from the context in which they are embed-
ded, those bits of background information to which communicators
intend to draw our attention. Pictures are often interpretable in contexts
very different from those in which they were produced. This may seem
to show that picture interpretation does not depend on the availability
of background information, and thus to provide a second reason for
thinking that it does not exploit our general ability to identify intentions
from the products of communicative behavior. However, the fact that
pictures are often interpretable in a wide variety of contexts shows only
that picture interpretation cannot, in general, depend on background
information that is available only in very specific contexts. It does not
show that picture interpretation does not exploit background infor-
mation. Many pictures are interpretable in a wide variety of contexts
because the background information required for their interpretation—
which is often limited to information about how things look—is widely
available. A picture of a duck may be interpretable by audiences in both
rural China and São Paulo simply because both audiences know what
ducks look like.

We are able to identify the intended respects of resemblance that
govern many instances of depiction because we have a general ability to
identify intentions from the products of communicative behavior, and
picture interpretation can engage this ability. By following Grice’s char-
acterization of nonnatural meaning as involving reflexive intentions
to achieve an effect (Grice 1957), we can thus provide a sufficient con-
tdition for a certain respect or certain respects of resemblance being rele-
vant to determining depictive content:

a) A picture’s resemblance to some object $O$ in a given respect(s)
is relevant to determining what the picture depicts if its maker
intended the picture to resemble $O$ in the relevant respect(s)
and thus to bring $O$ to viewers’ minds; and intended that these
resemblances have this effect in part because viewers recognize
that intention.

For the sake of convenience, I will refer elliptically to a picture’s object
as if it were simply the main thing it depicts. However, it is important to
note that its object in fact comprises the entire visible scene depicted.
The nature of this scene is determined, not just by the various things it
includes, but also by the point of view from which the picture depicts
these things, and the prevailing conditions of illumination. For every
picture, there will be some visible scene that it depicts. Moreover, any
adequate specification of this scene will refer to some visible thing (be it
a particular thing, or a thing of a certain type that is no specific par-
ticular of that type) that it contains. While some picture makers, such
as impressionist painters, are interested predominantly in the depiction
of color, they cannot simply depict color, but must instead depict some
surface or volume as instantiating a color, or light of a certain color as
affecting the appearance of a thing. Pictures cannot depict a property without depicting some visible thing as instantiating that property. The bare depiction of properties is impossible. Although elliptical, therefore, talk of pictures depicting objects is not inaccurate.

The condition above explains only our ability to interpret pictures produced with communicative intentions. Some pictures are not produced with such intentions. For example, L. S. Lowry painted a series of pornographic pictures which he hid in his studio and clearly did not intend any audience to see. While he intended these paintings to resemble naked women in certain respects, it is implausible that he intended an audience to recognize his intention that they resemble such women. Nevertheless, when discovered in his studio after his death, they proved readily interpretable.

While I am committed to the claim that depiction is communicative in origin, I do not hold that it is necessarily communicative. With the multiplication of instances of successful communicative depiction, regularities emerge in the respects of resemblance picture makers exploit. As viewers become familiar with interpreting pictures that exploit certain respects of resemblance, they become increasingly adept at inferring that such pictures resemble the objects their makers intended them to resemble. Picture makers may begin deliberately to exploit viewers' interpretative abilities by employing the respects of resemblance at issue, such that conventions emerge to depict objects by producing marks that resemble them in set respects.

A convention can be understood, following David Lewis (1969), as a widely adopted solution to a recurrent coordination problem. A coordination problem arises when three conditions are met. First, two or more agents must be involved in a situation of interdependent decision making, such that the decision each agent makes depends on what decision he or she expects the other agent(s) to make. Secondly, the interests of all agents must coincide in that situation, such that the decision each agent makes serves the other agents' interests as well as his or her own. Finally, the situation must admit of two or more proper coordination equilibria. That is, there must be at least two combinations of all agents' actions such that, given the other agents’ actions, each agent prefers that combination of actions to any other combination he or she could have achieved alone. The wide adoption of a solution to a coordination problem, and thus the establishment of a convention, does not require all those who adopt it to agree explicitly to do so. Conventions may arise through tacit agreement. What is important is that, among those who adopt a particular solution to a coordination problem, it is common knowledge (that is, known by all, known to be known by all, and so on) that each adopts that solution, expects the others to adopt that solution, and prefers to adopt that solution to any other on condition that the others do. A solution is widely adopted when many of those who face the problem at issue adopt a particular solution and share such common knowledge.

Coordination problems generally require one to act as others expect in order to coordinate one's own actions with theirs. However, as Stephen Schiffer (1972, 151) notes, communication presents problems of a rather different kind. Rather than problems of action coordination, the problems it presents require one to act as others expect in order to ensure that they form certain mental states as a consequence of one's actions. Let us call these latter problems communication problems. Picture makers face the communication problem of getting viewers to bring certain objects to mind, by getting them to note particular respects of resemblance between surface and object. This is a coordination problem: which resemblances they choose to exploit depends on what resemblances they think viewers will decide are relevant and vice versa; their interests coincide with viewers’ interests since, when picture makers exploit resemblances between surface and object that viewers readily identify or viewers identify resemblances to objects to which picture makers intended to produce resemblances, this serves both picture makers’ interests in getting viewers to bring the right objects to mind and viewers’ interests in bringing the right objects to mind; and the problem admits of several different proper coordination equilibria because there are several different sets of respects of resemblance one might exploit in order to get viewers to bring a certain object to mind. This coordination problem is the general one of getting viewers to bring to mind any of a variety of objects picture makers might intend their pictures to resemble. It thus recurs frequently and may admit of various different conventional solutions. Unlike linguistic conventions, which govern the meaning of individual words, such solutions are umbrella conventions: conventions for the depiction of a variety of objects.

Since differences in the respects of resemblance pictures exploit correspond to differences in depictive style, let us call a widely adopted solution to this communication problem a stylistic convention. Stylistic conventions are individuated by the respects of resemblance they exploit. Once stylistic conventions emerge, communicative intentions are no longer necessary for depiction, as viewers can interpret pictures that
employ these conventions simply by appeal to their knowledge of the relevant conventions. As Simon Blackburn notes in his discussion of Grice’s account of sentence meaning as fossilized utterer’s meaning:

In the one-off predicament I have to rely on Grice’s mechanism—that is, your recognition of my intention in uttering—because there is nothing else for you to go on. But once we have methods of communicating into which we have been trained, perhaps I need not care at all if you recognize my intention in uttering. It would be enough if you heard my words, you will have been trained to take them in a certain way, and so taking them, you will understand me. In other words, conventions or habits would not need to fossilize complex Gricean conditions—they would supplant the Gricean mechanism, which is only needed in their absence. (Blackburn 1984, 113)

Just as we are able to interpret sentences uttered without communicative intentions because they employ linguistic conventions with which we are familiar, we are able to interpret pictures produced without communicative intentions because they employ stylistic conventions with which we are familiar. While it is implausible that Lowry intended viewers to recognize his intention that his paintings resemble naked women, it is plausible that he appealed to stylistic conventions in producing them. His purpose in producing them appears to have been to appreciate, in his role as viewer, their resemblance to naked women. He could not achieve this purpose unless the paintings succeeded, when he viewed them, in bringing naked women to mind. In producing them, therefore, he deliberately exploited his own habits of interpretation.

We are now in a position to specify a second, sufficient condition for the relevance of a certain respect(s) of resemblance to determining depictive content:

b) A picture’s resemblance to O in a certain respect(s) is relevant to determining what the picture depicts if its maker intended it to resemble O in the relevant respect(s) and intended thereby to adhere to a stylistic convention extant in his or her community, characterized by resemblances in the respect(s) at issue, and thus to bring O to viewers’ minds.7

The emergence of stylistic conventions brings with it the possibility of the first of the two kinds of inadvertent depiction identified in the previous section. Once viewers are familiar with such conventions, they will be able to interpret marks that resemble some object in the respects characteristic of a familiar stylistic convention as depicting that object, even if its maker did not intend them to resemble the object at issue in the relevant respects. It does not always follow that the marks in fact depict the object at issue. As I have noted, pictures are artifacts, and the maker must therefore have produced those marks intentionally if they are to depict the object at issue. Moreover, someone might intentionally produce marks that are interpretable, by appeal to a stylistic convention, as depicting some object, without the marks thereby depicting that object. For example, someone might set out simply to paint over some graffiti and, in doing so, intentionally produce a patch of paint which just happens to be interpretable, by appeal to some stylistic convention, as depicting a horse. However, he or she does not therefore depict a horse, even if the stylistic convention is one with which he or she is familiar, because his or her reason for producing the patch of paint was of the wrong kind. In my earlier example, the picture maker who sets out to produce a picture of a swat man and inadvertently depicts a fat man does so because his or her intention in producing the marks he or she does is to respond to a communication problem. This gives us a third, sufficient condition for the relevance of certain respect(s) of resemblance to determining depictive content:

c) A picture’s resemblance to O in certain respect(s) is relevant to determining what the picture depicts if its maker produced the resemblance(s) at issue with the intention of responding to a communication problem to which a conventional solution is extant in his or her community, which is characterized by resemblances in the given respect(s).

The distinction between those pictures that exploit stylistic conventions and those that do not helps to explain why some pictures can be interpreted across a range of cultural contexts, some of which differ dramatically from those in which they were produced, while others cannot, even when they depict objects with which viewers in those contexts are familiar (Deregowski 1989). Pictures produced with communicative intentions do not depend for their interpretability on knowledge of stylistic conventions, and thus can be interpreted by viewers who lack such knowledge. By contrast, pictures produced by exploiting stylistic conventions are unlikely to be as widely interpretable. A stylistic convention might be characterized by such resemblances that a picture

7. The view I am advocating is thus a form of what, elsewhere, I term “non-arbitrary representational conventionalism” (Abell 2005b, 188).
which employs that convention remains interpretable even by those who do not know the relevant convention. However, some pictures which employ stylistic conventions will not be interpretable independently of knowledge of the relevant conventions. For example, figure 1 presents the same abstract occlusion shape property relative to a point in front of its surface as the person it depicts would present relative to a point in front of him or her. In virtue of doing so, it depicts a person seen from front on. Nevertheless, one would not expect viewers who are unfamiliar with the convention of depicting objects by exploiting resemblance in respect of abstract occlusion shape relative to a point in front of objects to be able to identify the respect of resemblance the picture maker intends to hold between picture and object and thereby to work out what it is intended to represent. Knowledge of the stylistic convention at issue is essential to the ability to interpret the picture.

The possibility of the second form of inadvertent depiction identified in section 3.3 arises because resemblance is a relation between tokens, not between types. Consequently, although only some of the types to which an object belongs may figure in picture makers’ intentions, any picture that resembles an object of the intended types will also resemble an object of any other type, membership of which is guaranteed by membership of the intended types. Such a picture will be interpreted as depicting an object belonging to all these types. Viewers’ abilities to identify intentions from the products of communicative behavior are not sufficiently refined to enable them to select, from among the types at issue, just those that figured in the picture maker’s intentions. They will thus interpret a picture whose maker produced it with the intention that it resemble a tree with drooping branches as depicting, equally, a tree with drooping branches and a weeping willow. To accommodate the fact that the picture’s maker inadvertently depicts a willow, we must allow pictures to depict, not just objects of the types specified by their makers’ intentions, but also objects of types, membership of which is guaranteed by their membership of these intended types. This requires us to broaden the scope of the first two of the above sufficiency conditions for the relevance of resemblances to determining depictive content, to accommodate the fact that:

- A picture’s resemblance in certain respect(s) to a Q is relevant to determining depictive content if its maker intends it to resemble Ps in those respects; all Ps are Q; and its maker’s intentions are as specified in either a) or b) above.

One might doubt that depiction is governed by resemblances of the kinds identified in this section because viewers who lack the ability to identify the resemblances at issue are nonetheless able to interpret pictures. For example, there is evidence that primates and infants as young as nineteen months are able to identify the objects of photographs and line drawings, and that pigeons are able to recognize the objects of photographs, but not line drawings (Cabe 1980, Hochberg and Brooks 1962). It seems implausible both that such viewers possess the sophisticated cognitive skills necessary for the ability to identify intentions from communicative behavior and its products, and that they have any knowledge of stylistic conventions. However, the ability to identify a picture’s object should not be equated with the ability to interpret the picture as depicting that object. The empirical evidence suggests that, rather than interpreting pictures as pictures, infants and animals either mistake pictures for their objects, or react to both similarities and differences between pictures and their objects without attributing representational significance to those similarities. There is nothing mysterious about visible respects of resemblance between one object and another leading viewers to mistake the former for the latter, or to react in the same way to both. Neither reaction requires an awareness that one of the objects represents the other. Infants’ and animals’ responses to pictures are like our responses to effective trompe l’oeil paintings. Such paintings fool us because their resemblances to their objects affect us without our being aware that we are being affected by resemblances. It is only when we realize that such pictures bear intention-based resemblances to the things for which we mistook them that we succeed in interpreting them as pictures.

Viewers are able to identify the intention-based resemblances between a picture and an object that I have identified in this section.

8. Some recent research suggests that infants may in fact possess these skills (Carpenter et al. 1998). If they do, their ability to interpret pictures poses no problem for me.

9. The only evidence Hochberg provides for picture interpretation in infants is sameness of (verbal) response to picture and object. Cabe (1980, 334) identifies three criteria as necessary for interpretation: sameness of response, spontaneity of response, and ability to differentiate picture and object. However, he acknowledges that the third criterion is rarely assessed in the experiments he reviews (335).

10. Cabe (1980, 332) acknowledges that very different objects (for example, red mail trucks and red fish) may elicit the same unlearned response in an animal, and thus that sameness of response is not alone a sound basis for inferring the ability to interpret pictures.
independently of knowledge of depictive content. We thus have the basis for a resemblance account of depiction that meets both the diversity and the independence constraints, and (bracketing temporarily cases involving either the depiction of nonexistents or the second kind of inadvertent depiction identified above) can identify a necessary condition for depiction.

1. A marked surface depicts an object \( O \) only if:
   a. Its maker intended it to resemble \( O \) in a certain visible respect(s) and thus to bring \( O \) to viewers’ minds, and intended that these resemblances have this effect in part because viewers recognize that intention, or
   b. Its maker intended that the above resemblances to \( O \) obtain and intended thereby to adhere to a stylistic convention extant in his or her community, characterized by resemblances in the respect(s) at issue, and thus to bring that object to viewers’ minds, or
   c. Its maker marked the surface with the intention of responding to a communication problem to which a conventional solution is extant in his or her community, which is characterized by resemblances in the given respect(s).\(^{11}\)

A marked surface’s maker, in the sense at issue here, is the person(s) whose actions are causally responsible for the surface bearing the respect(s) of resemblance at issue to \( O \). Many pictures have more than one maker. Someone may produce a linocut print, for example, from a linocut produced by someone else. The print’s shape resemblance to its object may be due to the way the latter cut the linocut, while its color resemblance to that object may be due to the former’s choice of ink. Similarly, a photograph’s resemblance to its object results partly from the photographer pointing his or her camera at that object, and partly from the camera designer making the camera with which the photograph was taken so that the photographs taken with it would exhibit certain resemblances to the objects at which the camera was pointed when they were taken. Sometimes, one maker’s intentions constrain the influence another maker’s intentions can have on depictive content. For example, camera designers generally intend their cameras to be used to produce photographs that bear certain respects of resemblance to the scenes that are causally responsible for those photographs. Photographers’ intentions can influence depictive content only within the constraints set by the more general intentions of camera designers, by determining at what objects cameras are pointed and how their variable parameters are set. In other cases, one maker’s actions may override another maker’s intentions. One maker’s intentions are overridden if another maker’s actions prevent these intentions from having the effect they would otherwise have had. For example, an artist might produce a linocut intending that it resemble in occlusion shape a vase containing two flowers, but a printer might take that linocut and fill in some of the grooves on its surface prior to printing from it, so that the resulting print resembles in occlusion shape a vase containing a single flower. The intentions of a picture’s maker(s) comprise all the nonoverridden intentions of all the marked surface’s makers.

In the next section, I will both identify a range of further conditions that must be met if a marked surface is to depict an object and solve the residual problems for resemblance accounts. This will enable me, ultimately, to identify a set of individually necessary conditions that jointly suffice for a marked surface to depict an object.

5. Canny Resemblance: The Complete Account

On the account I am proposing, a marked surface depicts an object only if it bears intention-based respects of resemblance to that object. This obviously requires, not just that the picture maker produce the marks with the relevant intentions, but also that the respects of resemblance picked out by his or her intentions actually obtain between picture and object. A picture maker’s intentions cannot determine those respects of resemblance that govern depictive content unless he or she succeeds in realizing them. Thus:

2. A marked surface depicts \( O \) only if it resembles \( O \) in the relevant intention-based respects.

A surface may resemble an object in certain respects that bear one of the requisite relations to intention, yet fail to depict the object because it is only by accident that the surface’s maker succeeds in marking the surface so that it resembles the object in the relevant respects. For example, I may mark a piece of paper, intending that it resemble an orangutan in respect of occlusion shape, but lack the skill to produce marks that so
resemble an orangutan. If, in frustration, I throw the paper into the fire, and the fire singes the paper in a pattern that resembles an orangutan in occlusion shape, I will not have depicted an orangutan because the causal chain linking the pattern on the surface to my intention to mark the surface with that pattern is deviant. Such a scenario is not one of picture production because the paper’s resemblance to an orangutan does not obtain because of my intention to produce such a resemblance. Thus, a further condition that is necessary for a marked surface to depict an object is that the surface bear its intention-based resemblance(s) to that object because its maker produced it with one of the three kinds of intentions identified in the previous section.

3. A marked surface depicts $O$ only if condition 2 holds because condition 1 holds.

This condition captures the fact that pictures are artifacts.

The conditions identified so far may all be met by a marked surface that is not a picture. Suppose that I mark a surface, intending that it resemble a red letterbox in respect just of color and intending viewers to recognize this intention. Suppose also that the marks I produce in fact resemble a red letterbox in respect of color and that they do so because I intended to produce such a resemblance. The marked surface will nonetheless not depict a letterbox because there are too many other, very different things that it also resembles in respect of color, such as apples, lipsticks, and sports cars. The color in respect of which the surface resembles the letterbox is too prevalent for that resemblance alone to underwrite depiction. The point is not that resemblance in respect of color can underwrite depiction only if it obtains solely between a marked surface and a single other object, for some pictures resemble, in the relevant intention-based respects, objects other than those they depict (consider pictures that depict one of a pair of identical twins). Rather:

4. A marked surface depicts $O$ only if it bears intention-based respects of resemblance to $O$ that jointly capture $O$’s overall appearance, so as to distinguish it from objects for which it would not ordinarily be mistaken in appearance.

This condition does not prevent a picture from depicting one of a pair of identical twins since we ordinarily do mistake twins for one another in appearance. A marked surface that resembles each of a pair of twins equally may nonetheless depict one twin in particular if its maker intended it to resemble one twin in the respects at issue, and not the other. If its maker did not intend it to resemble either twin, but it resembles each in respects conventionally intended within the community to which its maker belongs, the surface may depict a twin, without depicting either in particular.

I am now in a position to explain how my account overcomes the problem of the reflexivity of resemblance. Although resemblance is a reflexive relation, the relation of intention-based resemblance in some respect(s), like that of depiction, is not typically reflexive. While the marked surfaces picture makers produce resemble themselves in all respects, their makers do not generally intend them to do so. Because pictures resemble themselves in all respects, any picture whose content is governed by a communicative convention will resemble itself in whichever respects characterize that convention. Nevertheless, it will not thereby depict itself since the convention-characteristic respects in which it resembles itself will not generally capture the overall appearance of the picture, so as to distinguish it from that of objects for which it is not ordinarily mistaken in appearance. Features such as the flatness of picture surfaces are essential to distinguishing them from such objects, but communicative conventions are rarely conventions to exploit resemblance in respect of flatness.

Unlike that of resemblance simpliciter, the relation of intention-based resemblance is not generally symmetrical. One marked surface may bear an intention-based resemblance to another marked surface—the front of a Brillo box, for example—without the Brillo box thereby bearing an intention-based resemblance to the former surface. The makers of Brillo boxes do not generally intend them to resemble anything at all. Even if they made them by intentionally producing exact resemblances to previous Brillo boxes, the resultant Brillo boxes would not depict Brillo boxes because their makers would not thereby be responding to communication problems.

The intention-based resemblance account also overcomes the problem of the ubiquity of resemblance. Although everything resembles every other thing in at least one respect, not everything resembles every other thing in the particular intention-based respects that govern any instance of depiction. Moreover, while there will be some respects in which pictures resemble other things more closely than their objects, they may bear the intention-based respects of resemblance at issue either to their objects alone, or to each of the members of a limited class to which their objects belong. The account’s appeal to intended respects of resemblance therefore has genuine explanatory power.
I propose to opt for the counterfactual, rather than the experiential solution to the problem of the depiction of nonexistents. This has the advantage of enabling me to remain neutral about the psychological salience of the resemblance relation. Moreover, because I do not insist on a single respect of resemblance as central to all depiction, it does not preclude cases of misrepresentation. As noted in section 3.1, single-respect resemblance accounts which adopt the counterfactual solution to this problem seem unable to explain why pictures misrepresent one object, rather than any other, as having certain properties. I can accommodate such cases by holding that pictures that misrepresent one object as another resemble the object that is misinterpreted in at least one respect, and the object as which it is misrepresented in at least one other respect. A picture misrepresents O as P, and not some other object, S, as P, because it bears the intended respects of (counterfactual) resemblance to O as it actually is (or would be, if it existed), and not to S as it actually is (or would be if it existed). Even when the resemblances at issue must be construed counterfactually, they have genuine explanatory power because they are resemblances to the nonexistent objects as they would be, did they exist, and not to those objects with appearances other than those they would have, did they exist. Consequently, we must modify the conditions specified above so as to accommodate the following:

- A marked surface depicts an object O as P only if it resembles O in at least one visible respect (or would do so if O existed) and resembles Ps in at least one visible respect (or would do so if Ps existed).

If O is P, the surface will depict O accurately, and all the resemblances at issue will be resemblances to O. If O is not P, the surface will misrepresent O, and some of those resemblances will be resemblances just to Ps.

These resemblances do not, by themselves, enable us to distinguish pictures that misrepresent O as P from ambiguous pictures that depict O and a P without depicting O as P since both kinds of picture will bear intention-based (counterfactual) resemblances to both O and to Ps. Figure 3 resembles a saxophonist in respect of occlusion shape and a woman's face illuminated from the side in respect of tonal relations, but does not thereby depict a saxophonist as a woman's face. Ambiguous pictures are distinguished from misrepresentations either—in cases in which their makers succeed in producing resemblances to just those objects they intended to bring to viewers' minds—by the intentions with which they were produced or—in cases in which picture makers inadvertently depict something other than they intended—by the appearances that the intention-based resemblances they bear to O and to Ps capture. In cases of the former kind, a picture is ambiguous if its maker intended to produce resemblances that bring O and a P independently to mind, but did not intend those resemblances to bring O as P to mind. If, by contrast, he or she intended them to bring O as P to mind, but did not intend them to bring O and a P independently to mind, the picture misrepresents O as P. In the latter kind of case, a picture depicts both O and a P if the intention-based resemblances it bears to O and to Ps capture, respectively, the overall appearance of O and of a P, but do not jointly capture the overall appearance of O as P. If, however, those resemblances fail, respectively, to capture the overall appearance of O and of a P, but jointly succeed in capturing the overall appearance of O as P, the picture misrepresents O as P. There is no problem with positing appearances for the nonexistent objects that such misrepresentations depict; indeed, it is precisely because they have associated appearances that the experienced resemblance approach can claim that we experience pictures as resembling them.

One might object to this explanation of depictive misrepresentation on the basis that some pictures which misrepresent their objects exploit a single respect of resemblance. For example, Philipon's drawing of King Louis-Philippe as a pear exploits only resemblance in respect of occlusion shape. It may therefore seem that it cannot bear two distinct respects of resemblance, one to Louis-Philippe as he actually is, and the other to a pear. Rather, the thought goes, I can only explain the drawing's content by claiming that it resembles both in respect of occlusion shape, but I am then faced with the problem that, to accommodate the disparity between the occlusion shape Louis-Philippe's face actually has and that which a pear has, I must take the occlusion shape property in respect of which the resemblances obtain to be so abstract that the drawing bears this resemblance equally to Louis-Philippe, pears, and a whole host of other objects. Thus, it appears, I succumb to the problem of the ubiquity of resemblance.

Fortunately, this is not the only explanation of such pictures open to me. First, such a picture may resemble either the object it misrepresents or the object as which it misrepresents it in respect of fairly determinate occlusion shape, while resembling the other in respect of more abstract occlusion shape. The picture may thereby resemble the former
of these objects in a respect in which it does not also resemble a great range of other objects, although, given the degree of misrepresentation of which such pictures are capable, it will often bear the latter resemblance to many different things. Nevertheless, there is a second resource which such pictures may exploit, namely, the resemblances in respect of occlusion shape that various of their parts bear either to the misrepresented object or to the object as which it is misrepresented. One part of such a picture may resemble the first of these objects in respect of fairly determinate occlusion shape, while another part may resemble the second in the same respect. This explains how such pictures may resemble both objects without falling victim to the problem of the ubiquity of resemblance.

Hopkins (1994, 428) rightly objects to the parts solution as a general solution to the problem of misrepresentation on the basis that, for some pictures which misrepresent their objects, it is not possible to isolate parts which resemble those objects as they actually are, and parts which resemble the objects as which they are misrepresented. Rather, many such pictures seem to bear an overall resemblance to the objects as misrepresented. This seems equally true of figure 4, although it exploits only resemblance in respect of occlusion shape. This is easily explained, however, by appeal to the fact that the picture exploits resemblance in respect of both occlusion shape in more and less abstract respects and the occlusion shapes of various of its parts. It bears an overall resemblance to Louis-Philippe as a pear because, although the central part of the picture resembles the features of Louis-Philippe's face alone, the outer part of the picture does double duty, resembling both Louis-Philippe's face as it actually is in respect of quite abstract occlusion shape, and pears in respect of fairly determinate occlusion shape. The picture resembles Louis-Philippe as a pear because it resembles his face and his features in, respectively, abstract occlusion shape and the determinate occlusion shape of the central part of the picture, and does not resemble a wide range of other objects in these two respects.

Pictures like figure 5 depict objects that are impossible because they possess contradictory visible properties. These constitute special cases of misrepresentation, in which O (for example, an ascending staircase running in one direction) is misrepresented as P (for example, something connected at both ends to an ascending staircase running in the same direction), where O could not be P. The resemblances that govern such pictures are resemblances either to O or to Ps, where O and a P are each possible objects, not resemblances to O as P. For example, the upper quarter of figure 5 resembles a building with a staircase ascending in a clockwise direction in respect of its own occlusion shape and tonal relations, while it resembles something joined at both ends to a staircase ascending in a clockwise direction in respect of the occlusion shape and tonal relations of the picture parts to which it is attached, namely, those composing the adjoining quarter of the picture plane.

There may be alternative specifications of the impossible objects at issue, which do not construe them as one possible object misrepresented as another (for example, figure 5 might be described as depicting a continually ascending staircase, the top of which joins its base). Because what one can intend to do is restricted to what it is possible
to do, one cannot intend to produce counterfactual resemblances to
something that could not exist, and the specifications of the impossible
objects at issue that figure in picture makers’ intentions therefore can-
not be of this alternative kind. Nevertheless, so long as the specifications
that do figure in picture makers’ intentions are equivalent to the alter-
native specifications (an ascending staircase running in one direction
connected at both ends to an ascending staircase running in the same
direction just is a continually ascending staircase, the top of which joins
its base), the fact that pictures depict, not just objects of the types speci-
ified by their makers’ intentions, but also objects of types, membership
of which is guaranteed by their membership of these intended types,
means that the resultant pictures will depict objects that can accurately
be described in any of these ways.

There is arguably another kind of impossible object that can be
depicted. Some pictures apparently depict fictional characters such as
Sherlock Holmes. Nevertheless, such characters are often thought to
be necessarily nonexistent (Kripke 1980, 157–58). Because ‘Sherlock
Holmes’ is a proper name, its reference is taken to depend on the ref-
erence it was intended to have when it was first introduced. Because it
was introduced as the name of a fictional character, the name had no
bearer when first introduced. It therefore continues to have no bearer
whenever it is subsequently used. Consequently, it is argued, there could
be no person to whom the name ‘Sherlock Holmes’ refers. Presuming
this is correct, there can be no pictures of Sherlock Holmes. Neverthe-
less, those things we think of as depicting Sherlock Holmes are pictures:
pictures that depict a man—but no man in particular—with the appear-
ance characteristic of Sherlock Holmes. We think of these pictures as
depicting Sherlock Holmes because, while their makers intended them
to resemble men with the appearance of Sherlock Holmes, they also
intended us to make-believe that they resemble Sherlock Holmes in just
the respects in which they resemble such men and because, when we
look at them, we make believe that they resemble Sherlock Holmes in
those respects.  

The fact that the proposed account is able to overcome the vari-
ous problems to which resemblance accounts are subject suggests that
the four necessary conditions specified above will, suitably amended,
provide conditions that are not just individually necessary, but also
jointly sufficient for depiction. By incorporating the above solution to

1. Either:
a. Its maker M intended both that it resemble a/Fs in a certain
visible respect(s) (or that it would do so if a/Fs existed) and
that it resemble Ps in a certain visible respect(s) (or that it
would do so if Ps existed), and intended that it thereby both
bring a as P/an F as P to viewers’ minds and that it do so in
part because viewers recognize this intention, or
b. M intended that these resemblances obtain (or that they
would do so if a/Fs and Ps existed) and intended thereby to
adhere to a communicative convention extant in M’s commu-
nity which exploits (counterfactual) resemblances in the given
respect(s), and intended thus to bring a as P/an F as P to view-
ers’ minds; or

2. It resembles a/Fs in the relevant respect(s) (or it would do so if
a/Fs existed), and it resembles Ps in the relevant respect(s) (or it
would do so if Ps existed);

3. Condition 2 holds because condition 1 does; and

4. The respect(s) in which it (counterfactually) resembles a/Fs and
Ps jointly capture the overall appearance of a as P/an F as P, so
as to distinguish it from objects for which it would not ordinarily
be mistaken in appearance.

13. Because a picture might misrepresent one thing as a second, as a third, and
perhaps even as a fourth or fifth, complete specification of this account will allow a
marked surface to depict O as P as Q as R, etc., by bearing intention-based resem-
blances to each of these things. For convenience and brevity, however, I formulate the
definition only as it applies to cases either of accurate depiction, or in which one thing
is misrepresented as just a second.
6. The Explanatory Power of Canny Resemblance

This account overcomes the difficulties for resemblance accounts outlined in section 2. However, the adequacy of a resemblance account with the explanatory aims identified in section 1 also depends on its ability to explain why pictures possess those features that distinguish them from other representations. As I will now argue, my account helps clarify which features are characteristic of depictive representation. By providing a unified explanation of why pictures possess many of those features that are commonly thought to distinguish depictive from other forms of representation, it gives us reason to think that some other such features are not in fact so distinctive.

Hopkins identifies six features as distinctive of depiction. My account explains four of these features readily. First, it explains why, as Hopkins argues, pictures must depict their objects as having some properties, and these properties must be reasonably determinate (Hopkins 1998, 27). For example, a portrait cannot depict a man without attributing some properties to him other than that of being a man. Moreover, the properties it attributes to him must be reasonably specific. While it might depict him simply as having two legs and two arms, it cannot depict him as having limbs of some completely indeterminate type. My account explains this feature as resulting from the fourth condition identified above. To depict an object, a marked surface must resemble it in respects that jointly capture its overall appearance. To do this, these resemblances must obtain between the surface and the object it depicts, but not between the surface and things for which that object would not ordinarily be mistaken in appearance. This ensures that the respects of resemblance at issue will be reasonably determinate, and thus ensures the determinacy of the properties the object is depicted as having (namely, those in respect of which the resemblance obtains). For example, although figure 1 is intended to resemble a standing person only in respect of fairly indeterminate occlusion shape relative to a point in front of that person, the occlusion shape it attributes to its object is nonetheless sufficiently determinate to resemble a person of fairly indeterminate occlusion shape, but not a bear of such shape.

My account also explains why, as Hopkins notes, pictorial misrepresentation is possible, but has its limits (Hopkins 1998, 30). Whereas one can describe an object as possessing only features that it does not in fact possess, one must depict an object as having at least some of the properties it actually possesses. This limit to pictorial misrepresentation results from the fact that, in order for a picture to depict O as P, where O is not P, it must resemble O in at least one respect. At minimum, therefore, it will attribute to O the property in respect of which it resembles O.

Two further features that Hopkins notes jointly capture what is known as the natural generativity of depiction. Let us, following Hopkins, call the ability to interpret novel pictures without any instruction as to their content general pictorial competence. Hopkins characterizes natural generativity in terms of a necessary and a sufficient condition for picture interpretation: general pictorial competence and knowledge of the appearance of an object are individually necessary and jointly sufficient for the ability to interpret a picture of that object (Hopkins 1998, 31). My account explains why these conditions hold and why pictorial competence is not, as Hopkins assumes, a general phenomenon, but is instead relativized to particular pictorial styles. Although the ability to interpret novel line drawings without any instruction as to their content may enable one to interpret pictures in some other styles without any such instruction, it may not enable one to interpret novel cubist paintings un instructed. General pictorial competence comprises the ability to identify the respects of resemblance which govern the depictive content of novel pictures. For some pictures, this ability may require only one's general capacity to identify intentions from the products of communicative behavior. However, as I noted earlier, knowledge of stylistic conventions is sometimes essential to the ability to identify the respects of resemblance at issue. In such cases, if one does not know the stylistic convention a picture employs, one will be unable to interpret that picture, even if one is able to interpret pictures in other styles without instruction as to their content. Pictorial competence operates across pictorial styles between pictures whose interpretation requires only the general ability to identify intentions from the products of communicative behavior.

Pictorial competence in a particular style is necessary for the ability to interpret a picture in that style because, unless one can identify the respects of resemblance that govern a picture's depictive content, one will be unable to work out what that picture depicts. Knowledge of the appearance of an object is necessary for the ability to interpret any picture of that object because depiction is governed by visible respects of resemblance and, unless one knows what visible properties an object has, one will be unable to work out that the picture depicts it on the
basis of such resemblances. Pictorial competence and knowledge of the appearance of an object jointly suffice for the ability to interpret a picture of that object because, if one knows the intention-based visible respects in which a picture resembles its object, and if one knows what visible properties an object has, one will be able to work out that the picture depicts that object, given that the respects of resemblance at issue jointly capture the overall appearance of the object.

Hopkins (1998, 27) also claims that everything depicted is depicted from some point or points of view. This claim is true only if one assumes (as Hopkins does, and as I have done to date) that all pictures are marked surfaces and, consequently, that all depiction is depiction by marked surfaces. Hopkins attempts to explain the viewpoint relativity of depiction by appeal to the viewpoint relativity of occlusion shape, and thus of experiences of resemblance in occlusion shape. However, if pictures weren't flat surfaces, a single picture could support multiple experiences of resemblance in occlusion shape, each from differing viewpoints, as a result of which it could depict its object without doing so from any particular viewpoint(s). The viewpoint relativity of occlusion shape supports the viewpoint relativity of depiction only on the assumption that pictures are marked surfaces that present occlusion shapes relative only to a restricted range of viewpoints.

I have offered no reason why any picture must exploit resemblance in respect of viewpoint-relative features. While some of the respects of resemblance that can govern depictive content are viewpoint relative—occlusion shape and aperture color, for example—others, such as texture, are not. Nevertheless, an argument analogous to the above is available to me: one that appeals to the viewpoint relativity of appearances, rather than the viewpoint relativity of occlusion shape.

The nature of our visual systems means that our visual experiences, and thus the appearances things have for us, are relative to a viewpoint, namely that of our two eyes. While we can develop conceptions of objects' overall, viewpoint-independent appearances, we can do so only in terms of the various different viewpoint-relative appearances they have from each of an unrestricted range of viewpoints. My account requires the respects in which a picture resembles its object to jointly capture the overall appearance of that object, so as to distinguish it from objects for which it would not ordinarily be mistaken in appearance. It follows from this that the features of a marked surface that govern its depictive content jointly resemble the picture's object in overall appearance. We can see marked surfaces only from a restricted range of viewpoints. The appearance of these features is therefore viewpoint relative. Because the overall appearance of the picture's object resembles the overall appearance of these features, the overall appearance of its object will likewise be viewpoint relative. Consequently, any marked surface that depicts an object depicts it from some point or points of view. Any adequate specification of a picture's object will be viewpoint relative.

However, if we drop the assumption that all depiction is depiction by marked surfaces, we can see that there is a broader notion of depiction that is not inherently viewpoint relative. Some three-dimensional objects, such as sculptures, meet the four criteria for depiction. Because the viewing angles from which their representationally relevant features are accessible need not be restricted, they need not depict their objects from any point or points of view. Therefore, while this feature may characterize depiction by marked surfaces, it is not characteristic of this broader notion of depiction that encompasses anything that meets the criteria for depiction.

Finally, Hopkins (1998, 28) claims that whatever can be depicted could be seen. My account captures this feature by stipulating that depiction is governed by visible respects of resemblance. Again, however, a broader construal is possible, according to which things that are not visible can be depicted. If we relinquish not only the assumption that all depiction is by marked surfaces, but also the claim that depiction exploits only visible respects of resemblance, it is possible to capture a form of representation which exploits perceptible respects of resemblance and is common not only to mimes, sculptures, and pictures, but also to sound recordings and vocal imitations. Because it admits of more and less restricted forms, my account captures the sense in which depiction by marked surfaces is a unique, viewpoint-relative form of representation; the sense in which sculptures, mimes, and paintings all embody a distinctively visual form of representation; and also the sense in which representation by sound recordings and vocal imitations is of the same type as representation by paintings and drawings.

Conclusion

Resemblance accounts are not to be relegated to the scrap heap of history. Although rival resemblance accounts fail to provide an adequate solution either to the problem of what it is to depict an object or to
the problem of how we work out that something depicts an object, the resemblance account I have proposed does everything one could hope for in an account of depiction. First, it provides the most ambitious of the two kinds of answer to the question of what it is to depict an object. It explains what relation something must bear to an object in order to depict it: one of (counterfactual) resemblance in intention-based respects. It also explains what makes something a member of a particular depictive representational system. Something belongs to such a system if it bears the intention-based respects of resemblance characteristic of the system as if to some object, but not to things for which that object would not ordinarily be mistaken in appearance. Second, my account goes a considerable way toward answering the epistemological question of how we interpret pictures. Our ability to interpret pictures is grounded both in the more general ability to identify intentions from the products of communicative behavior and in our knowledge of stylistic conventions. Third, it explains why pictures exhibit those features that distinguish them from other representations and shows that some of the features that have been taken to be distinctive of depiction are not in fact so. In doing so, it explains how depiction is related to a range of other forms of representation. By admitting of broader construal, it explains how depiction, narrowly construed, is related to three-dimensional visual representation and perceptual representation in nonvisual modalities. Finally, by showing that depiction has its origins in general human communicative abilities, it shows how depiction is related to language, that form of representation with which it is most often contrasted.

References