

Chapter 4

Form and Norm in Pictures

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Hylomorphism is a metaphysical view, traced back to Aristotle, that holds that things are constituted by both their form and their matter. For example, a statue may have clay as its matter and the shape of the subject portrayed as its form. In a recent book,¹ Simon Evnine revisited Aristotle's metaphysics, arguing that the notion of form is unified with those of origin and function, while the notion of matter subsumes not only stuff such as clay or marble, but also more complex components which comprise the form. For example, the matter of a bicycle might consist of wheels, frame, tires etc. while its form is how those components are arranged by a certain process of making, namely the origin, for a certain purpose, namely the function.² Artifacts, from this perspective, are "the impress of mind on matter".³ In this paper I will argue that pictures also can be analysed from a hylomorphic perspective along these lines. Specifically, I will argue that the matter of a picture is a colored surface while its form is a norm which prescribe a certain use of that surface.

The claim that the matter of a picture is a colored surface paves the way for a unitary account that concern both concrete pictures such as paintings and more abstract pictures such as the digital images. What matters is the distribution of colors on a surface, regardless of whether this distribution is recorded by means of paint on a canvas or by means of an array of digits. Note that black-and-white pictures are also included in as black, white, and grey also are considered as colors in this analysis.

From a hylomorphic perspective, having a colored surface as the matter is necessary for something to be a picture, but not sufficient. A further component is required, namely the form. There are many colored surfaces which are not pictures because they lack the pictorial form. I propose to cast the latter as a norm that prescribes one to enjoy a peculiar visual experience of things that are not in one's immediate surroundings.

1 Evenine (2016).

2 See Evnine (2016) 9.

3 Ibid. 100.

One sees a colored surface as an object which has its place here and now, but when one uses that colored surface as a picture, thereby abiding by its norm, one also sees other things that have not their place here and now. It is worth characterizing the experience of the things depicted as a visual experience since things appear as organized in space just as they do in an ordinary visual experience. Yet, the pictorial experience differs from ordinary vision since things do not appear as organized in a space which surrounds and encompasses ourselves.

Thus, pictures are artifacts whose function consists in triggering visual experiences of things that are not in front of the viewer. While the matter of a picture is the colored surface that can trigger such an experience, the picture's form is the norm that prescribes the use of that surface which is to enjoy that experience.

Each picture may supplement the general norm that prescribes to see something in the colored surface with a specific norm that specifies what to see. Richard Wollheim calls the latter norm "the standard of correctness" of a picture, arguing that it depends on the history of making of the picture.⁴ For example, the standard of correctness may specify the kind of things that a picture portray, or the place and time of the scene portrayed.⁵ On the one hand, the standard of correctness is constrained by the picture's matter: the standard cannot force one to have visual experiences which could not be elicited by the colored surface. On the other hand, the standard can enrich the visual experience elicited by the colored surface, enabling one to properly understand what one sees. That is what Wollheim calls the "appropriate experience" of a picture.⁶

By means of its standard of correctness, a picture can play a communicative role. The viewer does not only enjoy the visual experience that the picture elicits, but also recognizes that this experience was elicited by a maker for a communicative purpose in a certain context. What is seen in the pictures is thus supplemented by what is communicated by it. The distinction between what is seen in and what is communicated by a picture matches the distinction between what is said and what is communicated linguistically, namely, the distinction between semantics and pragmatics. What is said only depends on the syntactic and semantic rules of a certain language, while what is communicated also depends on the

4 Wollheim (1980).

5 See Terrone (2021).

6 Wollheim (1980).

mental attitudes deployed in a certain context.⁷ Yet, a difference remains between depiction and language due to the difference between the matter of pictures and that of linguistic utterances. The matter of an utterance is a sequence of words, while the matter of a picture is a colored surface. Consequently, the form of an utterance prescribes one to understand the meaning of the sequence of words which is the utterance's matter, while the form of a picture prescribes one to enjoy the visual experience elicited by the colored surface which is the picture's matter. However, both the meaning of an utterance and the visual experience elicited by a picture can be exploited for further communicative purposes.

As explained by John Austin, utterances can make different kinds of speech act, for example, assertions, directives, interrogatives.⁸ In principle, the same holds true for pictures. One can use a picture to make assertions about how certain things look or about the occurring of a certain event, but one can also use a picture to give directives for assembling a piece of furniture,⁹ or to invite imaginings by means of a speech act of "fiction-making".¹⁰ However, pictures are less flexible than language since they lack connectives such as "or", "if", "because", or indicators such as question marks. Still, this is just a difference in degree which should not obscure the fact that both pictures and language can be used to make speech acts.

The place of pictures is somewhere in between language and perception. On the one hand, pictures resemble perception since their matter is a colored surface that can elicit a visual experience. On the other hand, pictures resemble language as for their form, which is a norm that enables communication by coordinating the intentions of pictures' makers with the cognitive responses of the viewers.

Ordinary perceptual experience involves content which is open-ended, requiring us to adopt our own perspective. However, when we look at a picture, our vision is constrained by the intentions of the picture's maker. We see things from a given perspective which is not up to us but rather is the same for all the picture's viewers. Moreover, in a pictorial experience we can see the same scene from the same perspective how many times we want, while in ordinary perception every moment is unique. Pictorial experience is closed and repeatable while ordinary perception is rather unrepeatable and open-ended.

7 Recanati (2004).

8 Austin (1962).

9 See Frixione/Lombardi (2015).

10 See García-Carpintero (2013).

Pictures turn perception into a form of communication which resembles linguistic communication. Yet, the perceptual root of pictures differentiates them from language. While linguistic sentences are sequences of words which match the conceptual structure of high-level cognition, pictures are colored surfaces which match the spatial structure of the visual field. Consequently, there are no dictionaries and grammatical rules for pictures. While the speaker of a language combines words from the dictionary by means of the rule of the grammar to enable the listener to grasp the intended meaning, the maker of a picture only organizes colors on a surface to elicit the proper visual experience from the viewer.

Although only the sequences of words that abide by the dictionary and grammar count as utterances of a certain language, any distribution of colors on a surface may count, in principle, as an image. That is why there can be abstract images and not abstract utterances. An abstract image is a colored surface which does not enable us to see things in it, as pictures usually do, and yet has a form which is a norm that prescribes us to enjoy a visual experience of that surface. In this sense, abstract images are borderline cases since they have the matter of paradigm pictures, namely a colored surface, but also a peculiar form which prescribes us to visually scrutinize that very surface as an object in our space rather than to see in it other things arranged in a different space.

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