

## **John Hyman**

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### **1. Why were you initially drawn to the study of images?**

I read Ernst Gombrich's wonderful book *Art and Illusion* in 1981. I'd completed my BA a few months earlier, and I was spending a year in Geneva on a scholarship, before returning to Oxford to begin the BPhil. The topic in philosophy that interested me most at that time was perception, and I was struck by the extent to which Gombrich's arguments relied on views about visual perception that he had inherited from the Helmholtzian tradition in psychology, and therefore indirectly from Locke and Kant. I thought that arguments in the philosophy of perception exposed serious mistakes and confusions in this tradition, and that they could therefore shed important light on the fascinating questions about pictorial art that Gombrich discussed in his book.

### **2. What do you consider your contribution to the field?**

One of the main results of pursuing this line of enquiry was that I discovered that twentieth century ideas about Renaissance perspective, and about the techniques for depicting space and light that were invented in the ancient world, depended crucially on a theory of visual perception, which stemmed from the advances made in optics in the seventeenth century, and still dominates the scientific study of perception today. The theory is that visual perception is the result of interpreting retinal images – the screen images objects in the visual field produce in our eyes. Helmholtz thought this process of interpretation was similar to reasoning or making inferences, in which the logical steps are governed by laws of association, drawn from the experience, which begins in infancy, of moving our limbs and bodies with our eyes open, and touching or bumping into things. Psychologists now think of it as making computations, in which the logical steps are governed by algorithms that are partly innate and partly the result of learning. But the basic idea is the same.

The influence of this theory on art history was immense, because it led psychologists and art historians to believe that shading, foreshortening and perspective are successful techniques for depicting solidity and depth because pictures that use these techniques resemble retinal images – the pictures our visual system has evolved to interpret. Now this cannot be right, because a painting which really did resemble a retinal image would be painted upside down on the inside of a sphere; it would flicker and change four or five times each second, which is

the rate at which the eyeball jumps from one fixation to another; some parts of it would be blurred and some parts of it would be in focus; it would have a blurry wedge in the corner where the nose is; there would be a blank patch near the middle for the blindspot; and so on. But explaining exactly where the train of thought goes wrong is a delicate and complicated task.

I have explored these connected ideas about perception and art and their roots in seventeenth century optics in several places, most recently in my book *The Objective Eye*. I've tried to show how our understanding of the seminal developments in Western art can be transformed by philosophy, and by a philosophically informed study of the history of optics. More broadly, I've argued that a correct understanding of the realistic impulse in Western art is threatened from two sides: from one side by the misconceived ideas about vision mentioned above, and from the other side by the idea that the impression of reality some works of art convey more forcibly than others depends on the novelty or the familiarity of the system of pictorial conventions the artist used to represent his subject. (Philosophers associate the latter idea with Nelson Goodman's book *Languages of Art*, but it was already well established in art history when this was published, partly because of the influence of Roman Jakobson and Leo Steinberg.) The principal aim of the last two chapters of *The Objective Eye* is to develop a way of understanding realism in art that is free from errors of both kinds.

The other main contribution I have made to the philosophical study of art concerns the idea of depiction in general. I've defended a qualified and – if I can put it this way – purified version of the so-called 'resemblance' theory of depiction: the theory that pictures differ from texts in resembling the objects that they represent. Two related mistakes led philosophers to abandon this theory. First, they mistakenly thought that resemblance is a relation, whereas the truth is that 'resembles', 'is like', 'looks like', etc. can function as two-place predicates and express relations (e.g. 'SoHo is like Hampstead'); but they can also function as copular verbs, that is, as part of a one-place predicate (e.g. 'SoHo is like a village'). Second, there is a fundamental distinction between a picture's having some generic content (e.g. depicting a bearded man, or a town) and a picture's portraying an individual (e.g. depicting Jesus, or Jerusalem). All figurative pictures have some generic content, but only some portray, just as all descriptions have a sense but only some refer. ('The present king of France' has a sense but does not refer.) But philosophers have commonly confused or amalgamated theories about the sense of pictures and theories about their reference (e.g. Wollheim), or assumed that a theory of

depiction is first and foremost a theory of reference (e.g. Goodman) – as it were, a theory of the portrait – and that a theory of sense can be developed from it, rather as Wittgenstein’s theory of meaning in the *Tractatus* was developed from his conception of a name. These mistakes are related because reference is a relation whereas sense is not. So if resemblance is assumed to be a relation, the resemblance theory of depiction is bound to be interpreted as a theory of pictorial reference, whereas it is (or should be) a theory of pictorial sense.

I have argued that if we correct these mistakes, and if we appreciate that a theory of depiction is first and foremost a theory of pictorial sense, we can recover the common-sense idea that pictures depict things by copying (or, better, presenting) their form and colour. So instead of rejecting the resemblance theory, as philosophers have tended to do in the last fifty years, we can make it precise. The most recent statement of my views on this subject is in a lecture I contributed to the Royal Institute of Philosophy’s 2010-11 series, *Philosophy and the Arts*. Finally, I would mention an article about Ramachandran’s and Zeki’s writings on the visual arts, ‘Art and Neuroscience’. This isn’t a major piece of research. I wrote it over a weekend. But it attacks an idea that is rapidly gaining currency today, that neuroscience can build new foundations for the study of the visual arts. I argue that the leading ideas in so-called neuroaesthetics are intellectually jejune and insufficiently informed about philosophy or art; and I try to show, as I did when I wrote about Renaissance perspective, that while science can sometimes correct misconceptions that arise in philosophy, the reverse is also true.

### **3. What is the proper role of the study of images in relation to other academic disciplines?**

Philosophy is a thickly interwoven subject. If I may borrow an image from neuroscience, in spite of my comments above, questions in philosophy are almost as densely connected with each other as neurons in the brain. The philosophical study of images cannot be divorced from the philosophy of perception, the philosophy of language, philosophical logic, and other areas of philosophical enquiry. And philosophical, historical and scientific studies of images are also closely related to each other. This is why the subject is so challenging and so rewarding. But – at least at present – the relationship between philosophy and science is the one that we need most to understand correctly, and that is most widely misunderstood. Many cognitive scientists interested in the visual arts have a very sketchy knowledge of philosophy in general and of the philosophy of art in particular. For their part, many philosophers are uncritical of ideas in cognitive science that seem to confirm their prior commitments or intuitions, and

their assessment of competing ideas in the field tends to be superficial and unsystematic, if it happens at all. There is an unfortunate tendency among philosophers to equate respect for science with deference to recent scientific ideas, however speculative and however coloured with philosophical ideas they would dismiss as muddled or simplistic if they came across them in their colleagues' work. Ultimately, what is needed is a properly thought-out view of the relationship between science and philosophy in general. This is something philosophers interested in depiction need as much as philosophers of physics and philosophers of mind, because of the extensive scientific literature about the perception of pictures. But there is little evidence of it in the philosophical literature about pictorial art.

#### **4. What do you consider the most important topics and/or contributions in the study of images?**

The most important texts in the last fifty years are surely Gombrich's *Art and Illusion* and Goodman's *Languages of Art*. *Art and Illusion* may be muddled at many crucial points, but it is pathbreaking; and the principal ideas in *Languages of Art* may be utterly misguided, but they are presented with a power, economy and panache that makes them impossible to ignore. Wollheim is an interesting writer about art, but in my view his writings on the fundamental philosophical questions about images are overrated. In particular, his theory of representation in the visual arts (which results from an insufficiently penetrating criticism of Gombrich) and his theory of realism are both superficial. Unlike Goodman's ideas, one does not learn much by engaging with them, except that they are wrong. All in all, I have probably learned more from the great philosophically-informed art historians in the German tradition (Wolfflin, Panofsky, Wind, Gombrich, etc.) than from philosophical studies of the visual arts. As for topics, I suppose it is obvious that I regard the topics I have studied as the most important ones – that is why I have studied them. The most important gap in my own work, I think, is that I have not written extensively about the connection between questions about the nature of pictorial art – or specific pictorial media, such as photography – and questions about its value as art. It is not essential to think about this in order to address the basic questions about depiction, realism and perspective on which I have focused, any more than it is essential to think about poetry in the philosophy of language. But it is a rich field of study.

#### **5. What are the most important open problems in this field and what are the prospects/avenues for progress?**

Important problems in philosophy always remain open. As for progress, I believe it is

possible. But I worry that increasing specialization stands in the way of progress, because of the interconnectedness of philosophy, which I mentioned earlier. Valuable new ideas in philosophy are often the result of making unexpected connections between different parts of the subject, and specialization makes this less likely to occur. Wittgenstein made a sardonic comment about progress in philosophy: 'I read "philosophers are no nearer to the meaning of 'Reality' than Plato got ..." What a singular situation. How singular then that Plato has been able to get even as far as he did! Or that we could get no further afterwards! Was it because Plato was so clever?' (Culture and Value, revised edition (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), p.22.) Anthony Kenny once commented that he thought this probably was the reason! Be that as it may, I think we can make progress in philosophy. But unlike in science we can also make regress. Regress in science could now only happen as a result of a social catastrophe, whereas in philosophy it can easily happen from one generation to the next, just because a certain range of philosophical literature has gone out of fashion. (Think of the decline of logic in the early modern period.) Also unlike in science, progress in philosophy does not mean adding to a body of established and agreed results. It is reasonable to hope for progress, but not consensus.

As I see it, philosophy has two complementary aims, one constructive and the other destructive. The constructive aim of philosophy is to provide a systematic exposition of the principal concepts or ideas used in a domain of thought; and to modify or replace existing concepts, when they give rise to paradoxes or embody confusion. In some parts of philosophy, such as ethics or philosophy of mind, the domain of thought is one we all inhabit, simply in virtue of being mature, socialized human beings; whereas in other parts of philosophy, such as philosophy of law or philosophy of physics, it is not. When it succeeds, this kind of philosophy makes us self-conscious thinkers, aware of the structure of our own systems of concepts and ideas. The destructive aim of philosophy, on the other hand, is to expose and criticize the errors and myths that dominate our thinking when this intellectually informed and self-conscious use of concepts fails. For example, in ethics, the claim that only pleasure and pain have intrinsic value; in metaphysics, the theory that space and time are created by the mind; and in psychology, the idea that thoughts and feelings are electrical activities in the brain. It was because he was so preoccupied with philosophy in its destructive mode that Wittgenstein described the philosopher's treatment of a question as being like the treatment of an illness.

In the philosophical study of images, the principal concepts include form, colour, depiction (sense), depiction (reference), realism, etc. And the myths include (i) painting is mirroring; (ii) mirror images are pictures; and (iii) vision is the result of interpreting images in the eye. If I could encourage one avenue for making progress, it would be basing the theory of images more firmly on a careful study of the concepts of colour and form, and on the distinction between an optical image and a picture.

### **Selected publications by John Hyman**

2013. Depiction, in *Philosophy and the Arts*, ed. Anthony O’Hear. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

2010. Art and Neuroscience, in *Beyond Mimesis and Convention: Representation in Art and Science*, eds. Roman Frigg and Matthew Hunter. Dordrecht: Springer. (German translation: ‘Kunst und Neurowissenschaft’ in *Kunst und Kognition*, ed. M. Bauer et al, Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2006.)

2006. *The Objective Eye: Color, Form and Reality in the Theory of Art*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

2005. Realism and Relativism in the Theory of Art’ [ch.9 of *The Objective Eye*], *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 105/1: 25-53.

Some other publications:

‘How knowledge works’, *Phil. Quarterly*, October 1999. 433-451.

‘-ings and -ers’, *Ratio Special Issue: Meaning and Representation*, December 2001. 298-317.

‘Pains and places’, *Philosophy*, January 2003. 5-24.

‘What, if anything, are colours relative to?’, *Philosophy*, October 2005. 475-494.

‘Knowledge and evidence’, *Mind*, October 2006. 633-658.

‘The Road to Larissa’, *Ratio Special Issue: Agents and their Actions*, December 2010. 393-414.

‘Voluntariness and Choice’, *Phil. Quarterly*, forthcoming.