

Wittgenstein and the Visual Experience of Depiction

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Ludwig Wittgenstein's discussion of aspect perception in the latter part of the *Philosophical Investigations* is generally credited with inspiring an important strand in contemporary explanations of depiction in which the visual experience of perceivers of pictures has a key role in the explanation. Although theorists working in this tradition have modified his concept of 'seeing-as', perceptual concepts related to seeing-as continue to have an important role in visual experience theories of depiction. A close examination of Wittgenstein's scattered remarks on perceptual concepts and experience, however, shows that he had far more to offer to those seeking a perceptual theory of depiction. The central aim of this paper is to bring these neglected features of his thought to the fore, and to indicate in outline how they might be developed into a theory of depiction.

1.

Ludwig Wittgenstein's discussion of aspect perception in the latter part of the *Philosophical Investigations* is generally credited with inspiring an important strand in contemporary explanations of depiction in which the visual experience of perceivers of pictures has a key role in the explanation.¹ Although theorists working in this tradition have modified his concept of 'seeing-as', perceptual concepts related to seeing-as continue to have an important role in visual experience theories of depiction. A close examination of Wittgenstein's scattered remarks on perceptual concepts and experience, however, shows that he had far more to offer to those seeking a perceptual theory of depiction. A key aim of this paper is to bring these neglected features of his thought to the fore, and to indicate in outline how they might be developed into a theory of depiction. Since Wittgenstein's later philosophy contains no theory of depiction, nor any indication that the discussion of pictures and visual experience is primarily directed toward understanding the *aesthetic* problem of depiction, development of his thought about depiction will involve a degree of re-construction. The account of depiction that emerges may be more properly called 'Wittgensteinian' than Wittgenstein's, but it will serve to indicate some of the ways in which Wittgenstein's thought about depiction has been neglected. Assessing the cogency of Wittgenstein's ideas, as well as placing them in relation to recent theories of depiction that give a key role to visual experience, are tasks beyond the scope of this essay.

2.

The appropriate starting point is the distinction Wittgenstein draws between two kinds of picture, and a corresponding distinction between two kinds of visual experience of pictures.

The former distinction is between ordinary unambiguous pictures with a determinate subject matter, and multi-aspect pictures such as the duck-rabbit that depict both a duck and a rabbit. In the context of his discussion of this latter kind of picture, Wittgenstein draws the distinction between the 'dawning of an aspect' and 'continuous seeing' of an aspect.² The former refers to those occasions when our experience of a picture-object changes without the picture itself changing. When looking at the duck-rabbit, for example, each change of visual experience, from duck to rabbit or vice versa, marks the dawning of an aspect. In such cases the seeing-as formulation is employed to report that an aspect has dawned or to report which of the possible aspects is being experienced. When looking at the duck-rabbit, for example, we might say that we see the picture as a rabbit or that we see it as a duck, thus reporting which of the aspects of the picture we are attending to. By contrast, 'continuous seeing' refers to those perceptual states in which only one aspect of the object provides the unchanging focus of attention. For example, when looking at an unambiguous line drawing of an object - what Wittgenstein calls a 'picture-object'³ - that does not lend itself to the kind of aspect-dawning experiences attached to the duck-rabbit picture, the one aspect of the drawing constituting its depictive content is *continuously seen*.

The perceptual reports of aspect-dawning experiences differ from reports of a continuously seen aspect in a manner providing a criterion for distinguishing between the two kinds of perceptual awareness. When one continuously sees a picture as what it depicts, one reports what one sees using a non-temporal formulation - e.g. 'Its a face', 'I see a face', etc. - which implies continuous seeing is an unchanging perceptual state rather than a visual experience. By contrast, a change of aspects is signalled by a temporal formulation of the report - e.g. 'Now its a duck, now I'm seeing a rabbit, now its a duck again' Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* op. cit., p.194-195 - which implies seeing an aspect dawn is a visual experience in the sense of a noticed change from one perceptual state to another.

A related difference between the two kinds of aspect perception concerns their relationship to the exercise of imagination. As Wittgenstein observes: 'Someone might see a boulder and exclaim: "A man!" . . . but no imagination is required to recognize a true-to-life picture of a dog as a dog . . . When I'm looking at a photograph, I don't tell myself "That could be seen as a human being"'.⁴ Although a rock may have a form such that one could imagine seeing it as a person, it makes no sense to suppose it could continuously be seen as a person whenever glanced. For imagining one thing as another has none of the spontaneity of continuous aspect perception. Likewise, it makes no more sense to suppose that when continuously seeing the pictorial content of an unambiguous picture we employ our imagination to do so, than it would to suppose there is such a thing as looking at a green leaf and imagining that it is green.⁵ We could look at a real leaf and imagine that it is plastic, and as long as we do so it would make sense to say we are seeing the leaf as plastic - thus indicating an awareness of the possibility of switching between seeing it as real and seeing it as plastic. From which we can infer that imagination has a role to play in some aspect-dawning experiences, but not in ordinary continuous visual awareness of the subject matter of unambiguous pictures. Indeed, the role imagination plays in aspect dawning experiences provides another criterion for distinguishing such visual experiences from the continuous seeing of an aspect, and the first hint that seeing-as is not the appropriate concept to invoke in an account of depiction.

Further doubts about the appropriateness of seeing-as are raised by Wittgenstein's discussion of the contrast between the experience of seeing a change of aspects and what he calls a continuous 'attitude' to an aspect. With regard to the latter, he writes: 'In some respects I stand towards [a picture-face] as I do towards a human face. I can study its expression, can

react to it as to the expression of the human face. A child can talk to picture-men or picture-animals, can treat them as dolls'.⁶

The contrast between such an attitude and aspect-dawning experiences provides another criterion for distinguishing between the two kinds of aspect perception. It is important to emphasize that Wittgenstein's point is not that we are under some illusion that the picture-face we see is really a human face. Rather, it is that in *some respects* we respond to what we see as if it were really the thing depicted. This characterization of this attitude toward what is seen during continuous aspect perception does not preclude awareness that what is seen is a picture of something. For when noting the relation between the attitude one has towards a picture of a table and the attitude one has towards a real table, Wittgenstein makes it clear that the former includes an awareness that the experienced object is a picture - as well as indicating something of the nature of that attitude: 'Although our attitude to a painted table derives historically from our attitude to real tables, the latter is not part of the former'.⁷

Wittgenstein's extended discussion of perceptual concepts primarily concentrates upon a wide range of aspect-dawning experiences and phenomena.⁸ In the course of his discussion, however, he briefly returns to continuous seeing and unambiguous pictures. Referring to the attitude we have towards an unambiguous picture of a lion, he writes: 'But do I see the picture in this aspect so long as I have this attitude towards it? - That can be said. But couldn't one also say: "I always see it as that, so long as I never see it as anything else"'.⁹

Since there would appear to be no possibility of some other aspect dawning when one is looking at an unambiguous picture Wittgenstein rhetorically asks: 'Do I ever really say of an ordinary picture (of a lion) that I see it as a lion?'¹⁰ It's not that it doesn't make *sense* to say of an unambiguous picture of lion that we *see it as* a lion, but rather, we need to distinguish between seeing-as and regarding-as because the experience of a pictorial aspect dawning is very different from continuously seeing an unambiguous picture as what it depicts. Since the bulk of his discussion is devoted to the concept of seeing-as, Wittgenstein is clearly more interested in aspect-dawning experiences. Nevertheless, he does develop the notion of continuous seeing into something that more accurately characterizes our attitude to fully-fledged pictures of unambiguous depictive content when he writes:

Perhaps the following expression would have been better: we *regard* the photograph, the picture on the wall, as the object itself (the man, the landscape, and so on) depicted there . . . I say 'We regard a portrait as a human being,' - but when do we do so, and for how long? *Always*, if we see it at all (and do not, say, see it as something else).¹¹

Regarding-as is a way of characterizing the attitude manifesting the perceptual state of one who looks at an unambiguous picture and continuously sees its pictorial aspect.

3.

Clearly regarding-as rather than seeing-as is the appropriate perceptual concept for a theory of depiction drawing upon Wittgenstein's thought, but by itself it provides little more than a foundation upon which an explanation of depiction might be erected. For such an explanation still needs to provide an account of why pictures are regarded as what they depict. This requires an account of the relation between a picture and what it depicts and an explanation

of how perception of this pictorial relation gives rise to a cognitive attitude and visual experience of the sort that regarding-as is. Notice that there are two different questions in need of an answer. First, there is the psychological question concerning the nature of the *visual awareness* of depiction: why does that awareness have the cognitive content it does? Secondly, there is the logical question concerning the nature of the pictorial relation: what is the relation between the marks on a surface and the object they depict that make *those* marks a picture of that object?

A remark Wittgenstein makes about aspect-dawning experiences provides a good starting point for the first question: 'The shape of the visual impression [corresponds] to the shape of the object (it looks rectangular to me, and is rectangular) – but what I perceive in the dawning of an aspect is not a property of the object, but an internal relation between it and other objects'.¹²

Wittgenstein's point is that when one looks at, for example, the duck-rabbit picture there is a correspondence between the shape that constitutes the picture and the shape within the sensory content of one's perceptual state. Conceived of purely as a shape in the visual world, the duck-rabbit picture corresponds to, and is identical with (hence both isomorphic and similar) the shapes in the visual field of one looking at it. But when one sees the picture as a rabbit - when, that is, one's perceptual state has that cognitive content - it is not because we notice such a correspondence or similarity between *shapes* in the visual field. Rather, it is because we notice an internal relation between the picture-rabbit and other rabbit-objects (such as e.g. all kinds of rabbit drawings, models of rabbits, toy rabbits, photographs of rabbits, and real rabbits) seen elsewhere. And the same must be true for states of continuous visual awareness of a picture as what it depicts. It is because we perceive an internal relation between one lion-object (a picture-lion) and other lion-objects that our perceptual state and attitude toward what we see has the cognitive content it does.

If one thing is internally related to another, then that relation is necessary to its identity as the thing it is. An object is always externally related to its shape since it could always have a slightly different shape without losing its identity as the object it is. So Wittgenstein's point is that when we look at a picture of an object, we do not regard it as what it depicts because of any perceived relation between the shapes on the picture surface and the shapes of other objects. Rather, we perceive an internal relation between the picture and what it depicts, the possession of which gives the picture its depictive content. If those who look at a picture see a picture-lion, then the picture's relation to lions is a necessary constituent of its identity as a picture-lion. The perceptual state of one looking at a picture-lion has the cognitive content it does because of the perception of this internal pictorial relation.

Discussing another aspect-dawning experience (this time, looking at a face and suddenly noticing a similarity between it and another face) Wittgenstein elaborates upon this internal relation:

Even if I say "There is a similarity between these two faces", several different things can matter to me. It could mean, for example: There is a similarity between *this* kind of face and *that* kind, where these two faces are distinguished by describing them. It may be the faces of *those men* that interest me, or it may be those facial *forms*, wherever I encounter them. The distinction I have in mind is, of course, that between the sense of: These two pieces have a similar shape - and:

The ellipse, the parabola and the hyperbola resemble each other. The difference is that between external and internal similarity.¹³

Wittgenstein is drawing a distinction here between, on the one hand, a kind of resemblance or similarity that is external in the sense that the relata are geometrical abstractions from the particular objects possessing these properties; and, on the other hand, a similarity internal to the particular objects being related. To take Wittgenstein's example, when looking at three shapes on a blackboard one might judge them similar in the sense that together they constitute a collection of curved lines. Alternatively, one might notice a similarity between them internal to their being what they are. That is, one might notice that they are all conic sections and thereby notice a resemblance between what these curves are, or what they mean. What is noticed is not a resemblance of geometrical shape, but of what I will call 'meaningful forms'. Grasping that the marks on the blackboard are an ellipse, a parabola and a hyperbola, and that they are all conic sections is to grasp that each mark is internally similar to the others in virtue of what each meaningful form is an instance of.

The notion of similarity at play here is not the kind of similarity of shape, isomorphism or fitting together that could be ascribed to two pieces of a jigsaw puzzle or two similar triangles. Rather, it is a similarity that arises from instances belonging together because of what they are. A good example of such a notion of similarity is to be found in the connection between instances of artefacts within a style or genre. Grouping particular instances of things according to their style requires the mastery of a technique of seeing similarities that is far from universally possessed. Indeed, even the agreement of judgement among experts that gives the practice sense may break down over particular instances. By contrast, virtually everyone masters the technique of perceiving the pictorial relation, and it is very unusual for someone to fail to see the pictorial relation. Like the expert on art deco furniture who can instantaneously perceive the similarity definitive of that kind of object, we are all experts on pictures capable of instantaneously perceiving the similarity definitive of a picture's identity. When we look at a picture of a lion and see a picture-lion, we do so because we are masters of the technique of perceiving the internal similarity between the picture-lion and other lion-objects.

In terms of the psychological question posed above, when we look at a picture of a lion, and see a picture-lion, our perceptual state and attitude toward what is seen has the cognitive content it does because we are skilled at perceiving the internal similarity that groups an instance of something with other instances of that thing that look very different. If it appears mysterious that we can instantly connect what we see when we look at a marked surface with other very different looking paradigm instances of an object, think of the ability to instantly recognize a building within the classical, gothic or modernist style. The mysteriousness of our grasp of depiction disappears as we reflect that we can perceive such similarities because we have learned to do so. Mastering the technique of seeing picture-objects is in this respect like learning to use language - we don't remember doing so, and this can make our abilities in these areas appear mysterious.

It is important to stress that the perceived similarity is between the meaningful forms that constitute a picture-object and other objects of that kind. That is, the similarity is between objects in the visual world, and not psychological phenomena. More will need to be said about this answer to the psychological question, but that will be difficult to do without first shifting our attention to the logical question of the nature of the pictorial relation. For if the psychological question is answered in terms of a perceived internal similarity between a picture-object and

other objects of the same sort, then to make progress we need to know what it is that makes certain marks on a surface a picture-object. What, then, does Wittgenstein suppose the nature of the pictorial relation to be?

4.

The answer is suggested by the term 'meaningful form', by which is meant a configuration of lines, shapes, colours etc. that have a meaning within a system of the sort Wittgenstein referred to as a 'picture-language'.¹⁴ On this conception, pictures are collections of forms of a certain sort having a role within a unique rule-governed system of pictorial signs. So Wittgenstein writes: 'The picture tells me something: it uses *words*, so to speak: here are eyes, mouth, nose, hands, etc. I am comparing the picture to a combination of linguistic forms'.¹⁵

The picture-eyes, picture-mouth etc., as well as the picture-person they combine into - i.e. the meaningful forms constituting the picture - have an analogous role in a pictorial system of meaning as words do in language. The analogy is not, of course, so close as to licence the claim that propositions are essentially pictures of states of affairs, which is the view of meaning that Wittgenstein advocated in his early work and which stands in contrast to his later thought.¹⁶ Nor is it a denotative theory of pictorial representation of the sort defended by Nelson Goodman.¹⁷ Rather, Wittgenstein's linguistic analogy is designed merely to indicate the similarities that do exist between the pictorial and linguistic modes of meaning. It is an analogy underpinned by the range of over-lapping uses to which both can be employed, including conveying information, warning, prescribing and forbidding. Any system capable of expressing meaning must be rule-governed and built upon the agreement in practice of those who understand the system. Having mastered the technique of understanding pictorial meaning is a matter of being familiar with the system of meaningful forms such that 'A picture of a human face is no less a familiar object than the human face itself'.¹⁸

When we are visually aware of meaningful forms in the picture-language, that perceptual state has the cognitive content it does because we grasp the meaning of the pictorial form, in much the same way that when we read a passage of descriptive prose our understanding of it has the cognitive content it does because of our grasp of the meaning of the words. Regarding a picture as what it depicts is like understanding a sentence since both are typically an instantaneous grasping of their respective signs. The criterion of both is located in what we do and say and, therefore, although they are different modes of meaning, our relation to both is closely analogous. Indeed, it is because pictorial and linguistic meaning are the result of the use of signs in analogous rule-governed systems that Wittgenstein can speak of a sentence being 'like a painting in words, and the very individual word in the sentence . . . like a picture'.¹⁹

The context in which Wittgenstein makes this last remark is his discussion of the distinction between experiencing, and being blind to, the meaning of a word. Being struck that a sentence is like a picture is an example of experiencing the meaning of a word, and is to be contrasted with both the 'experience' of skimming a newspaper for information and not experiencing the meaning of a word. There are, then, three possibilities Wittgenstein refers to: (1) not experiencing the meaning of a word - such as e.g. when one repeats a word over and over until it becomes a mere sound;²⁰ (2) our ordinary understanding or grasping of meaning; (3) experiencing the meaning of a word through concentrated attention upon it. There are direct parallels between each of these and the possibilities of one's relation to perceptual aspects: (i) not experiencing an aspect - such as e.g. when one fails to grasp that a painting

depicts a landscape, taking it instead for an abstract configuration of coloured shapes; (ii) ordinary regarding-as or continuous aspect experiences; (iii) aspect-dawning experiences. It is this characterization of the areas of overlap between the pictorial and linguistic systems of meaning that constitutes Wittgenstein's answer to the logical question of the nature of the pictorial relation.

Since a picture-language is essentially a visual mode of expression, our grasping the meaning of a particular pictorial form can be characterised as the perception of an internal similarity. We mustn't, however, be misled into thinking that noticing such a similarity is a matter of *comparing* two or more things. Understanding the meaning of the pictorial form coincides with our perception of it the way understanding the meaning of a word coincides with our hearing of it.^[21] Like any system of meaning, the picture-language has what Wittgenstein called a 'grammar' determining the correct use of the pictorial signs, such that to specify the grammar of a particular species of pictorial form is to specify its meaning. To specify the grammar of a particular species of pictorial form would be to specify the boundary between something being a particular picture-object and it being something else. It is important to emphasize that the similarity belongs to the grammar of the picture language, and our experience of it to perceptual psychology. As Wittgenstein notes: 'The system of language, however, is not in the category of experience. The experiences characteristic of using the system are not the system'.^[22] Therefore, the grammar of a particular species of pictorial form is given in terms of a perceptible similarity between the range of e.g. picture-lions - from highly detailed 'realist' depictions, through distorted and minimal line drawings. For a particular form to count as a picture-lion it must be sufficiently similar to other lion-objects for the spectator to recognize it as the kind of lion-object it is. To perceive that internal similarity is to grasp the meaning of the pictorial form, and this underlies the perceiver's attitude toward what they see in which they regard it as a lion.

All that remains is to note two plausible hypotheses from the psychology of perceptual experience that provide some indication of how we come to be able to grasp pictorial meaning. First, in order to be able to regard a picture as some object, the spectator must have some familiarity with the way such an object looks. Wittgenstein makes this point when he observes: 'You only see the duck and rabbit aspects if you are already conversant with the shapes of those animals'.^[23] This is not to say one must have had direct perceptual experience of a duck or rabbit, but one must have experience of the meaningful form of each, and in particular have had experience of other duck or rabbit pictures or objects. Secondly, someone who had grown up without ever having seen a picture of any sort will have some difficulty regarding a picture as what it depicts - even if he is familiar with the object it depicts, perhaps even if the object depicted is right in front of his eyes!^[24] If correct, these hypotheses powerfully suggest that we learn at a young age to connect the appearance of meaningful forms with other objects of a like sort. In doing so we learn our way around two-dimensional representations of a three dimensional world, which amounts to acquiring the ability to instantaneously perceive the intended internal similarity between picture and depicted object. How we first come to notice internal similarities is as mysterious as ever, but that is an issue well beyond the scope of this essay, if not philosophy itself.

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1. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell 1958), Part II, Section xi.
2. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, op. cit. 194. Stephen Mulhall is a notable example of someone who has seen the significance of the distinction, exploring it at length in *On Being in the World* (London: Routledge 1990).
3. Wittgenstein provides a simple line drawing of a face as an illustration of his concept.
4. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*, Vol. 2, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), §513-515
5. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* op. cit., 213
6. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* op. cit., p.194
7. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Grammar*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1974), pp. 164-165
8. Malcolm Budd, *Wittgenstein's Philosophy of Psychology* (London: Routledge, 1989), p.79 provides a useful list of the range of phenomena Wittgenstein discusses under this heading.
9. Ludwig Wittgenstein *Last Writings on the Philosophy of Psychology* Vol. 1 (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982), §670 - 671
10. Ludwig Wittgenstein *Last Writings on the Philosophy of Psychology* Vol. 1, op. cit., §675
11. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* op. cit., p.205
12. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* op. cit., p.212
13. Ludwig Wittgenstein *Last Writings on the Philosophy of Psychology*, op. cit. §155 - 156
14. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Grammar*, op. cit., p. 171
15. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Grammar*, op. cit., p. 170
16. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Trans. C.K. Ogden, (London: Routledge, 1922)
17. Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art*, 2nd Ed., (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1976)
18. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Grammar* , op. cit., 167
19. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* op. cit., p. 215
20. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* op. cit., p. 214
21. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Grammar* Op. cit. note 11. p.169
22. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Grammar* Op. cit. note 11, p. 170
23. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* op. cit., p. 207
24. Cf. Derogowski, *Illusions, Patterns and Pictures: A Cross-Cultural Perspective* (London: Academic Press, 1980), Chapter 4. For a dissenting view on this, see Noël Carroll, *Philosophy of Art* (New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 42.

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