KATERINA BANTINAKI

The Opticality of Pictorial Representation

In *Art and Knowledge* James Young explores the visual arts of the past hundred years and notes that the most striking development has been the emergence of the avant-garde style, adopted by artists such as Marcel Duchamp, Mark Rothko, and Andy Warhol.[1] All works employing the avant-garde style, Young argues, are discourse-dependent representations: they represent what they do via an associated body of discourse, which is usually the theory of art or the ideology of the artist. Young regards such representations as being more akin to language rather than to traditional works of visual art, as all typical instances of the latter are thought to represent in a direct manner: traditional works, according to Young, are *illustrative*, that is, they just *show* what they represent.

According to Young, the discontinuity between traditional and avant-garde visual art rests on the fact that the latter has ceased to be *visual*. And it has ceased to be visual in a twofold sense. On the one hand, the artwork is not autonomous anymore: rather it is inherently linked to a body of discourse, a theory, on which it draws and which it is intended to illustrate. On the other hand, and as an effect, the artwork cannot be understood simply on the basis of its manifest properties: one cannot make sense of the work unless one knows the theory to which it appeals for its meaning. Think, for instance, of a painting such as Warhol's *200 Campbell Soup Cans*: the painting shows soup cans; but what the painting shows, Young argues, has nothing to do with what it represents:

> The painting is intended to represent something besides soup cans. In particular it is intended as a representation of facts about images and quotidian life in the modern world. The painting is, however, unable to represent these facts *by itself.* It can do so only in conjunction with a body of discourse. . . . [It] cannot be understood and does not represent except in conjunction with what is said about [it].[2]

In sharp contrast, a traditional painting, such as Canaleto's painting of San Marco, is thought to give way naturally to what it represents: the painting, Young argues, represents San Marco because the viewer—that is, any viewer familiar with the appearance of San Marco—can recognize the Venetian cathedral in the painting. The viewer is *visually aware* of what the painting represents, and this is for Young the essence of visual art. Avant-garde visual art seems to work against this trait; it works against visuality or illustrativeness.

My concern in this article is not the relation between traditional and avant-garde works of visual art. Rather I want to focus on the conception of the visual character of especially *pictorial* works that Young seems to endorse and extend to all visual art. In particular I want to examine a conception of visuality that rests on two presumptions: (a) that a picture represents (in Young's words) *by itself*, that is, without appealing to contexts of information external to the picture; and (b) that, thereby, to make sense of a picture one simply needs to look at it, provided that one has a recognitional ability for the object represented. It is this conception of the visual character of pictorial works that forces the idea of a sharp discontinuity between traditional and avant-garde works of visual art. But the conception is, I will argue, erroneous to the extent that pictures always depend for their meaning on (and thus have to be supplemented by) information that artists had good reasons to regard as shared knowledge among the anticipated audience; it is therefore a misleading guide toward a right appreciation of the character of pictorial representation across different traditions. I will argue further that the popular belief, reflected in

The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 66:2 Spring 2008

Young's analysis, that one can be visually aware of what a picture represents, corresponds not so much to the process of pictorial understanding (as it is not unqualifiedly true of this process) as to the *character* of pictorial understanding: pictorial understanding is distinctively visual to the extent that—regardless of the way in which it has been accomplished—it informs and, at the same time, is informed by what can be seen in a picture.

A note needs to be made here on the significance of the project that I wish to undertake: it can be objected that, ever since the publication of Nelson Goodman's *Languages of Art* at least, it has been widely acknowledged that pictorial representations do not function as autonomous entities, in which case it could seem as if my analysis, if successful, would just reiterate a widely acknowledged fact. I believe, however, that there are good reasons to engage in the proposed analysis: (a) as Young's claim attests (and one could cite here also the anti-intentionalist claim, most famously stated by Monroe Beardsley, according to which the interpretation of visual works should be based on internal evidence alone), not all theorists acknowledge the nonautonomy of pictorial representation; (b) even theorists who *do* acknowledge that in some cases pictures depend for their meaning on external contexts of information implicitly or explicitly accept (as I want to deny) that this is not so in *paradigmatic* cases—Dominic McIver Lopes's conception of *basic picturing* (discussed in Section II) being a good case in point; (c) even if it is acknowledged that pictures *always* depend on external contexts of information in order to represent what they do, it is still worth explaining (1) why this is the case and, accordingly, on what sorts of information they depend; and (2) why, despite the nonautonomy of pictorial representation, the common insight that pictorial representation is a visual phenomenon does not lose its force. It is these reasons that merit the proposed analysis.

For reasons of coherence and simplicity in my discussion, I focus mainly on pictorial representation as practiced in the arts; however, I take it that my analysis applies to all instances of pictorial representation, for instance, pictures used to illustrate scientific data or pictures used in advertisement—although it has to be acknowledged that in this latter case (unlike the case of pictures that are works of art and the case of scientific illustrations), the external information on which a picture depends for its meaning is ready-to-hand for the targeted audience. Further, given that my interest is in the way that pictures represent or assume their meaning, I focus only on issues that are relevant to interpretation.

On the basis of the fact that representational pictures generate visual experiences with a certain content and the assumption that this is relevant to the way they represent, in what follows I will formulate an *opticality claim*, through an analysis of which I will point out the regularities that I take to be involved in the practice of pictorial representation and that, I believe, negate a *naïve* construal of this claim. In my discussion I will concede with Young that an inquiry into the content of a pictorial representation is an inquiry into what the representation was intended to stand for. I acknowledge that the role of the artist's intention in the whole project of interpretation is a rather controversial matter; however, for the sake of the argument I will just accept that in interpreting a picture we usually aim to discover the intended representational content of the picture and, so, in effect, that the intention behind the representational act usually qualifies one among possible interpretations.

The opticality claim—formulated after Richard Wollheim—is as follows:

> Opticality Claim: If a picture represents something there will be an experience of it that *determines* that it does so [and] this experience will be or include visual awareness of the thing represented.[3]

The opticality claim highlights the following fact: a certain interpretational strategy is appropriate to pictorial representation, and this interpretational strategy is such that it gives authority to the visual experience that the viewer has in response to a picture. This interpretational strategy is appropriate to pictorial representation to the extent that there is a correspondence between the representational content of a picture and the content of the visual experience that the viewer has in response to the picture.

I. WHOSE VISUAL EXPERIENCE?

We should be careful in our understanding of the correspondence that the opticality claim suggests: it *does not* follow from the opticality claim that the visual experience that any viewer might have in response to a picture determines what the picture

represents. Rather, the correspondence between the representational content of a picture and the content of the visual experience that the viewer has in response to the picture has to be limited to the visual experience of particular viewers. To understand why the correspondence needs to be thus limited, it might be useful to consider the case of a well-known picture that Tim Crane describes in *The Mechanical Mind*, which, although external to the domain of art, clearly raises the issue of spectatorship in pictorial representation:

> When NASA sent the Pioneer 10 space-probe to explore the solar system in 1972, they placed on board a metal plate, engraved with various pictures and signs. . . . The largest picture on the plate was a line drawing of a naked man and a naked woman, with the man's right hand raised in greeting. The idea behind this was that when Pioneer 10 eventually left the solar system . . . it would be discovered by some alien life-form. And perhaps these aliens [would] come to realize that our intentions towards them are peaceful. It seems to me that there is something very humorous about this story.[4]

But what is humorous about this story? One thing is that, even if the space-probe were discovered by aliens, to understand the meaning of the engravings these alien viewers (a) would have to understand first that the designs were not merely decoration: that their function was to represent something; and (b) they would have to have the perceptual ability to recognize the objects represented on the basis of visual information about those objects that the engravings provide.[5] But the most interesting point about this story is the reflection of a belief that has deep roots in our thinking about pictorial representation, on the transparency of pictures across place and time: the belief that a picture has a single possible representational content to which users with different cognitive backgrounds have equal and immediate access. Following such a belief, the picture on the plate unequivocally indicates our peaceful intentions. But this is not the case; there is nothing about the positioning of the man's hand that makes it a gesture, not to mention a friendly gesture, and there is nothing about the picture itself that unequivocally determines or specifies one out of all possible representational contents. If, for instance, in the alien culture that very gesture was a sign of aggression, the picture would have failed terribly to convey the intended content.

An artist who is familiar with pictorial representation (and, thus, aware of the opticality norm) should know that if her aim is to *pictorially* represent an object X, then she has to make her intention *visible*: she has to mark the surface in such a way that the viewer will be able to *see* X in it. However, the artist is also a situated spectator: to make her intention visible she will draw on her perceptual conception of X (that is, her conception of what X is like) and her relevant perceptual beliefs (for instance, regarding the setting in which X commonly appears or the different possible guises of X). These, however, can vary between subjects and over time to the extent that they depend on a subject's perceptual experience and, thus, also on the way that the world that she experiences is. It follows that the intended representational content of the ensuing picture will be visually manifest from within the artist's cognitive and experiential perspective. The viewer's appreciation and interpretation of a picture, on the other hand, depend on her own way of seeing things. Ernst Gombrich illustrates well this point with reference to the Ames chair, that is, a disjoint collection of line segments in three dimensions that, from a particular point of view, looks like an ordinary chair: such an object, he explains, has "no name and no habituation in the universe of our experience. Of chairs we know, of the crisscross tangle we do not. Perhaps a man from Mars whose furniture was of that unlikely kind would react differently. To him the chair would always present the illusion that he had the familiar crisscross in front of the eye."[6] As Gombrich notes, a picture of the Ames chair would thus be interpreted differently by viewers whose relevant perceptual experience is so radically different from ours. But there is nothing about the picture itself (that is, its internal properties) that determines whether it represents an ordinary chair or a disjoint collection of line segments: the picture itself is indeterminate, so it could be used in different contexts to convey different representational contents.

Given that the choices that artists make are determined by their perceptual conceptions of things and their perceptual beliefs and given that these are not standard across place and time but, rather, vary with a subject's perceptual experience, then in order to *see* what a picture represents, the viewer needs to have appropriate recognitional abilities. As an effect, the opticality claim will not be true of *any* experiential encounter with a

picture, but only of encounters to be had by particular viewers.

To account for the fact that pictorial representation embodies a certain way of seeing, we can amend the opticality claim as follows:

Amended Opticality Claim: If a picture represents something, then it represents what a suitable viewer could see in the picture, where a suitable viewer is one who shares the recognitional abilities of the artist.

What gives authority to the visual experience of a suitable viewer are facts about pictorial representation itself: the norm that in pictorial representation meaning has to be visually manifest, along with the pragmatic constraint that artists are situated spectators—which together entail that the meaning of a pictorial representation will be visually manifest from the cognitive and experiential standpoint that the artist (and the corresponding suitable audience) occupies. Even with this qualification, however, the opticality claim is not complete—it does not state a sufficient condition for pictorial representation: this is so to the extent that, when considered by itself, that is, without the support of relevant external contexts of information, a picture is indeterminate; it is compatible with more than one interpretation.

II. INDETERMINACY

Consider, for instance, Paula Rego's painting *The Blue Fairy Whispers to Pinocchio*.[7] The work is contemporary and assumes background knowledge common in Western culture. Given my perceptual beliefs, I can see in the picture a young woman leaning toward a naked young boy, holding a stick, sitting on a velvet armchair in a dark background, dressed in a blue dress, barefoot, and so forth. In seeing all that, in seeing a certain arrangement of objects in the picture, do I therefore see what it pictorially represents? If I have to state what the picture represents and I have to rely on my visual experience *alone*, and the understanding that only it can furnish, I will find myself in the midst of different, more or less compelling interpretations. The most compelling interpretation I could give is that the woman is the mother of the child, caressing him in the middle of a game; but I could not be sure about the relation between the woman and the child, the importance of her holding a stick, or why the child is naked. And I could not be sure about these aspects of content because the picture lacks, or does not carry with it, an explicit context that would give the objects in the picture a positive identity: a context that would unequivocally specify the *intended* story.[8]

Thus the opticality claim, even as it has been amended above, is not complete; the viewer's recognitional abilities alone cannot invariably fix the representational content of a picture, as the same configuration will often be consistent with different interpretations. Rego's painting represents the scene from *Pinocchio* in which the blue fairy brings the wooden puppet to life. If I had to rely on my visual experience alone in order to understand the representation, I would have failed to identify the woman in the picture as the blue fairy and the boy as Pinocchio, although I am quite familiar with the fictive characters: the identities of the subjects in the picture would be for me indeterminate, although I share the artist's way of seeing. In this and many other cases, the picture does not just give away what it represents: considered *by itself*, that is, without the support of relevant external contexts of information, the picture is indeterminate; it is compatible with more than one interpretation.[9]

When a pictorial representation does not offer conclusive evidence as to what it represents, it is not an autonomous entity: it depends for its representational content on, and thus has to be supplemented by, information external to the picture. Rego's painting, for instance, is reliant on its title: the title serves to disambiguate the picture; it provides the information necessary for correct interpretation that the viewer will not get from his experiential encounter with the picture alone. Further, in the title a text is implicated, namely, the story of Pinocchio. Pictorial representations often draw on literary texts or myths: they are often created as illustrations of, or comments on, preexisting themes. This is the case in Rego's painting, and this is the case, for instance, in all religious painting. When the representation draws actively on a preexisting text, understanding of the representation entails knowledge of that text. Further, pictures standardly draw on other pictures, either with regard to artistic style or with regard to meaning. For instance, Manet's painting *The Execution of Emperor Maximilian* draws on Goya's painting *The Third of May, 1808*, an association that affirms the political (rather than the documentary)

character of the work. When it comes to matters of style, on the other hand, familiarity with the style that the picture employs should allow the viewer to understand which elements have representational significance: Wollheim, for instance, argues that Parmigianino's *Madonna of the Long Neck*—a painting where the figures have noticeably elongated features—obviously does not represent the Madonna as having a long neck, although it shows a woman with a long neck.[10] But it has to be acknowledged (as Wollheim *does* acknowledge) that there is nothing about the picture, or our experience of the picture, to preclude that it does: it is rather knowledge of the style that the work employs that will enable the viewer to understand which elements have representational significance and which are intended as stylistic traits.

The title, the preexisting text, preexisting pictorial works, artistic style, and technique are all contexts of information on which pictures standardly depend for their representational content. They all provide resources necessary for interpretation, that is, resources the viewer needs in order to grasp the (intended) representational content of a picture.[11] And there are more such contexts: correct interpretation of a picture commonly requires, for instance, knowledge of the iconographic conventions that have been employed by the artist; or knowledge of the world that the picture portrays, for instance, of the relevant habits, customs, and social relations; or knowledge about the context of presentation; or even about the artist, her past work, or ideology.

In that sense, and to that extent, pictorial representations are *not* self-sufficient entities. Against what a naïve conception of the visual character of pictorial representation may suggest, a picture does not represent *by itself*. It rather relies for its representational content on external contexts of information, which the viewer would have to consider in order to understand what the picture represents. This is again due to relevant facts about pictorial representation: (1) the fact that a pictorial scene, considered in itself, is indeterminate, so to gain any specificity it needs to be surrounded by an appropriate context—most commonly indicated by the title; (2) the fact that pictorial representation is an art (that is, a craft), which, moreover, has a long and varied history: a history of styles, a history of techniques, a history of themes and motifs, a social history—dimensions of variability that potentially bear on the representational content of a picture we encounter; (3) the fact that pictorial representations are tools of communication and, as such, are often the means by which artists comment on their current social, cultural, and political reality (interests that they share with their audience): in such cases the representation makes sense in relation to the state of affairs toward which it is directed.

A possible objection to the claim that pictorial representations are not self-sufficient entities is that representations by pictures that are context bound in ways specified above are not paradigmatic cases of *pictorial* representation: the amended opticality claim could then be true of paradigmatic cases of pictorial representation and partly relevant to all pictures that can be rightly characterized as pictorial representations. Lopes, for instance, in his analysis of pictorial meaning, acknowledges as paradigmatic cases—as "basic picturing"—pictures of familiar objects that only engage our recognitional abilities in the process of interpretation (for instance, photographs in a family album); he further explains that, although basic picturing is at work in every pictorial representation, there are different varieties of pictorial representation depending on the sort of information the viewer has to consider in order to identify the object of representation.[12] So different varieties of pictorial representation are thought to correspond to different modes of identification or interpretation, and the unifying element is that the recognitional abilities of the viewer are engaged in all genuine cases of *pictorial* representation.

Even if we accept this analysis of pictorial representation, it is still the case that the amended opticality claim does not provide an exhaustive account of the way that pictorial representation functions. Indeed, I am not in favor of this analysis for the following reasons: (1) It creates boundaries within the practice of pictorial representation where there is really continuity. Basic picturing, like other instances of pictorial representation, engages more than our recognitional abilities, as it presupposes knowledge of the practice of pictorial representation itself: of the opticality of pictorial representation and of facts relevant to the medium, as, for instance, the norm in black- and-white photography that color is not to be taken into consideration. The difference between basic picturing and other instances of pictorial representation thus seems to be a matter of degree in the amount of external information required for

correct interpretation, rather than, as Lopes suggests, a diversity in modes of identification.

Further, (2) the idea that in basic picturing the viewer needs only to exercise his recognitional abilities in order to understand what the picture represents creates the false impression that such pictures stay at the level of appearances. Some obviously do, but in the case of many pictures that we should regard as basic following the explanation that Lopes provides, the picture is meant to "say" something more than how its subject looks—for instance, it may provide an interpretation of the subject or make a comment on it. To understand what more the picture "says" about its subject the viewer needs to exercise more than his recognitional abilities and perhaps draw on his knowledge of different domains. For instance, group photographs of affluent Victorian families often have a content that exceeds the appearance of their subjects: many such photographs are intentionally suggestive of power, eminence, and propriety, but this part of their content is manifest when the photographs are seen under the light of information relevant to the social and cultural structure of the Victorian world and, further, in relation to other contemporary but less stylized instances of family portraiture.

Finally, (3) one cannot know whether a picture is a case of basic picturing unless one has reliable grounds to believe that it is indeed a basic picture. Such grounds are often being given by information external to the picture, for instance, information relevant to the context of presentation or information provided by the title: it is possible that the same photograph, when encountered in a family album and when encountered in a gallery, in the one case is and in the other case is not a case of basic picturing.

So although I would agree with Lopes that different pictures require different sorts of information in order to be understood, I believe that (a) there is continuity in the practice of pictorial representation, and (b) pictures standardly depend for their meaning on relevant external contexts of information, so they are not self-sufficient entities.[13]

III. THE SOCIAL CHARACTER OF PICTORIAL REPRESENTATION

A picture is an artifact: it has been created by an artist in order to fulfill some function. The function of a picture is to refer to or communicate something about an object or a state of affairs, real or imaginary. If the viewer is aware of this function he will treat the picture as an intentional object and will try to grasp the intended representational content. How is it possible, however, that an artist can create or use a picture in such a way that the intended representational content is conveyed successfully?

Representational acts, whatever the medium, take place against a background of shared knowledge about the world *and* about the relevant type of representation. Noël Carroll has argued with regard to literary works that

> [n]o artist can say or depict everything there is to say or to depict about the fictional events she is narrating. She depends upon the audience to fill in a great deal and that filling in is an indispensable part of what it is to follow and to comprehend a narrative. . . . It is for this reason that the successful author requires an audience that can bring to the text, among other things, what is not explicit in it. The author designs her work with an implicit working hypothesis about the knowledge that her anticipated reader will bring to the text, along with knowledge of how the reader will feel toward the characters.[14]

I believe that it is on the same condition that pictorial communication relies: pictures are designed with an implicit working hypothesis about the knowledge relevant to different public domains that *anticipated* viewers will bring to a picture—for instance, knowledge of society, history, culture, politics, and the institution of art or about the practice of pictorial representation itself and the regularities and norms relevant to that practice. The public domains on which artists draw thus become contexts of information where the representational content of a picture is encoded and which viewers would have to and standardly *do* consider in order to rightly appreciate a picture. So in responding to pictorial representations we habitually draw on and are expected by artists to draw on appropriate contexts of information where the representational content of a picture is encoded, as in standard cases, and for at least pragmatic reasons, artists rely on shared knowledge relevant to such contexts in the process of production.

But now, if artists can predict and rely on the way that an audience will respond to a pictorial representation and the audience responds to pictorial representations in predictable and reliable

ways, it seems that what enables pictorial communication is the fact that both artists and audiences are involved in a rule-governed behavior: they both conform to what they regard as standard ways of articulating and responding to pictorial representations.[15] In *Interpretive Acts*, Wendell Harris notes on the interpretation of literary works:

> [L]anguage in use is always strategic in that the author assumes that the reader will attempt to achieve a coherent interpretation, calculates what the reader can be expected to bring to bear in interpreting the text, . . . and makes available whatever the reader is not expected to have to hand by way of information or awareness necessary to interpretation. . . . [T]he reader's assumption that the author has made these strategic assumptions and carried out these strategic actions is the basis of the reconstruction of authorial intention.[16]

The implication here is that there is a community-sanctioned practice regarding the way a type of representation is to be used: since the aim of using a representation is communication between an author and an audience, the author acts on the assumption that the audience will conform to the practice, and the audience acts on the assumption that the author has conformed to the practice in generating the representation.[17] I assume that the same strategy governs our use of pictorial representation: an artist who wants her intention to be understood by the audience would conform to the regularities that govern the use of pictorial representation; for instance, an artist who aims to portray Saint Michael would have to conform to the conventions of Christian iconography in order to allow viewers to identify the picture as a portrayal of Saint Michael. Further, the viewer's familiarity with the regularities of pictorial representation allows him to respond to the picture in an appropriate manner: it allows him to draw on those contexts of information where the representational content of a picture is standardly encoded and thus to reconstruct the representational content of the picture. I thus agree with Richard Shusterman that to understand a representation is "to respond to it in certain accepted ways which are consensually shared, sanctioned, and inculcated by the community."[18] Pictorial representation is then not just a visual phenomenon: it is also a *social* phenomenon; it functions within a social context where its use is regulated. To that extent a picture does not represent *by itself*, because every picture is part of, and thus relies on, the regularities and norms of the practice of pictorial representation that have been developed in the generating culture.

IV. REINSTATED OPTICALITY

Where does this all leave the opticality claim? Is it still plausible to claim that the viewer is *visually aware* of what a picture represents, moreover that this is so across different varieties of pictorial representation? The opticality claim is plausible if it is reinstated as follows:

> Reinstated Opticality Claim: If a picture represents something, then it represents what an informed viewer could see in the picture, an informed viewer being one who is familiar with the practice of pictorial representation: one who knows that the object is used to point to something beyond itself; knows that there is intention that qualifies one among possible interpretations; and, most importantly, is one who knows that the intended meaning is encoded in, and can be traced through appropriate dimensions of information that she would have to consider, in order to "inform" her visual experience.[19]

A viewer suitable to see what a picture represents is thus one who knows what the contexts are through which the right way of seeing the picture could be unraveled. Accordingly, we can consistently accept that the content of a pictorial representation is visually manifest (as Young would have it), but only so for eyes that are properly trained and properly informed.

The reinstated opticality claim deviates from the opticality claim as originally conceived in that pictorial understanding is not taken to ensue directly or entirely by means of the viewer's visual engagement with a picture. The viewer who can be said to be thus aware of the representational content of a picture is a viewer who, at the time of her encounter with the picture, already has the cognitive background appropriate to it (that is, is already in possession of the external information on which the picture depends for its meaning). In all other cases pictorial understanding proceeds in a self-conscious manner: it is not a direct or entirely visual feat to the extent that the viewer has to consider relevant dimensions of information in order to see what a picture represents.[20]

Still, however, the claim that the viewer is *visually* aware of what a picture represents does not lose its force: although it may not be entirely valid as a claim about the process of pictorial understanding (given that it is not unqualifiedly true of this process), it is true of the *character* of pictorial understanding. As I will explain in what follows, pictorial understanding, regardless of the way that it has been accomplished, is distinctively visual.

Entities that, like pictorial representation, are intentional and practice dependent, have to be surrounded with the appropriate context in order to be rightly understood; furthermore, when they are thus surrounded they assume a significance that they would not otherwise have. When it comes to pictures such understanding is not, I believe, just a cerebral affair: it is not exhausted in the associations relevant to the perceived entity that, as an effect of understanding, come into play. Rather, the change that the understanding effects is, to some extent, a change in perception, in the way that the entity is *seen*. The change can be located at different levels. For instance, through interpretation the identity of the depicted objects is fixed; an upshot of such identification is that qualities of the objects and relations between the objects emerge that would not be otherwise manifest or, at least, prevalent: identification of the boy as Pinocchio in Rego's painting, for example, brings out or accentuates the stiffness of his body and posture—the boy *looks* wooden after such identification.

Further, as Wollheim has noted, when a pictorial work is seen from the appropriate cognitive standpoint, the artistic properties are delineated (that is, those properties that are due, following Wollheim, "to a range of things, from the expressive vision of the artist, through the artistic pressures of the day, to the artist's technical limitations"[21]). Such understanding brings forth the expressive and other aesthetic properties of the pictorial work and can thereby affect to a certain extent how the viewer sees that work: that the bodies in Parmigianino's painting, for instance, are elongated widely contributes to the gracefulness and elegance of the composition, whereas the same painting would not look graceful or elegant to a viewer who would understand it as *representing* bodies with unusually stretched proportions.

So the meaning of a pictorial work, as it is grasped through the process of interpretation, does not just "float" over the pictorial composition; rather, it permeates it and transforms it, shaping its organization and accentuating qualities and relations: understanding of a picture affects how the picture is *seen*.[22] At the same time, what one grasps as the meaning of a picture is shaped to a considerable extent by the picture itself. Although, for instance, we may need to draw on the title to fix the identity of the characters in Rego's painting, how the two characters are represented as being, how they are related to one another, the atmosphere of their encounter, and their expressions or gestures are all aspects of meaning that are regulated by the formal properties of the composition (both shape and medium properties). So although often a picture has to be seen in the light of appropriate information in order to be understood, ultimately the meaning of the picture is the meaning that is conveyed *in terms* of the picture: pictorial meaning informs but at the same time is informed by what can be seen in the picture. Unless the upshot of an interpretation can be anchored in this twofold manner to the picture interpreted, the picture is not *understood* in accordance with the relevant interpretation. Such anchoring is to an important extent a visual affair, and it is because of such anchoring that the viewer can be said to be *visually aware* of what a picture represents, regardless of the manner in which her understanding of the picture has been achieved.

To conclude, my aim in this article has been to contest a naïve conception of the visual character of pictorial representation; according to this conception pictures function as autonomous entities and, so, to make sense of a picture one simply needs to look at it, provided that one has a recognitional ability for the object represented. I have tried to indicate the fact that this conception masks the complexity of pictorial representation; it masks the elaborate and systematic ways in which both artists and audience proceed in their encounter with the pictorial medium. A comprehensive account of the visual character of pictorial representation should, rather, accommodate the fact that in order to understand what a picture represents the viewer has to see the picture in relation to relevant dimensions of information, information that the artist had good reasons to regard as shared knowledge among the anticipated audience. Still, however, the character of such understanding is, or has to be, distinctively visual: although the picture has to be seen in the light of appropriate information, ultimately the meaning of the picture is the meaning that is conveyed *in*

terms of the picture: pictorial meaning informs but at the same time is informed by what can be seen in the picture. It is in this latter sense that pictorial representation (although to an extent it functions as a language with the norms of which users have to be familiar) is a distinctively visual phenomenon.

I will close this discussion by returning briefly to the issue of the relation between traditional and avant-garde visual art. If my understanding of the way that the system of pictorial representation functions is correct, it is not the case, as often supposed, that there is *discontinuity* between traditional and avant-garde works of visual art. This claim is based on the belief that traditional works are *autonomous*, that they *just show* what they represent. I have argued that this belief is counteracted by the fact that pictorial representation exploits the knowledge that is shared in the generating culture—knowledge about history, society, politics, culture, or religion, or about the system of representation itself. As a result, in order to understand a pictorial representation, the viewer will have to see the picture in light of the information that it presupposes. Although there are surely pictures that are quite straightforward, in that they presuppose little more than knowledge of appearances, most works of pictorial art, works like Picasso's *Guernica*, or Manet's *Execution of the Emperor Maximilian*, which, for instance, Young accepts as traditional illustrative pictures, need to be supplemented by a significant body of information in order to be rightly appreciated. In *that* respect, traditional works are continuous with the works of the avant-garde. Both traditions exploit external contexts of information, so for both, interpretation relies on a body of knowledge that the viewer has to either possess or else acquire in order to grasp the intended meaning. What, perhaps, conceals the nonautonomous character of traditional works, and thus leads to a simplistic conception of their visual character, is the fact that, in our recent cultural history, traditional works have been massively reproduced, analyzed, publicized, and exhibited; as an effect, contemporary audiences have come to be more or less familiar with the theory that such works presuppose: the resources necessary for interpretation are now ready to hand for a wide audience. This, however, does not render traditional visual works autonomous. What makes us able to be visually aware of what the *Guernica* represents, for instance, is the fact that we are already familiar with the stories about art, painting, cubism, war, the Spanish civil war, fascism, and Picasso that the painting presupposes. In *that* respect there is continuity between the *Guernica* and Warhol's *200 Campbell Soup Cans*; I believe that our best chance to understand the character of the latter work, and so also the differences that certainly exist between the two works, is from the perspective of such continuity.

KATERINA BANTINAKI
Department of Philosophy
University of Manchester
Manchester, United Kingdom M13 9PL

INTERNET: katerina.bantinaki@manchester.ac.uk

1. James Young, *Art and Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 2001).

2. Young, *Art and Knowledge*, pp. 139, 146.

3. Richard Wollheim, "On Pictorial Representation," in *Richard Wollheim on the Art of Painting*, ed. Rob van Gerwen (Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 13–27, quote on p. 16. The opticality claim is formulated after Wollheim, but it is important to note that Wollheim *does not* accept this claim in its unqualified form—what he accepts, I believe, is much closer to the reinstated opticality claim stated in Section IV.

4. Tim Crane, *The Mechanical Mind* (London: Penguin, 1995), p. 8.

5. For a comprehensive analysis of this claim, see Dominic McIver Lopes, *Understanding Pictures* (Oxford University Press, 1996), chaps. 6 and 7. Of course, it should be acknowledged that one of the merits of pictorial representation is that it can endow us with recognitional abilities, or it can extend existing abilities to new dimensions of variation: it is not necessary that one already has the perceptual ability to recognize the object represented—or to recognize it on the basis of the specific information about the object that the picture presents—in order to understand what a picture represents, to the extent that such understanding can be affected by other means. This fact, however, just confirms the claim that I wish to promote, that is, that pictures do not function autonomously.

6. Ernst Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, 2nd ed. (Princeton University Press, 1961), p. 249. For a useful discussion of the role of perceptual experience in pictorial interpretation, see John V. Kulvicki, *On Images: Their Structure and Content* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), chap. 9.

7. Paula Rego, *The Blue Fairy Whispers to Pinocchio*, 1996; The Saatchi Gallery, London. A picture of the painting is available at http://www.artnet.com/magazine_pre2000/features/cohen/rego04.asp.

8. The story, as Arthur Danto notes, is a narrative structure that a painting "not so much tells as presupposes in order to integrate the elements"; Arthur Danto, "Interpretation and Identification," in *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 120.

9. I have conceded with Young that in interpreting a picture we usually aim to discover the intended

representational content; if this is the aim of interpretation, it follows that only one of the possible interpretations of a picture will be correct or appropriate, that is, the one that corresponds to the artist's intention—unless, that is, the picture is intentionally ambiguous (as, for instance, the Ames chair picture that Gombrich discusses). The claim of indeterminacy then does not apply to the representational content of a picture (which I take to be determinate in most cases), but rather highlights the fact that a picture, by itself, does not provide all the information that the viewer needs in order to grasp the intended representational content; in that case the picture is bound to give rise to different interpretations equally compatible with its internal properties.

10. Richard Wollheim, "What Makes Representational Painting Truly Visual?" *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, supp. vol., 77 (2003): 131–147, quote on pp. 143–144.

11. This does not mean, however, that all these contexts of information are necessarily relevant to the interpretation of a given picture.

12. Lopes, *Understanding Pictures*, pp. 167–168.

13. An explanation of how this fact might affect, if at all, Lopes's account of pictorial representation exceeds the scope of this article.

14. Noël Carroll, "Art, Narrative, and Moral Understanding," in *Aesthetics and Ethics*, ed. Jerrold Levinson (Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 126–160, quote from pp. 138–140.

15. One of the first theorists to acknowledge this fact has been Ernst Gombrich (see Katerina Bantinaki, "Pictorial Perception as Illusion," *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 47 [2007]: 268–279. It is important to note, however, that such conformity is not a criterion of success in pictorial communication: communication might fail if either party (the artist or the audience), due to ignorance or incompetence or bad luck, fails to take into account what the other party regards as a relevant shared convention in the given culture. The strategy described here is regarded as a general strategy that in *ideal circumstances* allows pictorial communication.

16. Wendell V. Harris, *Interpretive Acts* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), p. 82.

17. The cooperation between speaker and audience that is here acknowledged as enabling successful communication has been extensively analyzed by Paul Grice. See Paul Grice, *Studies in the Ways of Words* (Harvard University Press, 1991), chaps. 2, 5, 6.

18. Richard Shusterman, "Interpretation, Intention, and Truth," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 46 (1998): 399–411, quote from p. 405.

19. From the perspective of Wollheim, the condition that "a picture represents something" entails that the artist has succeeded in making her intention visible according to the norms of pictorial representation: in all other cases, according to Wollheim, the picture represents nothing or no one (Richard Wollheim, "Seeing-as, Seeing-in, and Pictorial Representation," in *Art and Its Objects* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 205–226, p. 206. Not all theorists agree on this point: Levinson, for instance, acknowledges both that the intention of the artist and the relevant cultural practice guide his choices in forming a work of art and that it is this intention that interpretation aims to discover, but assumes that the system of art works in such a way that what finally decides on meaning is the interpretation of the informed audience; so even where the intention has failed, the work does not cease to have meaning—what supposedly matters is not the actual intention but the hypothesis on intention best supported by the work of art; Jerrold Levinson, "Intention and Interpretation: A Last Look," in *Intention and Interpretation*, ed. Gary Iseminger (Temple University Press, 1992), pp. 221–256. I wish to remain neutral on this matter, as it does not affect the plausibility of the reinstated opticality claim.

20. In an analysis of pictorial interpretation, Michael Baxandall draws a distinction between *participant's* understanding and *observer's* understanding. He argues that it is only a participant in the culture in which a picture was generated who can have an immediate and spontaneous understanding of a pictorial work given that "he can act within the culture's standards and norms without rational self-consciousness." However, whereas the participant's understanding is direct, the observer's understanding has perspective, as she can have an overview of the artistic tradition and the historical context in which the work belongs and can, moreover, assume a comparative stance. Such a distinction points toward the fact, which I acknowledge but decided not to raise in the article, that different points of observation (correlated here with different modes of understanding) entail, almost unavoidably, different depth and breadth of understanding; Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention* (Yale University Press, 1985), pp. 109–110.

21. Wollheim, "What Makes Representational Painting Truly Visual?" p. 143.

22. On these grounds Wollheim has criticized Danto's notion of indiscernibility employed in his philosophy of art, a notion that draws on the idea of the cognitive impenetrability of perception. See Arthur Danto, "Works of Art and Mere Real Things," in *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*; Richard Wollheim, "Danto's Gallery of Indiscernibles," in *Danto and His Critics*, ed. Mark Rollins (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), pp. 28–38. For a discussion of Wollheim's view, see Robert Hopkins, "Painting, History and Experience," *Philosophical Studies* 1 (2006): 19–35.