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A Double Content Theory of Artistic Representation

On the face of it, not all artistic meaning and communication can be explained in representational terms. In addition to the subject matter of artworks, which constitutes their normal meaningful representational content, there are various other components of meaning involved in artistic communication. These presumably involve at least expressive, stylistic, medium-related, formal, and intentional factors—collectively to be referred to as *aspectual* factors.

Thus there is a concern that a general theory of representation, applying to any signs or symbols whatsoever (such as that of Nelson Goodman), will be unable to capture what is specifically *artistic* about artworks as such.¹ For this reason too, it would seem that artistic meaning outruns any standard view of representational content. To be sure, Kendall Walton is able to explain some aspects of artworks on the basis of a *nonstandard* concept of representation—where representation is equated with fictionality—that makes integral appeals to interactions of artworks with human imaginative “make-believe” cognition.² However, this view has little to say about artistic intentions and expression, and even less to say about the concepts of artistic style, medium, and form.

There is another option that deserves to be tried. Instead of settling for irreducibly nonrepresentational meaning factors in artworks, or ignoring or downplaying the role of such factors, one could postulate that artworks involve *two* rather than just one kind of representational content, and then try to develop an approach in which all aspects of artistic meaning would be explained in terms of appropriate combinations of the two kinds of content. It is this option, a *double content* theory or approach to artworks, which I shall investigate and argue for in the

current essay. I shall concentrate on visual artworks, such as paintings or drawings, but the points made will be general enough to potentially apply to other art forms as well.³

There are additional reasons that a double content approach to artworks is desirable. First, an argument from the methodology of the cognitive sciences is relevant: paradigm cases of meaning, such as word, sentence, or propositional meaning, are typically analyzed in broadly symbolic or representational terms, so similar approaches should be promising for any artistic kinds of meaning as well. Second, the primary importance of perception in understanding visual artworks implies the relevance of cognitive analyses of perceptual processes, which also normally regard perception of any kind as a broadly representational procedure involving the processing of perceptual content. Hence, for this reason, too, one would expect representational content-based approaches to any kind of artistic meaning to be promising.

As for why *two* general kinds of content are being postulated, rather than just one, the basic idea is as follows. The perception of artworks, as with perception in general, involves at least two *hierarchically-related* stages. The first is a preliminary low-level stage that is relatively unconceptualized—the province of stylistic, medium-related, expressive, and so forth kinds of aspectual meaning. The second is a higher-level, more conceptualized stage, associated with subject matter content, which initially occurs in perception only as encoded by the low-level content and, hence, requires a higher-level interpretation or decoding during the perceptual process. Such a two (or more) level account of perceptual and conceptual structure is becoming increasingly plausible in cognitive

science, given the wide variety of recent arguments for the existence of nonconceptual content as a distinctive category over and above more traditional conceptual, subject-matter-related kinds of content.⁴

In addition, the specifically *artistic* aspects of representational artworks could then be explained in terms of the characteristic richness of aspectual content, in both perceptual and nonperceptual ways—as compared with their subject matter content, which they share with more prosaic or utilitarian representations such as snapshots. Also, some of the intuitions of Richard Wollheim and others concerning the “twofoldness” of the perception of artworks could then be explained in terms of the simultaneous perception of both kinds of content.⁵ Thus, in sum, there is a strong initial presumption in favor of attempts such as mine to analyze all artistic meaning in terms of content—and, with theoretical simplicity in mind, to assume that a single category of lower-level aspectual content, covering all broadly contextual factors, is all that is needed in addition to higher-level subject matter content.

Clearly, we must avoid trivializing the double content thesis by broadening the concept of content to include *any* kind of meaning factor or component as a kind of content of an artwork. Thus it is only specifically *representational* kinds of content that will be discussed here, kinds that can be closely related to some reasonably clear concept of artistic representation or symbolization.

I. INITIAL EVIDENCE FOR STYLISTIC CONTENT

There is some initial *stylistic* evidence for the existence of two complementary kinds of representational content. Consider a general style—a style that is not peculiar to a single artist—such as impressionism in painting, as found in the work of artists such as Claude Monet, Auguste Renoir, and Alfred Sisley. To begin, presumably it would generally be accepted that impressionism as a broad style or movement in painting cannot be explained in purely physicalist terms, so that *some* issues of meaning do arise with respect to it. In other words, the specifically *impressionist* aspects of an impressionist painting, such as the characteristic broken,

multicolored brushstrokes and other textures used to depict the subject matter, are not explicable simply in terms of a scientific, geometric description of certain shapes or physical configurations on the surface of impressionist works. Impressionism cannot be understood without reference to certain *impressionistically meaningful* properties of artworks, which are not broadly physical or geometric properties.

The relevant impressionist elements of a painting are perceived as being, or possessing, qualities of freshness, immediacy, vigor, spontaneous variety, and so on, all of which are at least meaningful or content-like qualities, rather than merely physical or purely formal qualities. Thus, if we make use of Richard Wollheim’s familiar distinction between “configurational” and “recognitional” elements of a picture, then the impressionist stylistic aspects—with respect to how they are experienced in perception, rather than how they are scientifically analyzed—belong on the *recognitional* side of the dichotomy because they are part of the meaningful content of a work that normally skilled perceivers can recognize just as its subject matter.⁶ However, at the same time, the impressionist content is not, in and of itself, identifiable with such specifically *subject matter* content because the same generic impressionist stylistic elements and visual effects could be recognized, no matter what the artist’s subject matter might happen to be, in a given painting. Thus experienced viewers can at least *conceptually* distinguish the *meaningful impressionist elements* of relevant paintings from their particular *subject matters*.⁷

II. DISTINGUISHING KINDS OF CONTENT

An important question arises at this stage. If stylistic content is indeed distinct from subject matter content, how is that distinctness to be explained in representational terms? One natural approach would seek to distinguish two separate kinds of representation for this purpose—such as *stylistic* versus *subject matter* representation—since presumably any genuinely representational content is the content of some particular kind of representation. Also, any genuine kind of representation is such that one can distinguish its *content* from its *subject*,

where in many cases the subject is some worldly object, event, and so on that the representation is about. For example, Monet's paintings of Rouen Cathedral have as their subject the actual building, Rouen Cathedral, whereas the content of those paintings is Rouen-Cathedral-related subject matter, which may or may not correctly characterize the actual cathedral. Thus if stylistic representation is to be genuine, it too must have some actual, or at least possible,⁸ subject S to complement its stylistic content, which stylistic content will in some way characterize that subject S.

My suggestion is that, as a first approximation, the subject in cases of *stylistic* representation is—as perhaps one might expect—the *style* employed by the relevant artist in producing the artwork. But an artist's style is only one aspect of the broadly contextual or provenance-related aspectual factors involved in the production of his or her work. And since one aim of this paper is to sketch an approach to artworks in which *all* aspects of artistic meaning would be explained in content terms, we shall generalize the current account to cover *any* relevant aspect of an artwork's history or context of production—including the artist's intentions, his or her expressions of emotion or attitude, relevant aspects of the artist's medium, his or her history and that of other artists in the field, and so on. Hence, we need to postulate a broad category of what is being called *aspect* or *aspectual* representation, involving representation of items of those miscellaneous kinds, along with correspondingly miscellaneous kinds of *aspectual content*.

However, there is a problem concerning the term 'representation' that immediately needs to be addressed. The ordinary meaning of the word in artistic contexts is so closely associated with subject matter representation that to say, for example, that an artist represents his or her own style in his or her work, or even that he or she aspectually represents it, could easily sound misleading or even wrong, because, of course, typically artists do not have their own style as the conventional subject matter in their works. To avoid such misleading appearances, cases of aspect representation will here be described as cases of *indication*, so as to emphasize the non-standard, non-subject-matter kind of representation involved, reserving the unqualified term

'representation' and its cognates for cases of subject matter representation. So, to summarize, artworks *indicate* (or aspectually represent) relevant contextual or provenance factors of expressive, stylistic, intentional, and so on kinds, which are associated with their *aspectual* or *indicative* content, and they *represent* in the ordinary sense subjects associated with their *subject matter* content.

III. INITIAL COMPARISONS OF INDICATION AND REPRESENTATION

One interesting disanalogy between representation and indication is as follows. There are cases both of actual representation—whose subject is some actual object—and hypothetical or possible representation—for example, of a man or of Santa Claus, in which there is no unique actual object that is represented.⁹ However, in the case of indication, there may be only one kind of case, depending on whether or not *actual intentionalist* theories provide a better analysis of the role of artistic intentions in artworks than do *hypothetical intentionalist* theories.¹⁰ Hence, to that extent there is already a functional asymmetry between indication and representation.

Another significant disanalogy is as follows. It is a basic fact that any picture can *represent* its subject in correct or incorrect ways, depending on how the subject is characterized by the picture's subject matter content. For example, if Monet had represented Rouen Cathedral as having one more tower than it actually has, this would be a case of incorrect representation. However, in the case of indication, the issue at least seems to depend on, again, the resolution of disputes concerning actual versus hypothetical analyses of artistic intentions, expression, and so on. For example, suppose an artist intended to express X, but the resultant artwork actually expresses Y. It might be thought that this is automatically a case of *incorrect indication* of the artist's expressive intention, but on some hypothetical analyses of such expressive intentions, it would be Y rather than X that a hypothetical artist would have intended, in which case incorrect indication might be impossible.¹¹ Thus, to summarize these two points, there is already evidence of theoretically

interesting differences in the modes of signification of indication and representation, which are worthy of further pursuit elsewhere.

IV. MORE ON THE RELATIONS OF INDICATION AND REPRESENTATION

Another, more currently relevant, basic question that must be asked about the relations of indication and representation is as follows. Presumably pictorial content of each kind—aspectual and subject matter—is at least partly perceptual, that is, some of each kind can be seen when looking at a picture. Also, both kinds have some spatial extent, in that, for example, impressionist stylistic elements are spread out over the surface of a canvas, as is the relevant subject matter. But what prevents each kind of content from competing with the other for the viewer's attention? To put the matter another way, how is a perceiver of a picture able to distinguish aspectual from subject matter information when any given region of the canvas has to supply both kinds?

A rough sketch of a solution to these problems could proceed as follows. Stylistic and other contextual elements provide a kind of toolbox of possible aspectual effects, which are then arranged, using appropriate variations in shape, texture, and color, to simultaneously provide subject matter information as well. Thus, a perceiver can both perceive the stylistic elements and the subject matter and appropriately distinguish them, because the subject matter information is provided by appropriate variations within the stylistic content. Presumably some such account must be correct, because the physical surface of a typical impressionist painting is entirely covered with configurations of paint that are closely associated with impressionist style so that there is no manner in which subject matter information could be provided, other than by appropriate variations within the stylistic and other aspectual content elements of the painting, since subject matter content itself has no such close association with the physical painting.

To put the relevant epistemic issue more explicitly, stylistic content has an *epistemic priority* over subject matter content, both because of its uncontroversial association with purely physical or configurational properties of the

surface of a painting and because the rudiments, and even the finer points, of impressionist style are well understood and generally agreed on. However, as the endless controversies about the nature of pictorial representation show, the subject matter of a painting has a much less securely grounded status with respect to a physical painting. Or, as a more cognitive-science-related epistemic point concerning actual perception of a painting, low-level perceptual processing presumably must first involve its configurational and stylistic properties because recognition of these initially requires only low-level kinds of conceptualization involving shapes and light-value relationships.¹² Such low-level information needs to be *decoded*, or further processed in some inferential way, in order to apply higher-order recognitional concepts appropriate to the level of subject matter content.

These points may be summed up as follows. At least one kind of directly perceivable aspectual content, namely low-level stylistic content, has an asymmetric or *hierarchical* relation to perceivable subject matter, in that subject matter content is initially present in perception only insofar as it is *encoded in* stylistic content, and therefore stylistic information must be decoded so as to extract the subject matter information. Thus there is a broadly *symbolic* relation between stylistic and subject matter kinds of content, since, to repeat, the stylistic content itself provides only an encoded form of information about the relevant subject matter. As will become clear, these points about the relational properties of stylistic content can be generalized to apply to any kinds of perceivable aspectual content, including expressive and formal kinds.

To conclude this section, some other nonstylistic kinds of aspectual content, such as intentional or art-historical content, have not been mentioned here, because the kinds of contextual information they provide is not itself direct *perceptual* information, and so they have no significant role to play in the understanding of purely perceptual content.

V. PERCEPTUAL AMBIGUITY SUPPORT FOR SUBJECT MATTER ENCODING

It was argued above that directly perceptual kinds of aspect and subject matter content are

not independent, but that instead, for example, low-level stylistic content itself contains information, in encoded form, about higher-level subject matter content. Some additional evidence for this claim will now be presented.

To begin, if this encoding claim were true, one would predict that there should be pervasive potential cases of *perceptual ambiguity* with regard to pictorial content, such that a correct decoding of subject matter would produce one kind of subject matter, while an incorrect decoding would instead produce another kind of subject matter. On the other hand, if aspectual and subject matter content were independent, with no encoding of one by the other, one would predict no such ambiguities. I shall show that ambiguities in perceptual interpretations of artworks are always possible, hence supporting the encoding claim.

The demonstration is straightforward. As a preliminary, an intuitive concept of a *purely transparent* picture will be useful—such as a good color photograph of a lake and its shores. Such a picture has no distinctive stylistic content at all and, hence, its stylistic content merely provides complete and unencoded information about its subject matter. The concept of a transparent picture is an intuitive one, because, for instance, looking at a fully transparent photograph of the lake would be phenomenologically exactly like looking at the actual lake itself. On the other hand, even a high-quality impressionist painting of the same lake under those same conditions would *not* look exactly like the actual lake because of its distinctive stylistic elements. For example, in place of the photograph's relatively undifferentiated, and completely realistic, watery contours in the lake area of the image, there would likely be a series of richly variegated painted brushstrokes in the painting.

This divergence from full transparency immediately allows the possibility of perceptual ambiguity. Of course, normally the distinctive brushstrokes would be perceived as impressionist stylistic content factors, while the subject matter would be interpreted or decoded as subject matter content that supplies roughly correct information about the actual lake's appearance. However, a literalist interpretation would also be possible, namely, one in which the painting is instead interpreted as being a fully transpar-

ent picture of a lake—one having strange brushstroke-like paint markings all over its surface.

To be sure, this latter interpretation would be a *misinterpretation*, in which the low-level brushstroked stylistic content was incorrectly decoded or interpreted as identical brushstroked subject matter. But such a mistake is possible only because perceptual processing of pictorial information *does* involve such a decoding stage, in which subject matter content is identified and separated out as needed from the stylistic content, and because any such decoding could always be done either correctly or incorrectly.

VI. CONFLICTING ASPECTUAL VERSUS SUBJECT MATTER PROPERTIES

In the preceding two sections, potential conflicts were discussed between aspect content—such as impressionist style—versus subject matter content, in cases where each is derived from the same area of a picture, and a *decoding* solution was suggested, according to which aspectual content includes a coded form of subject matter content that is decoded by perceivers to extract the desired content.

However, even if such a solution is persuasive for the epistemic and other reasons already given, it has not yet been explicitly shown that some simpler solution is not equally good—such as a *descriptive* solution, according to which a single area of a picture has different characteristics or properties, some of which are aspectual characteristics and others of which are subject matter characteristics. In other words, though concrete physical objects must compete for space in the world, a single physical object in a given place can have many different properties, some of which might include, in the abstract, compatible aspectual and subject matter properties. To rule out such a descriptive analysis as a general account, it would be sufficient to find cases, if any, in which each kind of content has *necessarily conflicting* characteristics in the same area of a picture, hence preventing any purely descriptive separation of aspectual from subject matter content while also showing the need for a decoding solution.

In fact, arguably any case of perceptual ambiguity, of the kind discussed in the previous

section, can provide such an example, as will now be shown using a related case. Around 1967, Andy Warhol produced a “red-faced Marilyn” portrait, in which the actual light pink color of Marilyn Monroe’s face is replaced with a strong red color.¹³ (In the discussion below, it is assumed that ‘red’ refers to some specific strong shade of red that is inconsistent with the same area also being pink.) Now on a literal reading of this picture, its subject matter is not simply Marilyn’s face, but more specifically her *red* face, in that, on this interpretation, the picture represents her *as having* a red face. To be sure, this would be a misrepresentation since she did not actually have a red face, but that would not prevent her from being represented thus if Warhol had wished to do so.

Nevertheless, such a literal interpretation seems implausible, even though perceptually possible, for example, because the portrait is of a famous person, so that this interpretation would also involve attributing unlikely intentions to Warhol, such as that he was saying through his work “See, I’m deliberately making a mistake, even though everybody knows it to be a mistake,” which would be puzzling at best. Instead, it seems likely that, insofar as the unusual red color is meaningful at all, it provides some *aspectual, expressive* content concerning its normal, *pink*-skinned subject matter—for example, as linguistically translated, that it expresses what it is like to see Marilyn with her normal pink skin color in the reddish glare of fame and media publicity.¹⁴

However, to the extent that this expressive aspectual interpretation is plausible or correct, it provides a potential example of *conflicting* aspectual versus subject matter properties in the same area of the picture, with the *red* aspectual content conflicting with the *pink* (nonred) subject matter content. But, of course, no single such area could both provide uncoded red information or content and uncoded pink information or content. Hence, at least one of them must be present only in encoded form to restore consistency to the informational situation. Given the weight of the previous arguments in favor of its being the subject matter content that is encoded, the preferred solution is as follows. The physical redness of the portrait should be interpreted as uncoded or explicit *expressive* red content, while that same red

aspectual content also serves to provide information in encoded or implicit form about the pink color of the subject matter.

VII. AN OBJECTION REFUTED

A natural objection at this stage might be that, strictly speaking, there is no genuine conflict of red versus pink characteristics here, but that instead the picture provides *no information at all* about the color of Marilyn’s face on the second, expressive red interpretation, and hence no issue arises as to whether such information is coded or uncoded. In other words, on this view we do not perceptually receive *information* about her face color at all, but instead we simply *assume* that her face is pink rather than red in the picture.

However, though it is of course true that the picture does not *explicitly show* both the expressive redness and the subject matter pinkness—since it could not consistently do so—it does not follow that it does not provide information about the pinkness. Compare the situation with a linguistic case, in which purely conventional symbols—words and sentences—are used to convey information. The sentence “Marilyn’s face is pink” conveys genuine information in *encoded* or *symbolic* form—requiring propositional decoding—about the color of her face, even though one cannot directly see the color pink simply by perceiving the word ‘pink.’ But similarly, if one interprets the redness of the picture in the facial area as an *expressive* redness, whose specific expressiveness depends on its being a specifically different color that contrasts with the actual pinkness of Marilyn’s face, one is thereby already committed to treating that expressive redness as also symbolizing, or providing information in encoded form about, the pinkness of her face.

Another way of putting this defense against the objection is that, even if we do assume, rather than perceive, Marilyn’s face to be pink, we nevertheless are *required* to make that assumption in order to make sense of the redness content as an *expressive* redness. Hence, that expressive content must also convey, in encoded form, necessary information as to what we must assume about the subject matter to fully understand the relevant part of the picture,

just as in a purely conventional linguistic case there are necessary assumptions one must make in order to understand a linguistic symbol or sentence.

To conclude this section, features of this example will now be generalized, as promised, to support the claim that *any* perceptual ambiguity case of the relevant, aspectual-content-caused kind can provide an example of potentially conflicting characteristics in the same area of a picture, hence requiring an aspectual encoding solution. Recall from Section V that the relevant kinds of perceptual ambiguity all involve aspectual deviations from fully transparent representation, such as the deviant, stylistically bold brushstrokes of a painting of a lake or those in a typical van Gogh painting of a cornfield. As normally or correctly interpreted, such deviancy causing brushstrokes in such a van Gogh painting represent a much more uniform expanse of corn in a field, so that there are features of the picture, such as its prominent brushstrokes, that inevitably conflict with features of the actual cornfield, such as its relatively uniform, non-brush-stroked appearance.

Thus in all such cases, the deviancy producing stylistic or expressive characteristics X will be in *conflict* with the corresponding correct characteristics Y of the actual scene or subject, which characteristics must also be taken to be present in the subject matter content so as to avoid misrepresentation of the subject. In general, no single picture area could both provide uncoded X-related information or content and uncoded Y-related information or content, given that X and Y are conflicting characteristics. Hence, as before, at least one of them must be present only in encoded form to restore consistency to the informational situation and, as already argued, it is specifically the subject matter content that must be encoded by the aspectual content.

VIII. A MORE FOCUSED DOUBLE CONTENT VIEW

The results achieved so far will now be integrated into a somewhat more focused or sharpened double content view. Though the main goal of this paper has been to initially show how non-subject-matter kinds of artistic meaning could be explained in aspectual content terms,

the preliminary results achieved potentially also have significant implications for our understanding of how normal, subject-matter-oriented pictorial representation works.

To begin, there is a widespread assumption that pictorial representation primarily works in ways that are significantly different from those involved in linguistic cases.¹⁵ In terms of C. S. Peirce's useful tripartite classification of signs as icons (which resemble their subjects), indices (which point to some entity), and symbols (which conventionally signify something), a pictorial representation is often regarded as a sign that is primarily iconic, while language is regarded as being primarily indexical and symbolic.¹⁶ However, as shown in the previous sections, once aspectual kinds of content are assigned their due role, it becomes arguable that subject matter content—normally assumed to be the central core of a picture's iconicity—does not primarily function in an iconic or resemblance manner at all, but that instead it is *encoded* in aspectual content, where this encoding in some ways functions in a manner closer to symbolic or conventional than to iconic signification. To clarify this important matter, I shall now recast the current double content approach in a sharper or more focused way that highlights the relevant issues—at the risk, to be sure, of some possible initial oversimplification.

The key to this sharpened or more differentiated double content approach is to argue that any apparent iconicity in pictorial cases pertains, in the first place, exclusively to *aspectual* perceptual content rather than to subject matter content, so that aspectual indication—at least when involving purely perceptual aspectual content—is an exclusively *iconic* mode of signification, whereas subject matter representation is exclusively *symbolic* (in a broad sense).

For example, the physical brushstrokes on the surface of a painting, and their colors, iconically indicate appropriate kinds of aspects, such as stylistic or expressive ones, whose perceptual content components are exactly similar to the physical properties that indicate the aspects—physical redness indicates a specific kind of expression whose perceptual content is an exactly similar red and so on. Then, on the basis of the resulting kinds of iconic aspectual content, one can—as an initial, rough summary—estimate the likely structure of its encoding

mechanisms for subject matter content and apply appropriate decoding techniques so as to arrive at the corresponding kinds of symbolized subject matter content. This generalized summary, discussed in greater detail in the following two sections, would be appropriate even for fully transparent representations, as will be shown below.

A useful way of comparing this more focused double content view (hereafter, double content view) with a standard iconic view of pictures is as follows. On such a standard view, completely transparent, iconic pictures provide the paradigm cases of pictorial representation, with deviations from iconicity being explained away in some fashion.¹⁷ On the double content view, aspectually rich pictures with significant differences between aspectual and subject matter content provide the paradigm cases, with completely transparent pictures being explained away as special cases of the operation of the same basic cognitive and perceptual symbolic mechanisms.

To make this basic contrast convincing, it is necessary to show how the double content view could explain even fully transparent pictures in broadly symbolic terms, which retain the full flavor of its paradigm cases. In doing so, it will be convenient to reuse the “red-faced Marilyn” example from the previous section. First, if it is accepted that the previous expressive, aspectual content analysis of the red area on the Marilyn portrait is correct, then for the reasons previously given, the red expressive content must encode or symbolize in some way the pink color of its subject matter, namely, Marilyn’s face. Now consider the expressive options open to the artist in such a case: Warhol could have used different colors in the same picture area—as he actually did in other versions of his Marilyn portrait—to produce different expressive effects.

However, suppose that he had decided (as he also did in several cases) that in one of these portraits he did not wish to express *any* color-related effects in the relevant facial area. How could he have achieved that desired result? There is only one way he could have done it (with the rest of this paragraph being a key to the whole paper), namely, by using an *expressively neutral* color in that area. But the only expressively neutral color available—since

even the whiteness of an unprinted area of paper would be expressively active by contrast with the colored areas—is the one that is the *same* color as the subject matter, namely, pink, since it is the only color that does *not* differ in an expressive way from the pink subject matter.

In other words, in order for artists to have available the full range of stylistic and expressive means, founded on a generally accepted rule that any differences from subject matter content are to be understood as expressively (stylistically, and so on) significant, or contrastive, an *expressive neutrality* option must also be available to them for colors, shapes, textures, and so on. But the only available mechanism for such an option for artists, given their acceptance of the “expressive difference” convention, is an *expressive sameness* rule in which a factor *not* different from the subject matter factor counts as being expressively neutral with respect to that factor. Thus on the current view, even a completely transparent representation is just as much the product of broadly symbolic representational practices as are its more stylistically or expressively dramatic artistic cousins.

To avoid possible misunderstandings, here is a more explicit restatement and generalization of salient features of the situation. Viewers of a picture initially—on first seeing it—directly perceive low-level, not fully resolved aspectual content, each element or factor of which requires interpretation or decoding so as to achieve an indirect perception of a corresponding subject matter element. In the case of an aspectual picture element interpreted as being transparent, an identity decoding is used, which assumes that aspectual content X is neutral and hence decodes it as symbolizing subject matter content X. But that identity decoding case is structurally no different from other possible subject matter decodings of the aspectual content X, being special only in that it is the only case involving a *neutral* or *noncontrastive* interpretation of the relevant aspect X.

IX. REQUIRED CONVENTIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL PICTORIAL PERCEPTION

One important question remaining to be discussed is that of how, on this broadly symbolic account of representation, viewers of artworks

manage to succeed so readily in two related tasks: (1) grasping the aspectual (stylistic, expressive, etc.) content of a pictorial artwork, and (2) of recognizing what its subject matter is—in each case they do so in apparent absence of the kinds of systematic training that are required for other symbolic activities such as language learning.¹⁸

More specifically, the root problem underlying both questions may be identified as follows. On the present account, initial perception of a picture identifies, not its subject matter content, but instead its aspectual content, in a perceptually iconic way—for example, red paint indicates expressive or other aspects having red content, or thick brushstrokes indicate stylistic aspects having brushstroke-like content. However, this is at best only a very crude or preliminary account of aspectual content, as cognitively processed at some relatively low perceptual level, because the precise meaning of such red or brushstroke-like content, in the case of the current picture, has not yet been established.

On the present account, there are two components to the complete or fully developed meaning of such content items, in that the fully developed role or function of the aspectual content also depends on the decoded subject matter content which it encodes—just as, in the Marilyn case, the precise expressive meaning of the aspectual redness depends on its contrast with the pink subject matter content that it encodes. Thus, put more abstractly, the problem is that of trying to solve an equation with two unknowns—precise aspectual and subject matter content—when only a preliminary, imprecise version of the aspectual data is known.

At this point in the discussion, it is important to distinguish the main epistemic tasks involved in solving this equation, from the data available to carry out those tasks. Clearly the *precise* meaning of aspectual content items can be determined only *after* the decoded subject matter content is identified, so the epistemic task of thus identifying the decoded subject matter is a primary intermediate goal of cognitive pictorial processing. However, as already argued, in effect, the available perceptual data at the preliminary stage is best viewed as *proto-aspectual* rather than *proto-subject-matter* content, because of its completely iconic nature, which

will invariantly remain part of the aspectual content throughout all the stages of pictorial processing, whereas subject matter elements are encoded in variable ways by that data.

To solve the relevant equation with two unknowns, arguably at least three broadly cognitive or communicative conventional principles—or interpretive conventions—must be active in an artistic community, implicit in the practices both of artists who wish to create comprehensible representational artworks, and of their audiences who wish to understand such works. The first principle could be called that of *preliminary aspectual neutrality* (PAN): initially assume that any putative picture looked at is *neutral* with respect to all of its kinds and areas of aspectual content. Or in other words, as a preliminary step, simplify the two-variable equation for each area of the picture by assuming that its two variables have the same values, both being equal to the directly perceived low-level aspectual perceptual content. With this simplifying assumption, preliminary pictorial subject matter recognition becomes no harder than perceptual recognition of ordinary nonpictorial objects.¹⁹

However, such applications of the PAN principle will inevitably give the wrong results—that is, involve incorrect subject matter decoding—for those areas of a picture that are in fact aspectually *nonneutral* or contrastive with respect to their corresponding subject matter. So in the case of artistic pictures involving some significant aspectual factors, some *conflicting* interpretations of subject matter areas are inevitable at this intermediate stage of processing. For example, in the Marilyn picture case, facial shape information suggests a particular person as the subject matter but color information about the face conflicts with known information about that person.

Clearly then, postintermediate stages of cognitive processing must somehow resolve these conflicts in a coherent way. But in order for them to be able to do so—and in ways that rely only on general-purpose cognitive principles or methods, rather than on special-purpose data acquired through learning, as in the case of language acquisition—the internal conflicts in the intermediate data must not be too difficult to resolve, and certainly must not be *intractably* conflicting or irresolvable.

Thus an important task for artists who wish their work to be properly understood is to somehow ensure that resolution of conflicts at the intermediate stage of processing is relatively straightforward—and certainly not intractable—for viewers, without specialized knowledge or learning techniques being required by them. Arguably the best, if not the only, completely general-purpose method for ensuring this is for artists to follow a principle of *aspectual parsimony* (AP) in creating their works, namely to ensure that only a relatively *limited* amount of the content in their works is aspectually active or nonneutral so that the majority or predominant amount of it will be aspectually neutral.

The result of artists following the aspectual parsimony principle should be that a viewer's intermediate processing of a picture would result in a majority or predominant amount of the subject matter content having been *correctly* decoded, since its corresponding aspectual content was aspectually neutral to begin with.

Thus at this stage, in effect there is already a kind of "majority vote" in the perceptual data for one overall subject matter interpretation of the picture, which, if accepted, would enable the conflicting elements to be resolved in postintermediate processing (as discussed below). The routine acceptance of such majority votes as binding on, or regulative for, such later processing embodies the third major conventional element in pictorial processing, naturally labeled the *majority vote* (MV) principle.

Given acceptance of the MV principle, postintermediate processing would proceed roughly as follows. First, for each conflicting factor in the picture whose subject matter is not consistent with the majority vote, assume that instead it has that subject matter content *S* that is most consistent with the majority vote for the general subject matter of the picture. Then, reinterpret the relevant aspectual data at that point in the picture—previously assumed to be aspectually neutral—so that it is instead interpreted as aspectually *contrastive* data that encodes, in an appropriate nonneutral way, the assumed subject matter *S*. Following this procedure for all conflicting elements should result in a single consistent overall interpretation of the picture that has full specificity both for the

resultant aspectual and subject matter content elements.

X. HARDER CASES

In the previous section it was argued that there must be at least three interpretive conventions or principles active in artistic communities in which pictures are readily understood. However, other principles are needed as well to deal with harder or more resistant cases that would not produce successful understanding merely by uses of the preliminary aspectual neutrality, aspectual parsimony, and majority vote principles by themselves. Indeed, there are at least three broad categories of aspectual content for which such methods by themselves would not work, namely, stylistic, medium-related, and formal content.

Formal content is a special case, requiring only a minor extension of our three practice-regulating principles. Arguably, an aspectual content item is *purely* formal just in case there is *no* subject matter content encoded by it. So formal content could be viewed as a kind of miscellaneous, wastebasket category, such that, out of the class of cases that conflict at the intermediate stage with the overall majority vote identification of subject matter, they are those cases left over when all attempts to find corresponding kinds of subject matter consistent with the MV principle have failed. To be sure, there might seem to be at least a conceptual possibility of there being purely or completely formal artworks that have no representational (subject matter) content for any of their elements. But if there are, such works would at the same time be immune to the representational encoding problems being currently discussed.²⁰

Stylistic and medium-related content, in contrast to formal content, are more fundamentally resistant to applications of the three principles because of their all-pervasive quality. For example, a strong expressionist style with large brushstrokes covering the whole canvas may have the result that use of the PAN principle produces either no subject matter at all, or nothing but brushstroke-related subject matter. And similarly, use of the medium of pencil drawing may produce little or no recognizable subject matter from an application of the PAN principle

because of the pervasive differences between gray marks on white paper and any normal subject matter. Further, such difficulties cannot be ameliorated by the artist practicing aspectual parsimony because use of a style or medium is an all-or-nothing commitment, quite unlike, for instance, the local and variable choices involved with uses of expressive content.

Intuitively speaking, what is additionally needed to cope with a pervasive style or medium is some prior recognition that indeed a picture *does* involve use of such a style or medium. Thus, prior to applying the three standard principles, an initial transformation is required in which some *overall decoding scheme*, appropriate to the relevant style or medium, is applied to the initial aspectual content. Then this *appropriately transformed* content may be processed in the usual way.

Of course, a perceiver of a picture cannot apply such an overall decoding scheme without having learned how to do so first. Thus, *prior learning* of how each particular medium or style is characteristically used to encode subject matter is required—which kinds of learning have strong similarities to certain aspects of learning a language. It is in such cases that the broadly symbolic and conventional nature of the encoding of subject matter by aspectual content is most easily recognizable, since, of course, stylistic and medium-related factors are pervasive and unavoidable in our dealings with pictures.

Nevertheless, these kinds of learning are more akin to learning only the syntactic structures of a language than they are to learning its vocabulary. All that is needed is the learning of a few generative or transformational principles, explaining in general how to, for example, move from typical pencil markings on paper to typical kinds of represented subject matter. Thus understanding how a style or medium works is a global kind of skill that, once learned, can be applied with relative ease to an indefinite range of instances. Hence, its application offers no obstruction to the subsequent more standard, and also readily applicable, procedures already discussed.

Thus, to sum up, it has been shown how non-subject-matter-related kinds of artistic meaning can be explained in terms of indicated aspects having aspectual content. These aspectual contents themselves encode representational

subject matter in a broadly symbolic manner, resulting overall in a hierarchical *double content* structure of artistic representation. Aspectually contrastive versus neutral perceptual rules were then discussed, followed by the identification of three basic kinds of picture-related, and practice-guiding symbolic principles (PAN, AM, and MV). Appropriate supplementations for stylistic, medium-related, and formal aspects were also provided. In general, it has been argued that our actual abilities to readily understand a wide variety of pictures are consistent with their subject matters being only *symbolically* encoded—rather than being directly iconic—in the manner explained.²¹

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1. Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1968).

2. Kendall Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts* (Harvard University Press, 1990). Only fiction is “representational” in his special sense.

3. See my book *The Double Content of Art* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2004) for a general account, though the current paper introduces additional considerations.

4. For example, see *Essays on Nonconceptual Content*, ed. York H. Gunther (MIT Press, 2003).

5. See, for example, Richard Wollheim, *Painting as an Art* (Princeton University Press, 1987). I provide a double content analysis of twofoldness in Chapter 6 of my *The Double Content of Art*.

6. For example, Wollheim, *Painting as an Art*, p. 46.

7. To be sure, this claim of conceptual separability is consistent with holding that episodes of artistically optimal perception of a particular impressionist painting would involve an experience of *both* kinds of content in an *integrally-related* way—of *these particular* impressionistic stylistic elements in the service of *this particular* subject matter. Thus the current analytical exercise of distinguishing different kinds of content does not undercut plausible claims about the inseparability of content elements in adequate experiences of artworks, as discussed in Chapter 6 of my *The Double Content of Art*.

8. Cases of representation of indefinite entities such as a man, or nonexistent entities such as Santa Claus, must not be overlooked.

9. For example, Richard Wollheim distinguishes representations of *particular* objects or events from representations of objects or events “that are *merely* of a particular

kind,” and thus of a man, and so forth, rather than of some particular man, in *Painting as an Art*, pp. 67–71.

10. See, for example, Jerrold Levinson, “Intention and Interpretation in Literature,” in his *The Pleasures of Aesthetics* (Cornell University Press, 1996), pp. 175–213.

11. See Levinson, “Intention and Interpretation in Literature,” pp. 175–213.

12. This is not to deny that there may also be higher-level or more global kinds of stylistic content involving such aesthetic qualities as freshness and vivacity that may appear only at a later stage in perceptual processing.

13. “Red-faced Marilyn” is my, not Andy Warhol’s, description. In this picture the actual light pink color of Marilyn Monroe’s face is replaced with a strong red color along with blue shadows and a lighter red background. See, for example, <<http://www.poster.de/Warhol-Andy/Warhol-Andy-Msarily-Monroe-Marilyn-1967-5800005.html>>. The portrait is one of a series of serigraph (silkscreen) prints in which the same basic photograph of Monroe, not by Warhol, is reinterpreted by the artist in a range of different colors.

14. To be sure, some might doubt that the unusual red color in the “red-faced Marilyn” portrait is meaningful in Warhol’s case since he was notoriously uncommunicative about his artistic intentions, if any. But for present purposes its meaningfulness will be assumed.

15. A view held by writers as diverse as Kendall Walton and Wollheim, in spite of Nelson Goodman’s heterodox, broadly symbolic view in his *Languages of Art*.

16. See *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, ed. C. Hartshorne and P. Weiss (Harvard University Press, 1931–1958).

17. See, for example, Arthur Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Harvard University Press, 1981) for criticisms of such a traditional view.

18. For a different but compatible account of pictorial competence constraints on an adequate theory of representation see Dominic Lopes, *Understanding Pictures* (Oxford University Press, 1996), § 3.4.

19. Thus, to this extent, the current account supports broadly recognitional approaches to representation, such as those of Flint Schier in *Deeper Into Pictures* (Cambridge University Press, 1986) and Lopes, *Understanding Pictures*. Interestingly enough, the relevant cultural practice is also likely supported by evolutionary considerations, in that even pigeons are able to gather information from pictures equivalent to that derivable from their subjects. See Arthur Danto, “The Pigeon Within Us All: A Reply to Three Critics,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 59 (2001): 39–44.

20. Reasons for doubting whether there are any such are given by Walton in Chapters 1 and 8 of his *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of Representational Arts* (Harvard University Press, 1993).

21. My thanks to the Editor, Susan Feagin, and an anonymous referee for very helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.