

SIMILARITY REGAINED

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UDK/UDC: 18
Izvorni znanstveni rad
Original scientific paper

Primljeno 1990-01-03
Received

In this article the author tries to articulate a theory of pictorial reference that would avoid the trap of the strict conventionalism supported by N. Goodman. Making use of the Gibson's notion of perceptual invariants, as well as of Goodman's notion of exemplification, the author claims that pictures, thanks to the visual properties of their signifier, refer to visual properties of our environment. As pictures exemplify perceptual properties (invariants) such as »to be red«, »to be doglike«, »to be up«, »to be in front of«, etc., strictly speaking, the language of pictures, according to the author, may be understood as a language which consists only of adjectives and adverbs. From this point of view, the role of the painter implies the construction of the signifier that possesses the properties to which he intends to refer. If, the author concludes, the reference of pictures relied only on conventions, such an effort of the painter would be unnecessary.

The intention of the article is to defend the role of similarity in the constitution of pictorial reference against Nelson Goodman's claim that resemblance was neither necessary nor »sufficient to establish the requisite relationship of reference«(1)

Nelson Goodman's case against resemblance and his theory of pictorial representation may be summarized into following statements:

1) Similarity, being a trivial, reflexive and symmetric relation is logically inconsistent with the relation »to be a picture of«.

2) Similarity may not explain pictures of nonexistent entities.

3) To insist on similarity prevents us from realizing that pictures are symbols, that denotation based on convention is the core of representation.

4) As denotation is independent of the classification of pictures into kinds, even if similarity were responsible for labeling the pictures, it wouldn't effect their denotational function.

5) The label that qualifies pictures as being of a certain kind is a one place predicate and has nothing to do with similarity between labels and objects.

6) Resemblance is the product of representational practice, and not its explanans.

7) Though only analogue representations may produce the effect of similarity, similarity may not be regarded as the criterion for the differentiation between verbal and pictorial labels.

8) Neither the laws of optics, nor the character of our perception determine the conventional character of pictorial labels.

9) The subjective character of our perception is partly determined by the use of arbitrary pictorial labels.

Before exposing our arguments against Goodman which will concentrate on statements 1, 3, 4 and 5, let us briefly comment other points of his theory.

NOMINALIST FRAMEWORK

Although Goodman's argumentation against similarity is based primarily on logical grounds, on the logical properties of the relation of similarity, his basic motivation for the dismissal of similarity from the theory of pictorial representation was an attempt to incorporate the theory within the frames of his nominalistic system, i.e. to prevent any immanentistic interpretation of pictures, any theory based on the notions of imitation, reflection or illusion of reality (2). Goodman's intention was to prove that pictorial signs do not present a special case which could not be explained by the general scheme of arbitrary labeling, in terms of denotation based on convention.

From N. Goodman's point of view, the relation of denotation, resulting from free symbolic activity, independent of any resemblance, of any immanent correspondence with reality, represents the core of pictorial representation, appears as the common denominator of different symbolic activities, such as descriptions, expressions and exemplifications. It is their denotational character that allows for the interpretation of pictures as a kind of symbols, as one of the »ways of worldmaking« (4).

Having rejected similarity as a possible basis of a specific pictorial reference which would thus be incompatible with his nominalistic system, Goodman has identified the principles of the constitution of pictorial and verbal reference. The reference of pictures, as well as those of words, rests on the arbitrary choice of labels and on their continuous application, on their turning into a habit, in other words, the denotation of pictures is, no less than the denotation of words, based on conventions.

Having given up the idea that pictures are icons which refer thanks to their similarity to objects, Goodman still could have claimed that

similarity enabled us to distinguish pictorial labels from verbal ones. Though maintaining the referential inefficiency of similarity, such a claim would, nevertheless, presuppose that kinds of pictorial labels are determined by reality, so it would be counter to the nominalist idea of the arbitrariness of labels. Being a consequent nominalist, Goodman must claim the very opposite, namely that thanks to the habit of referring to an object by a certain kind of label we come to notice the resemblance between the label and its referent (5).

This contention leads Goodman to an unacceptable consequence, namely to the statement that the habit of using any kind of labels may result in their becoming similar to their referents. Of course, not every kind of label will do, because no habit can make us notice the similarity between the word »mushroom« and existing mushrooms (6). The restriction that Goodman poses for the labels which may produce the effect of similarity is that they must be labels with pictorial properties, analogue and not digital representations.

To connect such a restriction with the claim that perception were an analogue process could suggest that kinds of pictorial labels were in fact determined by the character of our perception. Such an interpretation however, is not hinted by N. Goodman. On the contrary, Goodman undertakes the difficult task of proving the arbitrary character of pictorial representation even in the case of pictorial perspective. Pointing to some inconsistencies between the laws of projection and representational rules, Goodman reached the conclusion that laws of optics do not sanction the rules of pictorial perspective (7). Even pictures in perspective, which were taken for granted as an undeniable proof of the contention that the characteristics of pictorial labels were determined by the character of our perception and by the behavior of light, in Goodman's interpretation turn into arbitrary labels. »Pictures in perspective«, maintains Goodman, »like any others, have to be read and the ability to read has to be acquired«(8).

According to his view it is not our perception which determines what kind of labels we are going to use, on the contrary, features of the arbitrary labels we use determine our perception. Casting aside the myth of the innocent eye, Goodman seems to advance an indirect theory of perception maintaining that what and how we see is significantly determined by our symbol scheme. The eye »selects, organizes, discriminates, associates, classifies, analyzes, constructs« (9). The perceived objects are classified »by or under various pictorial labels« (10), »the making of a picture commonly participates in making what is to be pictured« (11). In the last consequence, as it seems, the arbitrary character of pictorial labels justifies, and may in turn be considered as justified by, the arbitrariness of our perception.

An attempt to reintroduce the notion of similarity to the theory of pictorial representation could thus proceed on several tracks. It could criticize Goodman's general nominalist position reinstalling a version of immanentistic theory of pictures, it could favour a direct theory of perception and claim the character of pictorial labels to be sanctioned by the behavior of light and by the character of our perception. It could claim that the analogue character of our perception determines the analogue character of pictorial representations, thus accounting for the difference between verbal and pictorial labels. Within the frames of this article we are going to ignore these clues, concentrating on the possibility to replace Goodman's notion of representation by his notion of exemplification, proving that similarity, understood as instantiation of perceptual invariants, plays the same role in the constitution of pictorial meaning, as conventions play in the constitution of the verbal one.

REPRESENTATION AND EXEMPLIFICATION

Although Goodman claimed denotation was the basic constituent of pictorial representation, since it is shared by other ways of symbolization, it does not uniquely determine pictures. The characterization of pictorial representation in terms of denotation is thus incomplete, another constituent is needed, the one that will be characteristic only of pictures. »To be a picture of« therefore, for N. Goodman is in fact ambiguously between saying what the picture denotes and saying what kind of picture it is (12).

To refer, in Goodman's terms, is to function as a label that picks out certain objects or classes of objects, to be a picture of a certain kind, on the other hand, means to belong to the application domain of a certain label. Being a representation the picture at the same time refers, i.e. acts as a label, and is being labeled by other labels, i.e. sorted out as belonging to a certain kind. What is important for Goodman's point is that he sees no connection between the active role of a picture as a label, and the passive one in which the picture is being labeled. »The denotation of a picture«, Goodman claims, »no more determines its kind than the kind of picture determines the denotation« (13). Two components of representation are functionally independent, »the labeling of labels does not depend upon what they are labels for« (14).

If it did, namely, this would mean there was an intrinsic link between the fact that pictures refer to, say, mushrooms, and the fact that they are sorted out as mushroom-pictures. To stress the independency of the two components, Goodman insists that labeling of pictures as so-and-so-pictures must not be regarded as two place predicate – »to be a picture and to

be of a mushroom«, but as one place predicate, a single label which makes it impossible to quantify over its parts, which makes it intransparent to which object the picture belongs, what object it is a picture of. Qualifying the kind of picture by one place predicate, Goodman also rejects the possible interpretation that would try to smuggle the notion of resemblance at least into the passive component of representation, rejects the claim that pictures could be sorted out as mushroom-pictures thanks to their sharing some visual properties with the existing mushrooms.

Since being a picture of a certain kind is independent from referring, one may conclude that the characteristic of pictures, i.e. their instantiation of certain properties, must be understood as their peculiarity which in no way influences their denotation. Thus divorcing the two components of representation, Goodman distinguishes representation from exemplification where the two components, the passive and the active one need to be correlated. Namely, whereas a picture may denote a man without necessarily being described as a man-picture, and necessarily without instantiating the predicate »to be a man«, a sample refers only to the predicates by which it has been denoted.

The difference between the pictorial representation and a sample, might have been established by the need to account for the multiple pictorial reference which seems to override the properties one could ascribe to a limited, flat piece of canvas. Although a sample never exemplifies all properties of its original, otherwise it wouldn't count as a sample but as a copy, it refers only to the very properties it may instantiate. Since a piece of canvas may instantiate a limited set of properties, if pictorial representation were reduced to exemplification, the range of pictorial reference should be drastically limited. In such a case, for example, a picture could never represent/exemplify three-dimensional space, because the two-dimensional surface surely cannot instantiate the predicate »to be three-dimensional«.

Identification of pictures with samples, as it follows from the Goodman's theory, could be accepted in some »simple« cases of selfreferential pictures, as for instance, in the case of some abstract paintings. The painting »The Black Square on the White Ground«, no doubt instantiates the property »to be a black square on the white ground«, and at the same time refers to it. However, only the selfreferential nonrepresentational paintings, where the properties of the signifier overlap with the properties signified, seem to be pictures explainable in terms of exemplification. Bearing in mind the limited number of properties that a canvas may exemplify, Goodman based the reference of representational pictures on conventions.

An attempt to combine conventional reference with exemplification of at least one common property in order to explain pictorial representation was made by D. Arrell (15). Although his explanation relied on exemplification, denotation played an important role in it, not less important than in Goodman's explanation. According to Arrell, »a symbol represents an object iff it refers to that object and exemplifies one or more properties of that object« (16). In fact, as reference to the object represented has already been achieved by conventional denotation, an exemplification of its properties seems an unnecessary embellishment. Such cases where reference to object is combined by referentially inefficient instantiation of some of the referent's properties, Arrell simply terms »representation«. Although Arrell's intention was to restrict the notion of representation only to cases where reference to object was accompanied by the sharing of features, i.e. by the similarity to the referent, having reduced the number of properties, that needed to be shared by the signifier and the signified, to one, Arrell makes the instantiation of common properties a trivial fact thus turning any symbol into a representation.

Consequently, Arrell's attempt to include the notion of exemplification in the explanation of representation, i.e. to preserve the sharing of common features as one of the conditions that determine representation, turned out to be as inefficient as the traditional resemblance theory. Since the other component of representation, that of denotation, overtakes the job of establishing reference, the role of the instantiation of common properties turns out to be trivial.

An attempt to advance the suggestion made by Arrell should, therefore, try to prove conventional denotation to be an unnecessary and the exemplification of certain visual properties a sufficient condition for the constitution of pictorial reference.

Let us return to the already mentioned painting by Malevich. Analysed in Goodman's terms this painting belongs to black-square-pictures and at the same time, thanks to its title, it refers to a black square, so it may be considered to be a representation-as, i.e. representation of a black square as a black square. However, since the link between the two components of representation is not a necessary one, our painting, belonging to black-square-pictures may bear different titles, and hence pick up different referents. For instance it might have bore the titles: »The Blackboard«, »The Annihilation«, »Malevich's Tombstone«, »Looking through the Window at Night«, »Space Odyssey 2001: The Monolith«, etc. The fact that different titles determine different referents of a single pictorial signifier, Goodman considers to be an evidence for the claim that the link between the two components of pictorial representation were arbitrary. Indeed, if a single pictorial signifier stands for different classes of referents, may we

not conclude that the constitution of pictorial reference is independent of what a picture looks like, independent of what kind of picture it is, what label is being applied to it?

The variety of pictorial reference is thus accounted for by the functional dissociation of the components of pictorial representation. Since the burden of the referential function, in the examples mentioned, is in fact carried by the titles, the question of the kind of pictures turned out to be an arbitrary matter. In fact, in such an analysis, looking at pictures turns out to be unnecessary; in order to understand pictorial references it is sufficient to read their titles.

Such a reasoning, however, oversees two important items. First, the reference of the pictures in the example we mentioned, is indeed definitely fixed by the titles. If there had been only one title, we would have no reason to talk of different referents of a single signifier. Further on, if there were no titles at all, a painting belonging to black-square-pictures could never be said to refer to the Malevich's tombstone, or to the blackboard. This, however, does not imply that it would not refer at all, nor that its reference is functionally independent from its belonging to a certain kind. If we, as in the case of exemplification, functionally associate the label, which is being applied to the canvas, with the role that the canvas as a label performs, a painting may be understood as referring to the very properties it instantiates. Taken as a sample, a canvas instantiating the property »to be a black square on the white ground«, could be understood, as referring to a black square on the white ground, even without its reference being fixed by the title. It does not refer to a black square on the white ground only thanks to its title, but primarily thanks to its visual attributes, thanks to the instantiated visual properties. That is why the title in this case seems redundant, as if it repeated what was already »said« by the picture. In fact, the role of the title in this case is negative: fixing the reference of the picture to the very description – »black square on the white ground«, it excludes other possible titles which could have indicated figurative interpretations. The role of the title in this case is »against interpretation«, it expresses the negative attitude of its author towards figurative tradition, towards the treatment of pictures as illusions, as mere mediators of an external reality.

Having abandoned the traditional theory of representation based on similarity, abstract artists intended not to imitate, but to create. Some of them interpreted their pictures not as symbols, but as objects in their own right and not in the right derived from what they represented. Reinterpreted in Goodman's terms such an effort may be understood as the striving towards instantiation. Neglecting the representational function of pictures, abstract artists focused on the very properties a canvas may exemplify.

Reducing extrapictorial means of fixing the reference, such as the role of the title or iconographic rules, to the minimum, they explored the potentials of the visual language cleared of any non-visual components. In their paintings they exemplified abstract perceptual invariants, visual properties such as »to be black«, »to be a square«, »to be in the middle«, »to be on the white ground« etc. They strived to make the canvas instantiate these properties in order to refer to nothing but these properties. From this point of view at least selfreferential abstract paintings, as well as abstract paintings with no titles, with the title »Untitled« etc. clearly represent cases which may be explained by Goodman's notion of exemplification.

Instantiating the visual properties mentioned above, and thanks to this instantiation, Malevich's painting refers to no more, but also no less than these properties. The class of referents of Malevich's painting consists of entities instantiating the same visual properties that are instantiated by the canvas. This class may include black and square boards, tables, tombstones, monoliths (if they existed), window-views etc.

Such an account, however, could be interpreted as implying the idea that a canvas may somehow instantiate the predicate »to be a tombstone«. This surely cannot be the case. If a canvas instantiates the property »to look like x«, it doesn't imply that it instantiates the property »to be x«. What any canvas exemplifies is the property »to look like this«, which in turn may be instantiated by other objects as well.

Pictures are indeed labels which may be described as so-and-so-pictures. Our classification of pictorial labels into kinds is not necessarily guided by the similarity between pictures and objects, but it is, as well as their reference, determined by their visual properties. Although our labeling of pictures is mostly inappropriate, because »words are wrong currency to exchange for pictures« (17), although we may sometimes be unable to verbalize what kind of picture it is, its kind is nevertheless determined by its visual properties. In this case, a verbally underdetermined, but visually determined so-and-so picture refers to whatever looks so-and-so. Thus, the meaning of a pictorial label may be understood, we may even be able to point to one of its possible referents, without being able to verbally describe what kind of picture it is.

The rule for the application of pictorial labels, is not something external to the pictures, it is not independent from their belonging to a certain kind. The clue for the use of a pictorial label is inherent to its perceptible properties. Without any title, the painting may be said to refer to whatever instantiates these properties, but to nothing specifically. Pictorial reference is reference to properties, it does not determine which object instantiates them. The role played by the title and by the iconographic

conventions usually consists of narrowing the class of pictorial referents, of focusing the reference to one specific class or object. The title or iconographic conventions thus offer us a subject, to which the picture may be applied as a predicate.

The vagueness of pictorial reference that is frequently spoken of, consists of not knowing specifically who or what the picture is about (18), although we clearly see (literally) what is being predicated. The idea that pictorial language consists of »adjectives and other predicating verbal phrases« (19) promoted by S. Kjørup may thus be explained in terms of exemplification. Instantiating certain visual properties, pictures refer to these visual properties, by their visual means pictures inform us about the visual characteristics of our world. Only this is pictorial reference in the strict sense of the word.

Whereas exemplified visual properties mentioned so far were limited to the most general perceptual invariants such as »to be red«, or »to be up«, J. J. Gibson's theory of picture perception (20) enables us to speak of the exemplification of more complex invariants which may specify certain classes of objects (21). Thus, we may speak of pictures instantiating the property »to be doglike« and hence referring to »whatever looks like a dog«. Of course, the class of referents to which this pictorial label is applicable must not necessarily consist only of dogs, but may include other creatures, scenes or patterns which satisfy the pictorial description.

The determination of a unique referent, on the other hand, could be accomplished by the picture only if it functioned as a definite description (22), if visual properties instantiated by the picture could be applied to one and only referent. This, however, hardly ever happens, first, because visual properties of an object may not be specific only of it, and second, because a canvas may not exemplify all the visual properties necessary for identification. Precisely because of their inability to determine unique referents, pictures are equipped by titles.

Titles and other nonvisual means may therefore be said to be functional in the constitution of pictorial reference only in the broader sense of the word. Being the nonpictorial component in the constitution of the reference of an exhibit, the title may in no way be considered as necessary for the constitution of pictorial reference.

Explaining the way pictorial representation is constituted on an example of the portrait of the Duke of Wellington, where, obviously, reference to the Duke, was established by the title, or by some other nonpictorial means, Goodman surely could not have advanced our understanding of pictorial reference. It is hardly possible for a picture to refer to the Duke of Wellington by its pictorial means, by instantiating certain visual properties, by belonging to a certain kind of picture. On the

basis of its visual properties, a picture may be described as instantiating properties such as »to be manlike«, »to be soldierlike«, so it may be understood as referring to whatever looks like a man-soldier. This exactly is the criteria Goodman uses to classify pictures into kinds, renouncing their relevance for the determination of pictorial reference. Of course, since the reference Goodman purported to explain, i.e. the reference to the Duke, was in fact performed by the title, Goodman saw no reason why to attribute any referential function to the visual properties the picture instantiated. Thus, his account of the reference of a picture turned out to be an account of the reference of its title.

If we restrict our analysis to pictorial reference in the strict sense of the word, then we should ignore the role of nonpictorial, nonvisual means that support, fix, narrow, or even contradict (23) information conveyed by the picture. What distinguishes pictures from other symbols may not be discovered by the analysis of nonpictorial means for the determination of their reference. Reference to a single referent is not a paradigm case of pictorial reference, but rather its marginal case. In order to pick up a single referent, to become »a picture of«, a picture usually has to be supported by the title, by some iconographic convention, or some other nonpictorial means. This, however, doesn't mean that, this support being withdrawn, the picture performs no referential function at all. Without the title that fixes the reference to a single referent, i.e. to the Duke of Wellington, the picture would refer to whoever or whatever looks like him. In this case, the class of referents is surely wide enough, but it is not underdetermined.

SIMILARITY AND CONVENTIONALITY

Why, we may ask, would the painter take the trouble in the constitution of a pictorial signifier if its observable characteristics were neither necessary nor sufficient for the constitution of its meaning? If the painter aims, as Goodman may presumably answer, at the constitution of a signifier which, thanks to our knowledge of pictorial conventions, could be easily sorted out as the so-and-so-picture, the painter's only task would be the instantiation of a certain convention. If it is enough to follow a convention in order to achieve the successful classification of a painting as a so-and-so-picture, it is difficult to see why any painter should take the trouble to improve the conventions we already got used to, or why he should even try to invent new ones?

According to Ferdinand de Saussure's insight (24), the stability of the linguistic system is the function of its arbitrariness. Namely, if verbal

signs were not arbitrary, the speakers would be motivated to initiate changes in order to make the existing signifiers even more adequate than before. This exactly happens to be the case with the pictorial signs. If our classification of pictures as so-and-so-pictures rested entirely on our habits, if this classification had nothing to do with pictorial reference, i.e. if reference of a picture rested entirely on conventions; if there was in principle no difference between seeing a picture and reading the text, than — the efforts of the painter to constitute more adequate signs would be entirely superfluous. Namely, what could count as an improvement in adequacy of an arbitrary sign? Certainly not its matching the reality, its expressiveness, or its formal harmony which are the most frequently mentioned criteria of adequacy of nonarbitrary signs.

The effort of the painter to constitute a pictorial signifier, to make the canvas instantiate certain visual properties may be understood as an effort in articulation. A painter will be able to refer, to convey certain information, only if he succeeds in the constitution of a pictorial label. The constitution of the label matters so much, because what the painter wanted us to know are visual properties exemplified by the label.

Finally we are left with the argument that seemed most convincing, namely, with the statement that the relation of similarity was logically too weak to establish pictorial reference (25). Even if we admit that kinds of pictorial labels are determined by the character of our perception and by the visual properties of the world, even if we confirm the necessary link between the possession of a visual property and referring to this property, a conventionalist may still argue that pictorial denotation must in the last consequence be established independently, hence that the possession of a certain visual property could be regarded as necessary, but not as sufficient for the constitution of pictorial reference.

Indeed, the fact that two objects are similar does not make one of them the pictorial representation of another. Understood as »feature matching«, the relation of similarity is characterized as symmetric, reflexive and trivial, and hence incompatible with the relation »to be a picture of«. If an advocate of similarity claimed that more than one common feature was required for the objects to be regarded as similar, hence that similarity was not a trivial relation, Goodman would probably repeat his famous sentence about the picture of Marlborough Castle having more features in common with other pictures than with the Castle (26), thus manifesting the difference between predicates »to have more features in common« and »to represent«.

Unlike similarity, the relation of denotation is clearly asymmetrical, and so is any symbolic relation. To recognize a general symbolic character of an object means that it stands for us in an asymmetrical relation to

whatever it symbolizes. No recognition of similarity may establish this asymmetrical relation.

The contention that the relation of similarity does not constitute the general symbolic character of a pictorial sign, however, does not imply that similarity is irrelevant for the constitution of pictorial reference, nor that its supposed role in this constitution should be performed by conventions. It is true that no instantiated properties of a canvas, for instance the property »to look like x« may constitute its general referential character, independently of the way it was produced, independently of the role it plays in the process of communication between its author and his audience. The intentions of its author and its role in the process of communication, namely, function as an operator, a »picture-stroke« (27) which turns a canvas into a signifier, endowing it with the general symbolic function.

The transformation of a canvas into a signifier, the acquiring of the general referential character, the shift from the domain of »mere things« to the domain of signs (28), still do not determine which information is being transmitted, leaving its decoding to the recipients's perceptual skills. It is after the recognition of the symbolic character of an object, that the perception of its similarity to other objects start to play a role in the constitution of its reference.

Thus interpreted, the role of visual properties, and hence the role of similarity, may be considered as analogous to the role of conventions. The use of conventions is not limited to symbolic activities, the predicate »to be conventional« does not uniquely apply to symbols, nor does it determine the referential character of the process it qualifies. The fact that certain activity, say a sports game, is ruled by conventions is not enough to qualify this activity as symbolic, hence, conventionality is not sufficient to establish its general referential character.

On the other hand, the situation of radical interpretation (29) proves that an utterance may successfully refer even in the case when the speaker and the hearer share no conventions, it proves that conventions are not only insufficient, but also unnecessary for referring. Of course, once the activity is recognized as symbolic, mastering the conventions helps us in decoding its meaning, but it is only after the general symbolic character of an activity, or an object has already been established that conventions become sufficient for the constitution of its reference.

The same conclusion may be reached in the case of pictorial symbols. It is only after the general symbolic character of a canvas has been established independently of its visual properties, that its visual properties, and hence the perceived similarity, become sufficient for the constitution of pictorial reference. Assuming the general symbolic character of a picture,

the similarity to physical objects may be regarded not as a necessary, because pictures may exemplify some simpler perceptual invariants, but as a sufficient condition for the determination of pictorial reference.

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Vanda Božičević: POVRATAK SLIČNOSTI

S a ž e t a k

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