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Substitution by Image: The Very Idea

ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to provide a plausible conceptual model of a specific use of images described as substitution in recent art-historical literature. I bring to light the largely implicit shared commitments of the art historians' discussion of substitution, each working as they do in a different idiom, and I draw consequences from these commitments for the concept of substitution by image—the major being the distinction between nonportraying substitution and substitution by portrayal. I then develop an argument that substitution by image in the desired, nonportraying sense needs to be thought of in terms of a figurative representation of an image's subject as a generic object, what I will call its figurative instantiation.

Not every image [*Bild*] must also be a portrayal [*Abbild*].
—Ernst Gombrich¹

I. INTRODUCTION

Substitution by image has received much attention in recent art-historical literature (Belting 2001; Ginzburg 2001; Bahrani 2003; Summers 2003; Bredekamp 2015; Weigel 2015), and the concept has been picked up by several influential voices in contemporary philosophy of depiction as well (Walton 2008; Noë 2012, 97–105; Wiesing 2013, 126–127, 157–169). However, the treatment of substitution by philosophers is significantly different from that of the art historians. For the former, “substitution” serves to explain the role of images in communicating the looks of things, whereas the latter treat it as a function of images fundamentally different from this role. In fact, what triggered the art historians' interest in substitution in the first place was the worry that explaining the development and sustenance of pictorial practices in terms of their tracing or modeling the appearance of absent objects—their portrayal—risked mischaracterizing an important function images have often served—that of stand-ins for powerful, often supernatural entities on

which behalf they impact, or interact with, their environment. By contrast, the premise informing the philosophical treatments of substitution by image is that a picture's ability to model an object's appearance is best understood as substituting for a veridical visual encounter with that object.² The philosophers propose to understand portrayal as a case of substitution, whereas for the art historians portrayal and substitution are supposed to be two different, opposing ways of using figuration.³

Although the similarities among influential art-historical accounts of substitution have been noted in passing (for example, Davis 2012, 34; Bahrani 2014, 59; Sørensen 2017, 367), no one has undertaken so far the critical work required to distill the concept of substitution by image implied in these writings—the kind of work that usually falls to philosophers to undertake. Unfortunately, given the nature of its interest in substitution, contemporary depiction theory is ill equipped to help make sense of the pattern emerging from the art-historical discourse. In this article, I try to remedy the situation. I bring to light the largely implicit shared commitments of the art historians' discussion of substitution, each working as they do in a different idiom (Sections II–III), and I draw consequences from these commitments for

the concept of substitution by image—the major being the distinction between nonportraying substitution and substitution by portrayal (Section IV). The next two sections (Sections V–VI) develop an argument that substitution by image in the desired, nonportraying sense needs to be thought of in terms of a figurative representation of an image’s subject as a generic object, what I will call its figurative instantiation.

What I do not address in this article—although this topic is high on the agenda of the historians of figuration—is the specific historical or anthropological role substitution played in the development of figuration; nor is this article a contribution to the philosophical literature on the nature of depiction. My aim is simply to provide a plausible conceptual model of a specific use of images as described by certain historians of figuration. The model does rely on recent work in depiction theory. Namely, this article draws on the quasi-Fregean position that distinguishes between the sense and the reference or use of a picture (Lopes 1996; Hyman 2012) as well as on the neo-Husserlian tripartite model of the image that differentiates between an image’s material vehicle, its figurative content, and its external subject (for example, Wiesing 2005, 2013; Briscoe 2016; Nanay 2016).⁴ The distinction between sense and reference or use helps me keep separate the idea of something being a picture (that is, having pictorial sense or, in my terminology, figurative content) from its being used for portrayal or substitution.⁵ Furthermore, the tripartite model allows me to conceive of the possibility that an image’s figurative content is perceived as particular or generic independent of the respective nature of its vehicle (which is always particular) and its subject (which could be particular or generic).

II. GOMBRICH AND VERNANT

What is meant by substitution by image in this article is fairly straightforward: for an image to stand in for something is to replace it or make it, in some respects, present by taking on its role. Image-substitutes respond to a desire for an effect occasioned by the visible, material presence of an object or an agent (what I will call their function), a desire the satisfaction of which would—absent a substitute—be frustrated by the unavailability of the object or agent. Image-portrayals respond

to a desire to gain access to the particular looks of an object or a scene, a desire the satisfaction of which would—absent a portrayal—be denied by the unavailability of the object or scene for visual inspection.⁶ Examples of artifacts employing figuration in order to substitute for what they represent include Archaic Greek *kouroi* that make available communication with the deceased by standing in for them, Egyptian sarcophagi that make it possible for the soul of the deceased to travel to the afterlife by providing an ersatz body, Byzantine icons that stand in for the Christian saints, or Assyrian *lamassu* guarding the gates of the royal palaces, which embody protective spirits to keep evil forces at bay. They do not portray, that is, they are not intended to trace or model the particular visible features of what they represent in order to provide visual information about its appearance. To give a specific example from the literature, the art historians Hans Belting (2001, 163–164) and David Summers (2003, 331) both contrast the imported Greco-Roman naturalistic style of some of the mummy portraits of Roman Egypt with that of the traditional Egyptian sarcophagi. The former, so-called Fayum portraits, dramatize for Belting and Summers the clash of the two functions, portrayal and substitution. Belting and Summers independently argue that, unlike the typical Egyptian sarcophagus, the portraits did not serve as substitutes for the decaying body necessary for the soul’s transport to the realm of the dead but as means of commemoration, perhaps displayed in the homes of the deceased before they were buried with the mummified corpse. This commemorative function was parasitic on their tracing or modeling the particular physical appearances of the deceased.

The contrast between portrayal and substitution was famously articulated by Ernst Gombrich in his “Meditations on a Hobby Horse” (1963; first published in 1951) as well as developed independently since the 1960s in a series of essays on archaic figuration by the historian of ancient Greece Jean-Pierre Vernant (2007a, 2007b, 2007c, 2007d). If the respective accounts are read alongside each other and mined for both explicit and implicit commitments and consequences, one finds a remarkable overlap that furthermore extends to Summers’s and Belting’s treatments of substitution as well.

Gombrich notoriously explains the function of substitution on the example of the hobby horse

that gave the essay its title: for a child, a mere broomstick can acquire the function of a horse the child can ride on: it is “neither a sign signifying the concept horse nor is it a portrait of an individual horse” (1963, 2), but by manifesting a function it shares with horses, it becomes a substitute for a horse and at the same time a member of a class of objects that share that function. Gombrich asserts that such visual representations are rather the “focus of fantasies” than a means of portrayal; their features actualize the desired function of an absent object. The substitutes follow the pattern of actualizing a function by sharing certain visible traits with an absent entity. According to Gombrich, this pattern motivates the development of image-making, specifically of the “conceptual,” heavily conventionalized and schematized pictorial styles—typical of “primitive and primitivist art.” Their often “distorted” or schematic nature is motivated, Gombrich argues, by the need to control responses to them and avoid the danger of their acquiring living presence (8). Gombrich contrasts conceptual images with pictorial styles that are developed to communicate objects’ external form. His *Art and Illusion* (1960) famously focuses on the latter use, which he saw as playing a prime role in the visual cultures of the “illusionist islands” of ancient Greece, China, and the European Renaissance, where pictorial representation was generally tasked with recording “a visual experience” (1963, 9). In Gombrich’s account, “illusionist” images aim at reconstructing how a specific event or situation would have appeared to an onlooker so that everything in an image’s figurative content refers to a fictional or real space outside it.⁷

Since the appearance in 1962 of “Figuration de l’invisible et catégorie psychologique du double: le *kolossos*” (2007a), Vernant has been contrasting the concept of the image with that of the double (or, sometimes, the idol). The pair serves him to address a shift he has identified in the understanding of figuration between the sixth and fourth centuries BCE in ancient Greece, a shift from “the presentification of the invisible to the imitation of appearance” (2007c, 546–547). At the end of this process, the understanding of figuration as imitation of outward form has been consolidated, and figurative artifacts such as statues have come to be seen as and valued for reproducing the visible shape of absent objects or persons; they have become, in Vernant’s terminology, images proper

(2007a, 534; 2007c, 547). In this regime of figuration, codified in Platonism, the validity of an image derives from its resemblance or similarity to that which it represents (2007b, 1731).

Vernant’s concept of the double, on the other hand, describes an altogether different approach to figuration, namely, one that treats the figurative object not as a semblance of an absent entity but rather as its—explicitly paradoxical—real presence (2007a, 537; 2007b, 1732; 2007c, 548; 2007d, 2027). The double is a substitute for what is invisible, inaccessible, or resides in another world (hence “the presentification of the invisible”). It serves as a medium for an authentic point of contact with a sacred or supernatural agency. Its legitimacy, however, is not secured by its likeness to what it substitutes. A material object can take on the role of the double because it has been ritualized—it has been integrated into a symbolic system and acquires efficacy only within the ritual context (2007a, 540, 544; 2007c, 549, 550). To that extent, and to that extent only, it has a real presence (2007b, 1732; 2007c, 548) and can operate in the world (2007c, 554). According to Vernant, the paradoxical character of the double as the apparition of that which is absent or invisible is made manifest by the dissimilitude of the idol: what is manifested is the incommensurability between the sacred agency and its visible manifestation (2007c, 549). Yet despite this irreducible difference, the double achieves identity (“similitude complète”) with what it substitutes (2007d, 2026) while often manifesting only such traits that capture the exemplary characteristics of the substituted (2028–2029).

Gombrich’s and Vernant’s accounts of the substitutive role of images overlap in these regards:

1. Substitution by image amounts to a standing-in-for: the image-substitute does not portray something outside itself but actually stands in for what it represents. Whether called “conceptual images” (Gombrich) or “doubles” (Vernant), image-substitutes are intended to make present an absent functionality or authority.
2. Substitution by image does not entail the collapse of representation, that is, an optical illusion or a conflation of the image with the real thing (Neer 2017, 146) and the degree of perceived physical resemblance does not correlate necessarily with an image’s substitutive

potential. An image-substitute does not disguise itself as what it represents and retains features that distinguish it from the substituted. Vernant insists that dissimilitude actually demonstrates the incommensurability of the substituted agency, while Gombrich claims that it keeps the image-substitute under control.

3. Despite (2) above, the substitute does claim a sort of identity with the substituted. This identity is, however, defined by a shared function manifested in a visible trait rather than by visual indiscernibility. Vernant explicitly, if somewhat confusingly, talks of “complete similarity” (*similitude complète*), but Gombrich also subscribes to this idea (1963, 2).
4. The concept of substitution makes the boundary between iconic and aniconic representation somewhat hazy.⁸ Both authors waver as to the image status of certain substitutes. Gombrich opts to call a broomstick serving as a hobby horse in a child’s play a representation rather than an image (1) and acknowledges that a mere stick that stands for a horse is “probably no image at all” (4). Yet at other places, he talks of artifacts representing by merely taking on (or faking) the desired function of the substituted as minimum images (8).⁹ Vernant, for his part, denies the archaic substitute (“the double”), the status of image altogether. The double and image proper are his names for different historical regimes of a more general category, that of figuration. However, as Richard Neer (2010, 13–19) has shown, Vernant is not always consistent: at times, he seems to be equating images with figuration (2007d, 2019), implying that the archaic Greeks did not perceive “doubles” as figurative. This makes it difficult, however, to comprehend what it was for them to create and perceive such “doubles” that appear to us as clearly employing figuration.

To sum up, for both Gombrich and Vernant, (1) images used as substitutes represent in the strong sense of standing-in; (2) their validity as substitutes does not covary necessarily with their degree of resemblance; (3) yet they manifest a functional identity with what they represent; and (4) the border between iconic and aniconic substitution is blurry.

III. BELTING AND SUMMERS

Gombrich’s and Vernant’s influence on contemporary art-historical theorizations of the substitutive power of images is profound. The topic has been amplified in the wake of the growing interest in the (epistemic, political, religious, emotional . . .) “power” or “agency” of images—a current in art-historical scholarship that sometimes goes under the shorthand “iconic turn.”¹⁰ This turn is characterized by the conviction that images dispose of a *sui generis* sense of presence that enables them to play an active part in human affairs. How exactly this iconic power is to be understood has been the subject of some controversy and continuing debates (see, for example, Wiesing 2013, 78–105, and Grethlein 2017, 149–155). Already, such a brief description is perhaps enough to appreciate why “substitution” becomes relevant in this context. If images can derive from their figurative character a commanding presence, the explanation of their authority in terms of making the absent effective via its figurative representation—that is, substituting for it by means of figuration—readily offers itself.¹¹

The influence of Gombrich and Vernant is most pronounced in two prominent contemporary art historians who have embraced this approach: David Summers and Hans Belting. In Belting’s treatment, substitutive practices associated with images spring from the desire to provide humans with a second, surrogate body, immune to the kind of decay that affects organic matter. This is very much in the spirit of Vernant, for whom substitution by figuration was also a matter of substituting for an absent body or a (deceased or divine) person.¹² By contrast, Summers comes across as more of a Gombrichian. He treats substitution by image as satisfying the desire for the functionality of the substituted; the focus is not so much on the image vehicle as a medium of embodiment of an absent person as on the function that the image comes to share with that of which it is an image. Notably, the same overlap I have identified between Vernant’s and Gombrich’s positions is replicated here as well.

Belting (2001) addresses the topic of substitution by image—using terms such as *Verkörperung*, *Stellvertretung*, *Ersatz*—when discussing his major and controversial (Grethlein 2017, 150–151) claim that the experience of death has played a decisive role in the emergence of image-making. Belting

connects the substitutive function of images to the desire to provide the deceased (and consequently, the absent) with an ersatz body, which he contrasts with the Platonic identification of mimetic image with a medium of remembrance (2001, 143–188). He argues that images serving as substitutes for the deceased require ritual practices attached to the cult of the dead, which are meant to aid the process of substitution toward embodiment. Perceiving images as substitutions for the departed does not imply mistaking dead matter for that endowed with life; images only acquire a “real presence” by embodying the absent through symbolic, ritualized acts (149, 177). Once these practices are not in place, the images easily lose their substitutive power and become, at best, mere means of commemoration (149). Images that stand in for bodies as “media of embodiment” thus do not necessarily rely for their authority on their resemblance to what they represent (148, 170). In this regard, substitutive images differ from “mimetic images”—“portrayals” in my vocabulary—functioning as media of remembrance (172–175).

For Summers, the root of image-making lies in the need to make accessible and bring under control what is desired, yet cannot be fully made present. In most of the world’s cultures, Summers claims, images have played the role of substitutes (2003, 251–259). Central to his understanding of substitution by image is the notion of real metaphor. As opposed to verbal, real metaphor substitutes for something or someone in their absence in real space. This real space determines the possibilities and functional manageability of the substitute. Just as the verbal metaphor requires linguistic context—grammatical and syntactic circumstances—so the real metaphor requires a spatial context. To use Gombrich’s example Summers borrows, only in a specific spatial and symbolic configuration will a broomstick become a hobby horse, and not just any object can take on the role. It must be something a child would manage to “saddle,” as opposed to a real horse (Summers 1991, 2003, 257–259).

According to Summers, when real metaphors acquire figurative content they become “icons” (2003, 259, 284–285). As he argues, icons as means of instantiating power and agency often combine resemblant features that, taken together, are not after anything observable, such as the Assyrian *lamassu* guarding entrances to palaces and

combining features of a bull, an eagle, and a human being. According to Summers, Western metaphysical tradition, dating back at least to Aristotle, treats such composite figures as the result of mere fancy, an imaginative combination of mental images stored in memory (314–326). Summers claims that such a perspective tends to assess all images, even icons, according to how well they resemble the appearance of their assumed prototypes. The result is that they cannot be treated as real metaphors, true icons, since they now cannot substitute, but only bring to memory what they resemble (338).

We find in Summers and Belting the same cluster of ideas (1–4) we encountered in Vernant and Gombrich. For both, (1) image-substitutes exercise a role or command authority on behalf of an absent agency while (2) relying on spatial and ritual conditions rather than optical naturalism for validation. These conditions (3) secure their functional identity with the agency, but also (4) blur the boundary between iconic and aniconic substitution—to be a substitute, an artifact does not have to effect resemblances, that is, it can be an “imageless” or “aniconic image” (Summers 2003, 268; Belting 2001, 170).

IV. SUBSTITUTION WITH/OUT PORTRAYAL

When we try to spell out a rough and preliminary concept of substitution by image based on this overview, the problematic aspect of point (4) comes in full view. An image substitutes for an object or a person if it stands in for that object or person and its quality of being a substitutive image is not dependent on its degree of resemblance to the object it substitutes. Rather, there exists a functional unity between the substitute and the substituted that is enabled by the substitute’s visible traits under adequate spatial and social conditions. Such a preliminary conception is too broad, however. Surely, not all objects that can act as surrogates are images. Consider the following example: In the absence of a hammer, I drive a nail down using a shoe. The shoe substitutes for the hammer as it stands in for, yet is distinguishable from, the hammer. It is a substitute for the hammer because it can serve the same function and will do under given circumstances. Furthermore, it is typically because of its visible traits—I see in the shoe its hammer potential—that I decide

to use it as a hammer substitute. Finally, there is no sense in asking after its degree of representational accuracy or vividness, since it does not have a figurative content. The shoe thus satisfies the conditions of being a substitute, but it is not an *image*-substitute of the hammer.

Image-substitutes are images that are functionally identical with what they depict, that is, they take on the same function. This function is dependent in part on their having figurative content. A shoe may be a substitute for a hammer, but it is not an image-substitute for the hammer because its hammer function is not dependent on its depicting a hammer. The range of functions an image-substitute can instantiate qua image, it appears, must be limited by its figurative character: it is partly because of its figurative content that an image can become an image-substitute. It is partly because a sarcophagus has its anthropoid shape that it can serve as a substitute body or a vessel that takes the soul to the afterlife. It is partly because a Byzantine icon reveals, say, the figures of a female and a baby that it can secure a real contact between the Virgin and her worshipper. I say “partly” because having (a specific kind of) figurative content is not a sufficient feature of an image-substitute, just as having (a specific kind of) figurative content is not sufficient for an image to be a portrayal.¹³ Both substitution and portrayal describe possible uses of the figurative content and what one may do with it (Lopes 1996, 88–89). What use a particular image serves will thus depend on socially established norms of use surrounding it. As the four historians of figuration never tire of stressing, substitution by image must be sanctioned by its social (ritual, symbolic, but also spatial) context.

The stress on social context, however, raises doubts about the connection between an image-substitute’s figurative content and what it stands for that do not apply to portrayal. Image-portrayals use figurative means to convey the appearance of their subject; that is, they purport to provide the kind of information one would otherwise obtain through a veridical visual experience of their subject. While what passes for a convincing portrayal may differ from context to context, if portrayal is an established image use in a given social setting, the more resemblant of the subject the figurative content is deemed, the better the image fulfills its portraying function. No such intrinsic link between the subject’s appearance and

the figurative content exists in the case of substitution by image. The success or failure of an image-substitute does not derive from its level of resemblance or veracity.¹⁴ Indeed, the art historians claim that the configuration of an image’s presentation in both its spatial and symbolic values determines to a large extent its substitutive effect, and what is decisive is that one share this space with the image-substitute and thus is directly engaged by it rather than the degree of its visual resemblance (Summers 2003, 244–248).

The problem here, however, is that the emphasis put on the ritualization and configuration of its environment as decisive contributors to a successful substitution at the expense of the image’s degree of resemblance make it difficult to see what contribution figuration itself brings to the table. It is this stress on the setting and ritualization of the substitute that is responsible for (4)—no clear distinction between substitutes and image-substitutes, as arguably almost anything can substitute for anything else, given the right configuration of its spatial and symbolical context. Insofar as, say, an Egyptian sarcophagus or a Byzantine icon both involve substitution and do not portray their subject, it is not clear what makes them cases of substitution *by image*, since there appears to be no intrinsic link tying their figurative content to their subject. Their figurative content and style is perhaps canonically prescribed by their respective religious traditions, but the fact that they are images and not, say, inscriptions plays no role in their substitutive effects (Neer 2017, 146). In other words, in the game of substitution in which they take part, the sarcophagus and the icon could turn out to be mere place holders or arbitrary symbols rather than figurative instantiations of the substituted.¹⁵

The success or failure of developing a plausible idea of a substitution by image that does not depend on portraying thus turns on providing a plausible description of the contribution of figuration to substitution that would not depend on its potential to trace or model the looks of the substituted. This condition amounts to making sense of point (2)—the substitutive potential of an image is not supposed to covary with the degree of its success in tracing or modeling the looks of the substituted.

Here, one needs to recognize that acting as an image-substitute is not incompatible with being a successful image-portrayal. In other words, it

needs to be acknowledged that substitution by portrayal is possible. For example, if one were to rely on Byzantine descriptions of icons, one would inevitably reach the conclusion that their substitutive power relied on portrayal. Photios, the patriarch of Constantinople, describes in 867 CE the apse mosaic of the Virgin and Child in Hagia Sophia in terms that suggest the effects of optical and psychological naturalism: “a lifelike imitation . . . she fondly turns her eyes upon her begotten child in the affection of her heart. . . . You might think her not incapable of speaking. . . . [T]he fairness of her form [is] the real archetype” (Photios 1958, 290). Incidentally, the two most paradigmatic accounts of substitution by image handed down through centuries in the West arguably involve portrayal too. The mythical first image of Christ (*Mandylicon*) was supposedly an *acheiropoieton*, an image made without hands: an imprint of Christ’s features on the veil that St. Veronica handed him to wipe his face on the way to crucifixion (Bredenkamp 2015, 181, 187, 193). Because the *vera icon* was literally taken “from life,” it was an index of the presence of Christ, which sanctioned its substitutive power (as in the apocryphal story of the veil’s healing of the emperor Tiberius; Nagel and Wood 2010, 64). Put differently, because the image traces the subject’s particular features, it achieves substitutive power (see also Summers 2003, 290–291).

Ovid’s famous tale of Pygmalion and its many later variations establishes another tradition of stories about the substitutive potential of image-portrayals. This myth about a sculpture coming to life effectively describes the dissolution of representation, the *terminus ad quem* of substitution by image understood as substitution by portrayal. Such a substitution satiates a desire for the substituted by individuating through figurative content convincing vivid appearances of their subjects (Stoichita 2008; van Eck 2015). The image-substitute’s potential to take on the role of the substituted is understood as resulting from modeling its particular looks so convincingly that it offers very lifelike experiences, leading one to take the same attitude toward them as one would toward their prototypes (Noë 2012, 104–105).

Importantly, the two traditional accounts of substitution by portrayal violate condition (2) for image-substitutes, namely, no necessary correlation between similarity and substitutive potential.¹⁶ In other words, substitution by

portrayal constitutes a different kind of substitution by image than the one implicit in the writings of Gombrich, Vernant, Belting, and Summers. What stories about the *vera icon* or Pygmalion nicely demonstrate, however, is a specific feature of portrayal that helps distinguish it from cases of the nonportraying substitution by image. These narratives underline the fact that to portray, that is, to trace or model appearance, is to represent the subject of the image as a particular object: what is being traced by the figurative content are individual features of the subject. Pygmalion falls in love with a particular individual woman; the *vera icon* (or the Turin shroud for that matter) gives away the features of one particular face. Pygmalion’s example is also instructive in that the sculptor falls in love with a particular woman who, however, is (at least at first) fictional. For an image to be a portrayal, then, its subject does not have to be an existing particular; it could also be generic (a dog) or fictional (a generic or particular unicorn). What needs to be particular is the figurative content’s rendering of its subject. Or more precisely, the figurative content must serve to represent the subject as a particular. We may not know what dog is being depicted (and maybe no particular dog is), but when it is portrayed it is depicted as a particular dog; the image’s figurative content is used to gain access to a particular appearance of a dog. We can conclude that an image that portrays renders its subject as a particular, from which it follows that an image that substitutes its subject by portraying it renders it as a particular, too.

This brings us back to the Hagia Sophia mosaic. For despite Photios’s vivid rhetoric, it is far from certain that the icon substituted by rendering its subject as a particular. As it happens, his description of the icon does not correspond to the actual image in Istanbul: the Virgin’s posture is markedly different, and she is looking at us rather than at her son, showing little of the emotional depth ascribed to her by Photios.¹⁷ If one were to explain the discrepancy while holding on to the assumption that Byzantine icons served as portrayals, one would either have to deny that Photios is talking about the same icon we see today (for example, Grabar 1984, 496–497; Oikonomidès 1985) or bite the bullet and declare the discrepancy only apparent because the intended audience of the images was trained to “see more than was actually there” (Onians 1980, 15). However, neither explanation is particularly convincing: archaeological

analysis suggests that the icon Photios eulogized is identical with the surviving apse mosaic (Mango and Hawkins 1965, 142–144); besides, it is generally recognized that the typically florid Byzantine *ekphrasis* did not match the austere and schematic content of the icons (Mango 1963; Onians 1980; Brubaker 1989). And the idea that a large community of beholders can be trained to have pictorial experiences of features that go beyond what the image “actually” shows is confusing, if not confused: it suggests a collective perceptual hallucination.

It is thus likely that Photios was not involved in giving an accurate account of the icon’s rendering of its subject. It could still be the case that his description was just an exercise in a highly conventionalized rhetoric divorced from reality (Mango 1963, 66) were it not for the fact that his emotionally charged description corresponded to the intense reactions the icons were meant to elicit and often elicited from their beholders (Brubaker 1989, 25). As Liz James proposes, Photios’s aim might have been to evoke such reactions, facilitated by “the overall environment of the church” (James 2004, 532). This would entail that the Hagia Sophia mosaic was not a portrayal at all. Rather, the icon was meant to trigger an intensely emotional, direct contact with the Virgin and Child because it exposed the observer to their typical features—“immediately identified” by “any Byzantine viewer” (531)—under conditions prescribed by the church doctrine and within the stimulating environment of the Hagia Sophia interior. The success of such a manifestation does not depend on the figurative content convincingly tracing the particular appearance of the substituted; what is required is that the figurative content present under right circumstances features typical of its subject.

V. SUBSTITUTION AS FIGURATIVE INSTANTIATION

The idea that substitution by image has to do with depicting typical features of its subject’s appearance is entertained by Alva Noë’s recent proposal that some images (“icons”), rather than modeling physical appearance, are generalized visualizations of the concept of what they depict, retaining just its relevant, “essential” features while still making use of “technologies of showing” (2015, 163–165). The exact term Noë uses to describe

this phenomenon is “exemplification.” Exemplification is a technical term Nelson Goodman (1976) introduced to explain one of the two major kinds of reference both verbal and nonverbal symbols (such as images) can be involved in. According to Goodman, pictorial representation is a kind of reference, namely, denotation. Denotation is a straightforward case of reference: a symbol stands for an object (1976, 5). But, claims Goodman, an image does not have to denote; it may also exemplify. It does so when it refers to a feature by possessing or instantiating it (53; Elgin 1991); this feature is a type of which the exemplification is a token. Without going further into details of Goodman’s account (and without committing to his nominalism), something like exemplification seems worthy of consideration as a candidate for the explanation of the relation between figurative content and its subject in cases of nonportraying substitution by image if for no other reason than that allying the idea of substitution with exemplification divorces it from portrayal, since to exemplify is to represent a type via its token. In other words, the subject of an exemplifying image is a generic feature (“while anything may be denoted, only labels may be exemplified”; Goodman 1976, 57). A sarcophagus would then acquire the function of an ersatz body by exemplifying generalized anthropoid features; a Byzantine icon of the Virgin would exemplify generic iconographic elements of the visual type “Virgin Mary.” But introducing exemplification understood as a representation of a type via its token does not explain how a representation can both exemplify a type and, by this virtue, stand in for another particular token. After all, the sarcophagus is a substitute for a particular deceased body and the icon is still an icon of the one and only Virgin. In those cases at least, nonportraying image-substitutes stand in for particular objects. We are then in need of a concept of figurative instantiation that would tweak exemplification to apply potentially also to particular subjects.

Here is a suggestion: if image-portrayal involves representation of an image’s subject by its figurative content as a particular object, then figurative instantiation will involve representation of an image’s subject by its figurative content as a generic object. Putting things this way leaves open the option that the image’s subject is a particular. What matters is that the figurative content presents the particular subject (say, Virgin Mary) as a generic

object by possessing visible features that are typical visual characterizations of its subject. The visual type (“Virgin Mary”) is exemplified by the figurative content of the image (an icon of the Virgin), making the image itself an instance of the type.¹⁸ For the image to present the subject as generic—as belonging to a type—is therefore in effect to make itself belong to the same visual type as the subject. And since a function is associated with the appearance of Virgin Mary such that being exposed to her presence triggers a desired effect, the figurative presentation of her appearance as an instance of a type makes it possible to treat the figurative instantiation (the icon) as her image-substitute. A functional identity of type with the particular substituted (the Virgin) is established, and the substitute and the substituted both belong to the same class of objects identified by a shared function—just like Gombrich’s hobby horse claims membership in a class of “gee-gees” that includes other hobby horses as well as the real ones (Gombrich 1963, 2). But since the nonportraying image-substitute does not rely for its substitutive potential on a descriptive or vivid rendering of its subject (as is the case with substitution by portrayal), other marks of its authenticity gain in comparative importance—its canonical style, for example, and the right social and spatial context.

What about cases of nonportraying substitution of *generic* subjects? It is possible that the subject of the Assyrian guardian figure *lamassu*, a protective deity or spirit, was not particular, but generic—not a particular guardian spirit, but just an unspecified member of the kind.¹⁹ Summers argues that we misunderstand the figure’s function when we think that for the Assyrians, it portrayed the appearance of a *lamassu* (2003, 325–326). On the proposed model here, the *lamassu* figure instantiates its generic subject, some *lamassu* or other, by manifesting its visual type. It is neither a portrayal nor a figurative instantiation of a particular guardian spirit as there may not have been a particular object—apart from other *lamassu* figures—to which the figure claimed visual resemblance (326). Yet it does constitute a case of substitution by image as it substitutes for a *lamassu* protective spirit by figuratively instantiating a *lamassu* visual type—a visual type that corresponds to the idea of *lamassu*, includes all its visible emanations (possibly only the figures), and implies certain spatial and social conditions of efficacy.

VI. SUBSTITUTION AND MODES OF PRESENTATION

When an image serves portrayal, its figurative content represents its subject as a particular object; when an image is used for figurative instantiation, its figurative content serves as a token of a visual type.²⁰ Furthermore, when an image-portrayal stands in for its subject, its figurative content resembles its subject so convincingly that it takes over its function. However, for a figurative instantiation to become substitution, the figurative content must exemplify a visual type that is associated with a function. It is the association of the notion of functional identity with figurative instantiation that has allowed us to recognize that there are in fact two kinds of substitution by image: one exploiting and one incompatible with portrayal. Without a similar notion, one would not be able to appreciate the difference.²¹

Recognizing the relevance of figurative instantiation for the contrast between portrayal and substitution helps explain why (2) in cases of the nonportraying substitution by image, the degree of similarity does not necessarily covary with the substitutive potential and, at the same time, vindicates (4) the blurring of the dividing line between iconic and aniconic substitution. Because such a substitution does not involve using images as models of the appearance of their subjects, their figurative content may be limited to just displaying one simple feature of their subject. The level of figurative elaboration may be minimal to the extent that it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to decide whether a substitute employs figuration at all. The twigs of a broom used as a horse-substitute acquire the role of a horse tail (or is it a mane?); but is that already a case of figuration? Lingams, phallic monoliths venerated in South Asian Shaivism as representations of Shiva, would presumably constitute cases of substitution by image insofar as these stones are really treated as embodiments of a reproductive organ. But often Shaivites deny that lingams are phallic; if that is the case, then lingams are not image-substitutes (Doniger 2011; Davis 2017, 462).

Figurative instantiation also sheds light on the question of the relationship between “conceptual” styles and substitution. In his criticism of Gombrich’s association of conceptual imagery with substitution, Dominic Lopes suggests that it is just as likely that “pictorial substitution [has] sprung from the lifelikeness of nonsubstitutive

pictures with illusionistic effects” (1996, 79). That may be so—especially if one wants to explain the emergence of substitutive portrayals—but the nature of figurative instantiation suggests that there is at least one good reason why canons of figuration developed to serve nonportraying substitution would generally tend to be schematic or “conceptual” rather than naturalistic or lifelike (leaving aside the reasons actually put forward by Gombrich and Vernant): if the point of image-making in a particular case is to instantiate the features that establish the identity of a type, there is less of an incentive to elaborately trace the looks of things. That does not mean that images located on the naturalistic end of the spectrum cannot act as successful nonportraying image-substitutes. To return to the Fayum case with which I opened, in contrast to Summers and Belting, the Egyptologist Christina Riggs interprets the naturalistic style of the Fayum portraits not as an intrusion of an alien pictorial function of portrayal but rather in terms of an assimilation of the Greco-Roman mode of representation for the substitutive purposes of the Egyptian burial rites (2005, 180). Lopes is thus right when he claims that “the truth is that we cannot tell a substitutive picture simply by its style of representation. Any picture may be a substitute” (1996, 79). Deriving types of attitudes toward images strictly from styles of pictorial representation would indeed be a mistake. What distinguishes image-portrayals from image-substitutes is not necessarily the naturalism of the former and the schematism of the latter. Images that have served the role of substitutes can take on the role of portrayals and vice versa (Summers 2003, 341). The claim should be rather that certain modes of presentation are better suited (and thus are likely to have been developed) for certain figurative functions.

VII. CONCLUSION

By way of conclusion, let me reformulate the four ideas that reappear in the works of Gombrich, Vernant, Belting, and Summers in terms of the conclusions reached above.

1. Image-substitutes stand in for what they represent: a nonportraying image-substitute makes present a functionality or authority by having its figurative content exemplify features of a visual type which matches the substituted kind (for example, *lamassu*) or the substituted particular (for example, the Virgin Mary) associated with the desired function. The figurative content instantiates visible characteristics shared by tokens of the type, effectively making the image such a token. The image thus can, under adequate circumstances, become a member of a class that shares the desired function.
2. Image-substitutes are contrasted with image-portrayals. In light of the possibility of substitution by portrayal, the contrast should be rephrased as one between a nonportraying substitution by image and portrayal. Nonportraying substitution by image relies on figurative instantiation, that is, figurative representation of an image’s subject as generic, whereas image-portrayals represent their subjects as particular objects. Unlike image-portrayals serving substitution, nonportraying image-substitutes do not rely for their success on a descriptive or vivid modeling of the particular appearance of their subject, but rather on their exemplifying a visual type. This conclusion is independent of Vernant’s claim that dissimilitude symbolizes the invisible nature of the divine as well as Gombrich’s assertion that dissimilitude keeps the image from becoming dangerously alive.
3. Image-substitutes achieve identity with their subjects: the identity is a functional identity of type. Even a very schematic or minimally figurative image can become a successful image-substitute, if it instantiates under adequate conditions the relevant features of the visual type associated with the desired function.
4. The boundary between iconic and aniconic substitution is blurry. Because figurative elaboration of the substitute may be minimal, there exists a gray zone where it becomes difficult to decide whether a substitute employs figuration at all.²²

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1. Missing from the original English version (Gombrich 1963), this sentence appears in the German edition of “Meditations on a Hobby Horse” (1978, 20).

2. For Walton (2008), pictures are substitutes for what they depict because they generate our imagining seeing what they represent. According to Noë, pictures are visual substitutes configured to instantiate “the look or appearance of a thing or situation” (2012, 104). Wiesing argues that images as tools for showing substitute by means of their figurative content for our looking at what they refer to (Wiesing 2013, 125–127). Curiously, all three have acknowledged their indebtedness to Gombrich’s discussion of substitution (1963). See Walton (1973, 283), Wiesing (2013, 158), and Noë (2012, 97).

3. I use “image,” “figurative,” and “figuration”—and not “picture,” “pictorial,” and “depiction”—to cover both 2D and 3D artifacts with figurative content.

4. I borrow the classification “neo-Husserlian” from Voltolini (2018).

5. John Hyman (2012) understands the sense of a picture as the “how” of depiction: two paintings of the same horse have the same reference, but different sense. Dominic Lopes proposes that substitution, like reference, is just one way of using depiction; both, however, are constrained by its sense: “The meaning of a picture as a picture that remains constant whether it is used to communicate, to warn, to serve as a substitute, or what have you” (1996, 88–89).

6. Whether image portrayal can constitute a case of substitution by image is discussed in Section IV.

7. This is where “Beholder’s share” from Gombrich’s *Art and Illusion* enters the stage, as the perceiver is required to participate in the creation of the illusionist experience of virtual space.

8. On the concept of aniconism, see Gaifman (2012, 17–45; 2017).

9. This, more liberal use of “image” corresponds to the way the term “*Bild*” is used in the German version (Gombrich 1978). See also Wiesing (2013, 165).

10. For recent evaluations of its legacy, see Moxey (2013), Marr (2016), and Wood (2016).

11. There are also other influential accounts of substitution by image—Lorraine Daston’s or Christopher Wood’s, for example—which it would be difficult to interpret as following in the footsteps of Vernant or Gombrich. I have narrowed my focus to the discussions that exhibit to a various extent the familiar tenets shared by Gombrich and Vernant because these tenets revolve around the contrast between portrayal and substitution, associating the latter with a power or agency that is *sui generis* figurative. On Daston’s notion of “epistemic image,” see her (2015) and, for context, Marr (2016); on Wood’s “principle of

substitution,” see Wood (2008, 25–60), Nagel and Wood (2010, 12–14), and Stejskal (2018).

12. Besides Vernant, the essential influence here is Ernst H. Kantorowicz’s interpretation of medieval royal effigies: these effigies, placed on the royal coffin during a funeral, displayed the regalia and embodied the royal dignity that lived on despite the demise of the ruler (Kantorowicz 1957, 419–437; Belting 2001, 97–98; Bredekamp 2015, 181; Weigel 2015, 208–231).

13. I will have more to say on the relationship between substitution and kinds of presentation in Section VI.

14. Consequently, the discourse surrounding image-portrayals tends to assess them along epistemic criteria as sources of knowledge, whereas the discourse surrounding image-substitutes reflects on images in terms of a relationship between presence and absence. On epistemological versus ontological theorizations of images, see Elsner (2012).

15. To avoid this conclusion, one may be tempted to opt for a Waltonian interpretation of substitution by image as a special case of the visual game of make-believe constitutive of any pictorial experience (Walton 2008). It would be a special case because the players in the game would forget or disregard the imaginative character of their visual encounter (Lopes 1996, 85). But if this disregard entails conflating the image with the real thing, it would violate condition (2). I thank Rob Hopkins for pressing me on this.

16. However, each violates condition (2) differently: Ovidian substitution by portrayal relies for its effect on optical illusionism, whereas the *vera icon* kind presents an image’s descriptive tracing of an appearance as a sign of contact with its divine prototype. Thanks to Elisa Cardarola for drawing my attention to the difference.

17. See James (2004, 522) for a reproduction.

18. Technically, it makes only the figurative content a token of a type, not the material image vehicle (see Wiesing 2005, 74).

19. The scholarly literature, at least, allows both interpretations. See, for example, Danrey (2004).

20. Thus, depending on the circumstances, a garden lion statue can serve to figuratively instantiate a generic subject (it exemplifies the visual type “lion”) or a particular subject (it presents Leo the lion as a visual type “lion”); it can also portray a particular (Leo) or a generic subject (portrait of a lion).

21. That is why Robert Briscoe’s (2016) otherwise helpful discussion of substitution by depiction cannot be applied to address the difference between the two types of substitution by image.

22. I thank the participants at the conference “Rethinking Pictures: A Transatlantic Dialogue” in Paris in 2016, Whitney Davis’s graduate seminar at Berkeley in 2017, and the European Society for Aesthetics 2018 annual conference in Maribor for their feedback on earlier drafts of this article. I am especially grateful to Caitlin Dolan and an anonymous referee for their written comments. This work was supported by the German Research Foundation (grant STE 2612/1-1).