



The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Phenomenology

Dan Zahavi (ed.)

<https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199594900.001.0001>

Published: 2012

Online ISBN: 9780191750458

Print ISBN: 9780199594900

CHAPTER

26 Something that is nothing but can be anything: the image and our consciousness of it

John Brough

<https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199594900.013.0027> Pages 545–563

Published: 28 January 2013

Abstract

This chapter concentrates on the nature of the image as it presents itself in experience, with its remarkable capacity to represent within itself people, events, emotions, and many other things, and with its place in art. The Husserlian perspective has many affinities with more recent investigations of images. The physical dimension of image plays an important role in imaging and has been largely neglected by philosophers, though not by artists. The uniqueness of image consciousness rests in its ability to see something in something else. Then, the chapter assesses the differences between image consciousness and symbolic or signitive consciousness. The resemblance in image consciousness must precisely not be perfect; it must be paired with and permeated by difference and even conflict. Images improve experience by folding into themselves the world.

Keywords: [image consciousness](#), [art](#), [emotions](#), [imaging](#), [signitive consciousness](#)

Subject: [Epistemology](#), [Philosophy of Mind](#), [Philosophy](#)

Series: [Oxford Handbooks](#)

Images are peculiar and perplexing phenomena, highly complex and capable of representing things entirely different from themselves, a feat beyond the reach of ordinary objects. They have intrigued philosophers since the time of Plato, and have played what some take to be a quite pernicious role in epistemology, particularly in the understanding of perception. Phenomenology approaches images and imaging from a variety of perspectives. The images I will be concerned with in this essay are those we actually see—the sort encountered regularly in museums and movie houses, in newspapers and magazines, and on the stage. My focus will be on the nature of the image as it presents itself in our experience, with its remarkable capacity to represent within itself people, events, emotions, and many other things, and with its place in art. What I have to say will be influenced by Edmund Husserl's understanding of phenomenology, and particularly by his phenomenology of image consciousness. The Husserlian perspective has many affinities with more recent investigations of images, such as those of Richard Wollheim and Robert Hopkins, among others.

1 The three moments in imaging

p. 546 Image consciousness is a kind of perception, but a peculiar kind in that it is mediated, which ordinary perception is not. We usually think of perceiving as the straightforward awareness of something in the world: a glass of red wine on the table in front of me, a train slowly entering a station. In such cases, no image intervenes between the act of consciousness and its object. Memory and phantasy in the sense of visual imagination, on the other hand, would seem to be more complicated. If I imagine a satyr, a mythical creature who is clearly absent, there is a strong temptation to say that I am directly conscious of a present image serving as a vehicle giving me access, indirectly, to the absent satyr. Since what I remember or imagine is not actually there, so the reasoning goes, there must be something present in my mind—the image—standing in for the missing object. Memory and phantasy would then involve two objects: the internal image of which I am immediately aware, and the absent object that I reach only through the image. Phenomenologically, however, this is not the case. My awareness of the remembered or imagined object is just as straightforward as my awareness of the perceptual object. It is true that the satyr I imagine is not present in person, as it would be if I were perceiving it; but it is also true that what I imagine is the satyr itself, not a picture of it tacked to the wall of my mind. I can, of course, imagine a painting depicting a Satyr, but that is to imagine a painting, not a satyr, except indirectly. Furthermore, if I do imagine the painting, I imagine the painting itself, not an image of it. Both perception and phantasy present the object itself; the difference between the two is that perception presents its object as actually there, while phantasy represents its object only 'as if' it were present. Images do not intervene between consciousness and its object in phantasy and memory. They are not modes of imaging. Where, then, are images to be found?

The brief answer is: in image consciousness, which is a mode of awareness fundamentally different from perception or phantasy. It is in image consciousness alone that one encounters images in the authentic sense—paintings, sculptures, films, and the like—and becomes aware, in a single integrated conscious act, of more than one 'object'. Indeed, in seeing an image such as a painting or photograph, as many as three objects are involved. There is first the representing or depicting image, which is what I immediately see when I stand, for example, before Manet's *Bar at the Folies Bergère* at the Courtauld Institute in London. The image is an object; it is what I actually encounter when I look at the painting. The image can also have a subject, what it represents and depicts—in this case, a bar at the famous Parisian music hall. The depicting image-object often has multiple image-parts or moments representing a variety of things, such as the bottles of Bass ale and the glass dish filled with oranges in Manet's painting. The notion of the subject of an image is more ambiguous and complex than might at first appear. The subject can be obvious, as is in the case of the portrait of a famous person, but it can also be elusive. Some writers, for example, find in Manet's painting a commentary on the alienation and perhaps exploitation of working-class women in late nineteenth-century Paris. We shall discuss the issue of whether images must always have a subject, and what the range of subjects might be, later in this essay. The third element involved in image consciousness is the physical support that undergirds the image. Although the image and its subject will be my main concern in this essay, the physical dimension deserves careful consideration, since it plays a fundamental role in imaging and has been largely neglected by philosophers, though not by artists. ↵

p. 547

2 The physical support

A physical thing serves as the support or substratum for the image I see. The material support is not the image itself, but without it there would be no image. In the case of images that are two-dimensional, the support might be canvas and pigment or paper and ink. Images, however, can also be three-dimensional, such as sculptures, or the props and even the actors in a play. The physical support in such cases would then be three-dimensional as well, formed from bronze, stone, wood, or any other material capable of being shaped into something with breadth, width, and depth. Like all physical things, the image's support fits into the environment of the real world. It can hang on the wall of a house, or sit on a pedestal in a gallery. It interacts causally with other physical things, and thus can be damaged by fire or moisture.

There are further important aspects of the physical support. It is an artefact made by an image-maker precisely in order to excite the experience of a specific image, which by extension is itself an artefact. If the substratum has been properly constructed, then the image it supports will appear to the spectator more or less as the maker intended it to appear. The support also ensures the intersubjective and public character of the image it founds, and endows it with a stable and abiding content that can be experienced at different times and, in many cases, in different places. Throngs of people may line up in one city to see an exhibition of paintings by Vermeer, and then, a month later, thousands more will visit the same exhibition in a place halfway around the world. This contrasts with the objects of phantasy, which are irreducibly private and tend to be fleeting, unstable, and relatively indeterminate with respect to colour and other qualities. Only I can experience what I visualize in imagination; it would be absurd to expect others to stand in line to contemplate my phantasies.

Since the physical support is an object in actual space, it can be seen from a variety of orientations or perspectives. It cannot, however, be seen from just any orientation if the appropriate image is to appear. A painting, for example, considered as a physical thing, has a 'normal position' in which the image shows itself (Husserl 2005: 586). The support obliges the spectator to view it from the particular perspective and distance that will instigate the appearance the image-maker intended the painting to have. An ordinary physical thing carries no such obligation. A stone can be seen appropriately from any perspective one chooses. The presence or absence of motion can also be a characteristic of the experience of the substratum. The support for a photograph, for example, is supposed to be unchanging and at rest. Turning it too far to the side or moving it about rapidly will frustrate the emergence of the image it is intended to excite. On the other hand, in the case of a moving image such as a film, the appropriate image fails to appear when the physical support abruptly ceases its motion. The frozen appearance left behind on the screen is usually not what the filmmaker intended to appear. 'Moving' pictures and 'still' pictures are therefore rooted, respectively, in the motion or rest of their physical supports. This does not mean, however, that an image that does not move could not depict motion. Degas' paintings of racing horses do not themselves move, but one certainly sees motion in them.

p. 548

Although there can be no image without a physical substratum, what I see in image consciousness is the image, not its support. The support is concealed or integrated into the experience of the image in such a way that it tends to disappear or be suppressed as an object in its own right. Indeed, the appearance of the image depends on the disappearance of its support; or, more accurately, the image emerges when the support goes underground or retreats into the background. I remain conscious of it, but not as a second object on the same level as the image. Indeed, I must be aware of the support if I am to be aware that what I am experiencing is an image. Consciousness of the image never quite eclipses the awareness of the support, leaving a tension between the two that is essential to image consciousness.

The image and its physical substratum are so tightly interwoven that if one tries to focus one's attention on features of the latter—the texture of canvas, for example, or the direction of a set of brush strokes—it is

extremely difficult to suppress the appearance of the image altogether. The intertwining of the two also means that aspects of the material support, such as passages of raw canvas in paintings or the grain of the wood from which a sculpture is made, can seep into the image, showing themselves in subtle ways and contributing to the image's unique character and aesthetic effect. The physical support is not aesthetically neutral.

The substratum plays interlocking roles in image consciousness: underpinning the image, instigating its appearance, and securing its public status. Through its relative permanence and stability, it also embeds the image in time, making possible the history of art. It grounds critical commentary about size, shape, colour, texture, and other features of the image that depend on a work's physical dimension and that are important historically and aesthetically.

3 The image

When I look at a painting or photograph, it is the image that truly and fully appears, not its subject and not its physical support, even though the image could not appear without the latter. The support, as we have seen, tends to be concealed in image consciousness, and although the subject is meant and announces itself in the image in ways to be seen, it does not appear in person, as present here and now. The image, on the other hand, taken just as it appears, is present in person. Since perception is the mode of consciousness that presents something as actually there, image consciousness is a kind of perception, and its object is genuinely perceived. I perceive the little grey image-figures in a photograph with the 'full force and intensity of perception', just as I do the cup on my desk (Husserl 2005: 62).

p. 549 The image, however, differs from an ordinary perceptual object in important respects. It is exhausted in its appearance, for example, unlike the object of straightforward ↵ perception, whose spatial horizons can always be explored further. The image is a figment, a semblance, a 'show'. In fact, all imaging, not just theatre, can be described as 'show business'. As such, the image, unlike its physical support, is not an actual physical thing placed in the midst of the world and related causally to other physical things. The image itself cannot be burned up, even if the canvas and pigment supporting it can be. One can touch the cold, unyielding surface of a bronze sculpture or inhale the aroma of fresh oil-paint, but one cannot touch or smell the image itself. In that respect, the image is an 'ideal' object, as Husserl puts it (Husserl 2005: 647), or 'irreal', as Sartre says (Sartre 2004: 125). It has its own space and time set apart from the space and time of reality. It embraces a world internal to it and discontinuous with the reality around it. Its physical support may attach it to the time and space of the world—Manet's *The Bar at the Folies Bergère* hangs at this moment in the Courtauld Institute in London—but the image as such resists assimilation into its surroundings, which are made up of real walls, floors, light-switches, and museum guards. The image is 'in' the world but not 'of' it. Manet's painting and all of its image components are nevertheless perceived; they are public objects, intersubjectively available and not privately phantasied. Thanks to its physical substrate, which locates it in space, I can ask you to follow me into the room at the Courtauld Institute where it hangs. Both of us will then see the painting, though neither of us will be tempted to take what we see in it to be real. Our awareness lacks the belief in existence that marks ordinary perception. Image consciousness simply lets the image appear, but appear as something that is not real; it does not support the positing of its image-object as actual. Thus I can see appearing bottles and fruit and people and much else in the image, but I cannot step into the imaged scene and order a drink from the young woman behind the bar. She is an image person, not a real person, and the bottles arrayed in front of her are image bottles. She cannot actually pour from them, or drop and break them. They do not fit into the spatiotemporal horizon of the gallery room in which they appear.

There are, of course, instances of visual deception in which one takes an image, such as one of Duane Hanson's hyperrealistic sculptures, to be real, although the deception is usually only temporary and dissipates with closer observation. Images, however, are not illusions of this kind, which are in fact the antithesis of authentic imaging, since they trick us into believing that they are real objects, effectively masking their being as images.

p. 550 The peculiar status of the image as sheer semblance explains why, although it is genuinely perceived, it can be described as a 'nothing', a 'nullity' (Husserl 2005: 50, 51). To say that it is 'nothing', however, is not to say that it has no being at all. It is rather to point to its odd ontological status. Its being is unique: not real being, but what might be called 'image being'. It may be 'nothing' in the sense that it does not fit comfortably into the spatial and temporal structures of the world, but it is a nothing that nonetheless appears. The image's lack of real being in the world, however, should not be construed to mean that it exists inside the mind. If the painting I see were a mental image, assuming for a moment that there are such things, it would be as fleeting as a twinge of feeling or passing psychic act, enjoying a brief moment of existence before being swept away in the stream of subjective time. It would lose its full-fledged perceptual presence and public availability. Images are unique among beings precisely because they exist neither inside the mind nor outside it, and yet are available to everyone endowed with the capacity to perceive them. Furthermore, because they are not real things but nevertheless appear, they can be hospitable to a degree that only human minds can approach, embracing, disclosing, and, in the mode of imaging, becoming the things they are not—that is, the things they represent. René Magritte's *The Treachery of Images*, the various versions of which picture a pipe with the words 'Ceci n'est pas une pipe' painted below the image of the pipe, is justly famous because it captures this odd status of the image and the difference between two ways of being present. If someone standing before the picture were to ask 'what is this?' it would be perfectly reasonable to respond: 'This is a pipe.' On the other hand, it is a painting of a pipe, not a real pipe. It both is a pipe—an image-pipe—and is not a pipe—a real pipe. It is the nullity of the image that lets it represent a pipe—that is, be a pipe without really being one. 'Things are in pictures,' Robert Sokolowski notes (Sokolowski 1977: 21), and we can add that they are in sculptures, plays, and other kinds of images too. Things leave behind their real being and enter into the accommodating nothingness of the image, where they enjoy image-presence. We can then see them in the images.

4 Image consciousness as seeing-in

If the image does not present itself as a real thing existing in the world or as a mental picture, how does it present itself? It appears before me as exhibiting or displaying something. Real things just are what they are; they do not exhibit anything, except accidentally and superficially, as when a cloud formation looks like a castle. The image, however, is made to display something other than itself. Its physical support is an artifact, we noted, made precisely to excite the consciousness of a particular image in the perceiver. Manet employed his pigments and brushes to make something that would represent a woman, fruit, bottles, and much more, all in the fashion his creative imagination demanded. But how is the image able to represent? Certainly a necessary condition for having a depictive image is the capacity to recognize something as an image—that is, one must be capable of image consciousness, which Husserl describes as 'a unique and absolutely primitive mode' of awareness (Husserl 2005: 18). One could no more be conscious of images without that capacity than one could be conscious of the past without memory.

The uniqueness of image consciousness resides in its ability to see something in something else—a bottle in a painting, for example, or a human figure in a photograph. The notion of 'seeing-in', understood as an essential moment of representation, has gained wide currency in Anglo-American aesthetics, particularly through Richard Wollheim's *Painting as an Art* (Wollheim 1987). It is an idea also present in Edmund Husserl's texts from early in the last century, although its importance in his phenomenology of imaging has

p. 551 not been adequately exploited. Wollheim approaches seeing-in through the notion \hookrightarrow of 'twofoldness': one is visually aware of a marked surface, and one sees in that surface a figure or a face, for example, although it could just as well be a geometrical form (Wollheim 1987: 21). Wollheim contrasts seeing-in with seeing 'face-to-face', which occurs in ordinary perception in which one simply sees something straightforwardly without seeing anything in it. In phenomenological terms, the awareness of the surface and the awareness of something in the surface are not two separate experiences, which would be the case if an act of perceiving were simultaneous with or followed by an act of phantasying. They are, rather, two distinct but inseparable moments of the single act of seeing-in. This act, as Robert Hopkins says, is 'a phenomenally integrated whole' (Hopkins 1998: 17).

Seeing-in is more complicated than might initially appear. Husserl's remarks about imaging suggest that it is possible to distinguish two levels of seeing-in (Husserl 2005: 21, 30). Wollheim does not seem to make this distinction, instead focusing exclusively on what I take to be the first of the two levels. In this first kind of seeing-in I see something in the image's physical support—that is, in the lines drawn in ink on a piece of paper, in the carved marble of a sculpture, or in the coloured forms on the surface of a photograph. In the lines and bounded grey and black areas of a photograph by Henri Cartier-Bresson, for example, I see the face and the upper body of a woman who stands next to a building fronting on a street along which three pedestrians can be seen walking in the distance. It is this act of seeing the human figures, the street, and the building in the lines and patches of grey distributed across the surface of the photograph that transplants me from the realm of ordinary perception, in which I would see just paper with a mottled grey surface, into the realm of images. If I restrict myself to what actually appears when this first level of seeing-in has done its displacing work, what I see are people, a street lamp, and buildings, all image-parts of a larger image-whole, and all small and grey.

The second level of seeing-in involves seeing something in the image rather than in its physical substratum. Here the subject of the image comes into play: I see the subject in the image. Thus in the small grey figure of a woman that I perceive in Cartier-Bresson's photograph, I see a specific person, Simone de Beauvoir, standing on a street in Paris. Only images can have subjects; an oak tree may have majesty and a screwdriver may have a purpose, but neither has a subject. The image-person I see in photographic colours appears perceptually, but the subject I see in the image does not; that is, Simone de Beauvoir is not actually present to me in person when I look at the photograph, nor am I consciousness of her through phantasy or memory, although seeing her in the image could trigger both. As long as I stay within the boundaries of image consciousness, the subject does not offer itself in a second appearance, whether memorial or imaginative, distinct from the image.

To the degree that I do see the subject in the photograph, I must see her in the traits of the image: 'The subject looks at us, as it were, through these traits' (Husserl 2005: 31). There is a kind of doubling of consciousness at work here. One is aware of both the image and the subject of the image in two moments of a single complex act. In Cartier-Bresson's photograph the image with its small grey figures does appear perceptually, but, unless we are absorbed in the image as a work of art, it is usually the subject that we mean, as \hookrightarrow when we say to someone 'This is a photograph of Simone de Beauvoir.' The perceptually present image exhibits Simone de Beauvoir. We take the image to be the image of a particular person, and we mean that person within the limits of the image exhibiting it, although, as we shall see later, this does not entail the perfect coincidence between the features of the image and those of its subject. Indeed, insofar as an image appears, there will not be, and must not be, complete agreement.

p. 552

One might be tempted to claim that seeing-in in both of its forms is really the same as 'seeing-as'. Why can I not say, in looking at the photograph, that I see certain shapes on the surface of the paper as a woman and that I see this woman as Simone de Beauvoir? It would certainly make sense to say that about a piece of driftwood with patterns that in some respects resemble a woman's face and even Simone de Beauvoir's face. Another person, however, might see the same patterns as a rabbit's head, or not see them as any particular

thing at all; or perhaps seeing the patterns as a woman's face, see it as Simone Signoret's face rather than as Simone de Beauvoir's. Seeing-as, because it can be exercised on virtually anything given perceptually, is arbitrary and subjective in a way that seeing-in is not. Seeing-in, as it is understood here, involves only images, and, more precisely, only images made by a human agent in such a way that the observer is supposed to see something definite in them. The creator of the image may have considerable freedom in producing the image, but the spectator has much less. In Richard Wollheim's terms, a standard of correctness governs the image-experience (Wollheim 1987: 48). Seeing-in is therefore pinned down in a way that seeing-as is not. Cartier-Bresson does not have it in mind that I see just anything I might wish in his photograph: his intent is that I see a woman's face, and in that face see Simone de Beauvoir. In following the demands the photographer has embedded in the image, I do not see what is represented in the photograph as a woman's face or see the face as Simone de Beauvoir's face because what appears to me is a woman's face and is meant to be Simone de Beauvoir's. It is true that I can be mistaken about what I see, but that is because what I am supposed to see in the image is not left up to my whim.

I also think that it would be off the mark to claim that seeing-in amounts to seeing something through an image in the sense of seeing it by means of the image. As we shall see in the discussion of symbolic consciousness in the next section, the image is not an instrument prompting me to think of something else—that is, of something not actually seen in the image or in what the image-maker has put down on the surface of the support. If the image were a means in that sense, other means might serve equally well to summon up the representation—a possibility that would sever the intimate bond between the image and its physical support and between the image and its subject.

That there are two senses of seeing-in suggests that we should speak of 'threefoldness' rather than 'twofoldness' in image consciousness: on one level I am aware of the surface of the physical support; on another I see something in it, giving me the image; and on the third I see the subject in the image.

p. 553 There can be more complicated instances of seeing-in than those we have been considering, especially in the case of images with 'tricks' built into them. It is precisely ↳ seeing-in that makes the tricks work. Giuseppe Arcimboldo's composite portraits illustrate this in interesting ways. Arcimboldo builds up portraits of human faces by ingeniously combining images of fruit, vegetables, flowers, mammals, or fish. When one encounters one of his polysemous paintings, one normally sees a human face. The appearing face, however, bristles with knobs and protrusions and curious combinations of colours. The experience of conflict it provokes compels the spectator to examine the image more carefully. One then sees meticulously rendered flora and fauna in the paint-covered surface of the support: one realizes that the nose is a pear; the lips, cherries; the rosy cheeks, apples; and the eyelids, pea-pods. The image of a human face dissolves into an assemblage of images of non-human things. It would be tempting to claim at this point that the pear image, for example, has a kind of foundational priority and that one sees the nose in it. It would seem more accurate, however, to say that one sees the nose in a shape painted on the surface of the support that is sufficiently 'nose-like' in form and also related to other shapes on the surface in such a way that one can see in them eyes, a mouth, ears, and so on, together forming the appearance of a face in which the nose appears in its appropriate location. One sees the pear, on the other hand, when one isolates the same shape and considers it apart from its relations to the other shapes on the surface. The pear, then, appears when the shape is considered by itself, while the nose appears only when the shape plays a specific role in a relational whole. If the 'nose' as painted by Arcimboldo were cut from the canvas and hung on the wall, one would not and could not see a nose, but only a pear. As it is, in looking at Arcimboldo's painting one alternates between seeing a face with a large nose and rosy cheeks and seeing apples and pears, all in the same surface. The painting is unsettled. A radical change in images takes place, challenging the spectator and inviting exploration and discovery. Seeing what is in it becomes as much an intellectual as a sensuous experience.

Since Arcimboldo's images are portraits, they also provoke the second kind of seeing-in. In one painting, for example, the subject is Vertumnus, the Roman god of the seasons and vegetation, but one also sees the

Emperor Rudolf II, since the portrait depicts Rudolf as Vertumnus—assuming, of course, that one is not absorbed in the images of fruits and vegetables that make up the head, in which case there is no portrait (Ferino-Pagden 2010: 18). Arcimboldo also made reversible pictures that in one position show, say, a still life of vegetables in a bowl, but when turned upside down show a face—a phenomenon that confirms in dramatic fashion the importance of the position of the physical support in determining what can be seen and how adequately it can be seen.

Arcimboldo's paintings may be tricks, but they show how rich and diverse the phenomenon of seeing-in and imaging can be. Their surfaces support images of flora and fauna, but also images of the human face in which one can see a Roman god and an emperor. All of this occurs within the few square centimetres of a wooden panel covered with pigment, which is not itself any of the things whose representation it makes

p. 554 possible. ↵

5 Symbolic consciousness

Before examining further aspects of seeing-in as well as features of the image that make it possible, it will be helpful to note the differences between image consciousness and symbolic or signitive consciousness, which is also a form of mediated awareness.

An image represents internally; one sees something in the physical support and in the image itself. In symbolic or signitive consciousness, what is signified is neither seen in the sign nor presented in an appearance distinct and separate from the sign. Rather, it is indicated as something absent and external to the sign that I am given in perception. 'The symbolizing function represents something externally; the imaging function exhibits its subject internally, seeing it in the image' (Husserl 2005: 89). Unlike the image, the sign does not exhibit, make intuitable, or pictorialize what it symbolizes, except incidentally. In perceiving the sign I am instead carried by association or convention to its referent, which is not itself perceived. If it were, there would be no need for the sign. It is such signifying consciousness that lets me understand highway signs or icons in airports directing me toward the nearest bar or luggage carousel. Appearing in their own right, such signs point externally, usually in an anticipatory way, to something that does not appear. When what is signified actually occurs and is experienced, sign consciousness evaporates in the face of perceptual fulfilment. Image consciousness, on the other hand, is not anticipatory. When I see something in an image, I become absorbed in the image and do not see beyond it. It is fulfilled in the present for as long as seeing-in continues to occur.

Despite the difference between sign and image, sign consciousness, or something like it, can arise on the basis of image consciousness. I can immerse myself in the photograph of a friend, for example, but the photograph might also trigger memories and encourage phantasies that lead me away from what I see in the image to other appearances. One might also stipulate arbitrarily that a certain image will serve as a sign. In that case, the function of the image would not be to invite seeing-in but to give directions or serve as a warning about something not yet perceived. A full-blown image, however, would seem to be less effective in meeting such pragmatic requirements than a conventional schematic sign. If Manet's *Bar at the Folies Bergère* were suspended from the ceiling of an airport concourse to indicate the location of a bar, passengers might well become so immersed in the sign/image that they would never find the bar, or, if they did find it, would feel disappointed that it does not resemble what they saw in the image. Of course, if small reproductions of Manet's painting were universally accepted in airports as the sign for bars, then the painting's stipulated function as a sign would trump its status as an image. Similarly, if the purpose of a sign is to indicate an unseen turn in the road ahead, a yellow, diamond-shaped marker with a curved black arrow on its surface would be more effective than André Derain's painting, *The Turning Road, L'Estaque* (1906), in which one sees the turn in the image, and much else besides, all in the wild hues of Fauvism.

p. 555 Travel on winding roads would become more risky, not less, if the signs ↪ warning of approaching curves consisted of elaborate paintings like Derain's. They would invite seeing-in, a delightful activity to pursue in an art museum, but a dangerous distraction on the road, since when one sees in, one does not see beyond. Signs demand 'seeing-out' rather than 'seeing-in' for good reason.

6 Resemblance, difference, and seeing-in

Granted that we are able to see images as representing something, that is, that we are capable of seeing-in in the two senses we have described, what is it about the image itself that brings image consciousness and seeing-in into play?

A common answer is that images are able to represent through resemblance. This reply has often been challenged. The principal criticisms are that images do not resemble their subjects and that the reputed resemblance between image and imaged is arbitrary and ultimately a matter of convention. These criticisms are misguided. First there is, phenomenally, at least some degree of resemblance between an image and what it images, as we shall see shortly. Furthermore, there must be some resemblance if we are to experience an image and not just a sign, which does not have to resemble what it signifies. The kind of resemblance at work in image consciousness, however, differs from resemblance as it is commonly understood, which involves an external relation. The resemblance in imaging is instead an internal matter bound to 'seeing-in'; it makes possible seeing something in a physical support or a subject in an image.

Normally, when we say that one thing resembles another, we have in mind comparing different things—identical twins, for example, or two buildings—and noting their similarities. The comparison can be made between present things, between absent things, or between something present and something absent. I can compare the identical twins standing in front of me right now and see that they resemble each other perfectly, or nearly so. That, however, does not make one twin the image of the other. Even two pictures or two sculptures, which are already images—two prints of Cartier-Bresson's photograph of Simone de Beauvoir, for example—can resemble one another without either being the image of the other. As Husserl succinctly puts it, 'the resemblance between two objects, however great it may be, still does not make one into the image of the other' (Husserl 1970: 594). One might respond to this that in imaging I do not compare two present things but something that is absent with something that is present, and that it is precisely the resemblance between what is present with what is absent that makes the former the image of the latter. Richard Wollheim refers to this as the 'resemblance view', which identifies the experience of the image 'with that sort of experience in which the spectator compares ... what is in front of him with something that is absent' (Wollheim 1987: 77). But even this would not account for imaging. A painting that is present to me now does not become an image simply because a comparison shows its resemblance to something absent, anymore than the resemblance between a twin I am seeing now and her absent sibling makes the present twin the image of her sister. Furthermore, ↪ resembling taken as an external relationship is reciprocal, while imaging is not. David's painting of Napoleon in his study may be an image of the emperor, but Napoleon himself is not an image of the painting.

p. 556

A corollary to the resemblance view is that something becomes an image because it is a copy or imitation of what it represents. Copies, however, are not images. They are separate objects that duplicate or reproduce other objects, and, as Rebecca West is reported to have said about the imitation theory of art: 'A copy of the universe is not what is required of art; one of the damned things is ample.' Images, whether works of art or not, fulfil their purpose by representing, not by reproducing or replicating.

The objections I have outlined above are not fatal to the claim that resemblance plays a fundamental role in image consciousness, for the resemblance in imaging is not an external relationship established by comparing two separate objects or appearances. There is only one appearance in image consciousness: the

appearance that is the image itself. What the image represents does not have a separate appearance of its own. Since image consciousness offers only a single appearance, the awareness of the resemblance that makes depicting possible cannot be a matter of comparing one appearance with another. It is rather a question of seeing-in: seeing-in and the resemblance underlying it are inseparable moments internal to image consciousness. I see the resemblance and through it recognize or see something in the image. This can happen because of the unique ontological status the image enjoys. It is, as we have seen, nothing real. Its whole being is to show, to represent, to exhibit, that is, to let something be seen in it through resemblance.

The resemblance to what the image depicts is inherent in the image, then, intentionally produced there by the image-maker. This is not the case for ordinary things, which may incidentally resemble other things, but do not have to. In saying that the image must resemble what it depicts if we are to see something in it, we are claiming, in a sense, that we see the resemblance of the thing with itself, but with itself in the image, not outside it; or better, that we recognize and identify the thing in its image. Resemblance in the case of imaging involves the being of something in the image, its 'image being' or representational being as opposed to its real being. It is still the same thing in both cases, however, although in its image being it is not present in person, as it would be if it were actually being perceived.

This notion of a resemblance that shows itself internally as opposed to resemblance as an external relation must defend itself against two criticisms: first, that it is obscure; and second, that images are not based on resemblance in any sense. I shall consider the second objection first. Nelson Goodman takes works of art, and by extension images generally, to be symbols or signs that denote, and argues that they are independent of resemblance. Resemblance is neither necessary nor sufficient for reference, Goodman claims, since 'almost anything may stand for almost anything else' (Goodman 1976: 5). That may be true of signs, which do not involve seeing-in and do not have to resemble their referents, but it certainly does not seem to be true of images. Images do not 'stand for' things; rather, things are in images and are seen in images. Paraphrasing Goodman, it would be more accurate to say, as far as images are concerned, that 'in almost anything ↵ one cannot see almost anything else.' In the absence of resemblance in any sense, it is difficult to see how seeing-in and therefore imaging could occur at all. As Robert Hopkins observes: 'Representations are only able to represent aspects of the world by maintaining some connection between how they represent it as being and how it really is' (Hopkins 1998: 34).

p. 557

This brings us to the second objection. What does 'internal resemblance' really mean, and how does it make seeing-in possible? This is an especially acute question with respect to the first sort of seeing-in. If resemblance in imaging depended on comparing two appearances, then I would see a human figure in a photograph by comparing the appearance of the physical support—a piece of paper with patches of grey on its surface—with the appearance of a human being, noting the resemblance between the two. However, as we have seen, I do not in fact have a separate appearance of the physical support that I could compare with the appearance of a human being. The seeing of the support and the seeing of the human figure in it are fused. There must nevertheless be some resemblance between what is seen in the image and the features of the physical support; that is, the lines, shading, colour, and so on, must be such that I can see something in them. The source of this resemblance, I would argue, resides in an 'idea' of what I see in the image. The idea 'human being', for example, comes into play when I see a human figure in the support. This idea 'prescribes certain possibilities for perception: a human being is something that has a certain look in perception' (Husserl 2005: 585). If what I see in the physical support displays this 'look', I experience the image of a human being. The idea is not an appearance with which I compare what I see. Rather, it radiates from what I see, animating it internally. This assumes, of course, that I am acquainted with the 'look' of whatever is supposed to be seen in the image. Seeing something in a representation, Robert Hopkins writes, 'essentially requires a knowledge of how things look' (Hopkins 1998: 34). Resemblance and seeing-in are therefore

mediated by the cognitive resources of the spectator. If I lack the appropriate 'idea', the embedded acquaintance with the 'look', I will be incapable of seeing the corresponding object in the support.

Resemblance in this sense serves as a check on seeing just anything I want to see in an image. I cannot see a giraffe, for example, in Cartier-Bresson's photograph of Simone de Beauvoir because I know what a human being looks like, and the visible form present on the surface of the physical support sufficiently resembles what I know to demand that I see in it a human being, while there is nothing at all there to make me see a giraffe.

To defend the role of resemblance in image consciousness is obviously not to claim that the resemblance must be perfect. In fact, the opposite is the case. The resemblance must precisely not be perfect; it must be paired with and permeated by difference and even conflict. 'A consciousness of difference must be there', Husserl writes, if we are to experience an image' (Husserl 2005: 22). If the resemblance were perfect in every respect, ordinary perception or seeing-face-to-face would displace image consciousness. The image would be mistaken for what it represents, producing an illusion rather than an image. Although a standard of correctness is at work in image consciousness, it demands difference as much as it demands similarity.

p. 558 The possible differences touch every aspect of imaging. Perhaps the most obvious of these is an outright conflict with the perceptual surroundings of the image. The image's physical support thrusts it into the world, but what appears in the image does not really belong there. A street represented in shades of grey in a photograph does not fit into the room where the photograph hangs. If I look to the right or left of the image, I do not see a continuation of the represented street, as I would if it were part of my actual environment. Instead I see the red wall of my living room and a table with a vase full of flowers. There is nothing I can do to fill the empty horizons of the photograph. This disjunction between surrounding world and image is just one of the ways in which resemblance falls short and combines with difference to signal that it is an image I am experiencing, not an actual street. Another is the conflict within the image itself between what actually appears and what is represented. The face of a woman I see in the photograph appears as small and grey, but I know that women's faces are not grey and that women do not occupy a grey world and are not just a few inches high. The image does not present the woman in her real colour and size, and I am aware of that. However, I do mean her with her real qualities when I look at the image. This difference between what appears in the photograph and what I mean again makes me aware that what I am perceiving is an image and not actually the reality the image internally represents. To 'mean' the real features of what is depicted, it is important to note, is not to imagine or intuit them in separate acts of phantasy or memory. I could do that, of course, but then I would have left image consciousness behind and taken up residence in visual imagination, which is a different kind of experience and does not involve seeing-in.

Given the differences that attend them, the resembling features of an image might best be described as 'analogous' to the features of what is represented in the image, with 'analogous' understood in its standard meaning of resemblance in some respects between things that otherwise are different. The image can be rich or poor in resembling traits. The only limit to the poverty is that a certain minimal level of resemblance must be present if a physical object is to be depicted. Robert Hopkins finds this in what he calls 'outline shape' (Hopkins 1998: 53), and Husserl locates it in 'plastic form' (Husserl 2005: 90). Beyond that there seem to be no hard and fast rules governing the degree of analogy, or of resemblance and difference, required for seeing-in. An image might, as in a spare drawing by Matisse, simply outline a human face with a single continuous black line. This would be enough to let me see the face in the shape traced by the line, but I would be aware that the complex tonal contrasts of the face are absent. The same idea of the human face that lets me see a face in the drawing also tells me how much is missing from the image. Relative poverty in image-content need not be an aesthetic flaw, of course; it might, in fact, contribute to the aesthetic force of the work. At the other extreme, a painting by Raphael might offer the full human figure in colours analogizing the tones of skin, hair, lips, eyes, garments, and much else besides. Still, no matter how

rich the resembling content in the image might be, differences must remain if image consciousness is not to give way to perceptual illusion.

p. 559 There can, to be sure, be instances in which features appearing in the image can be perfectly faithful to what the image depicts. In the case of a sculpted bust, for example, ↪ the image–shape of a head and the physical substratum supporting it can be identical to the actual shape of the subject's head. I would see the shape of the head in the image without difference or conflict. This perfect resemblance in one respect, however, is interwoven with other traits that analogize less perfectly, or perhaps not at all, as would be the case with respect to colour if the head were made of white porcelain. Such differences keep the image–appearance firmly planted in the realm of semblance, despite the faithfulness of this feature or that.

To say that certain traits analogize imperfectly is not to make a value judgement. Aside from the fact that their deviation is necessary to the constitution of the image as something distinct from reality, their very 'imperfection' may tell us that the image is a work of art and contribute essentially to its aesthetic value. In such cases I do not take the deviant features as occasions to abandon image consciousness and turn to phantasies or memories that might fill the gaps and correct the distortions. Instead I contemplate the image aesthetically, immersing myself in it, distortions and all. Picasso's *Guernica*, for example, whose subject is the bombing of the Basque city during the Spanish Civil War, is an image in black and white and shades of grey in which I see, among other things, a bull, a horse, men, women, children, a light bulb, all appearing in the distorted forms familiar from Picasso's work. The event and presumably Picasso's reaction to it are seen in the sombre tones, and in the truncated and fractured figures strewn across the canvas in physical and emotional agony. Because it is an image, the painting can contain the event in its fury and express Picasso's vision of how the people it engulfed experienced it. The overall appearance of the image, the distorted faces and forms I see in it, the grey palate, may not be 'faithful' depictions of human beings or of a city under bombardment, but their deviations from the literal not only contribute to the constitution of the image but express something much deeper than ordinary resemblance could hope to convey.

7 Depiction, the subject, and seeing-in revisited

The notions of depiction, seeing-in, the subject, and even the image are more fluid than I have suggested. In this final section I take a further look at these aspects of imaging, starting with the subject and focusing on nonobjective or abstract art.

p. 560 Some images represent specific historical persons or events; others represent particular fictional or mythological beings. This is one sense of the subject. Another is a painting's or sculpture's motif taken in very general terms—sunflowers in a work by van Gogh, a kiss in a sculpture by Rodin. For many artists, however, particularly nonfigurative artists from the last hundred years or so, these notions of the subject would be much too restrictive. The Abstract Expressionists, for example, far from denying that their works had subjects, insisted, as Mark Rothko and Adolf Gottlieb wrote, that 'the subject ↪ is crucial and only that subject matter is valid which is tragic and timeless' (Johnson 1982: 14). Rothko's mature paintings are not depictive images in the ordinary sense, that is, they do not have manifest subjects—a mountain, a horse, a satyr—drawn from the perceptual or fictional worlds. Even Picasso, who engages in a considerable degree of abstraction in *Guernica*, intends us to see recognizable things in his picture. Indeed, seeing them in their distorted forms is essential to grasping the meaning of the painting. Rothko intends us to see something in his paintings as well, but not something that we can so readily identify.

Barnett Newman, Rothko's contemporary and fellow abstract painter, also held that subject matter is central to art, but Newman presents a somewhat perplexing case. Richard Wollheim, for example, thought that Newman's mature works do not permit seeing-in. Wollheim did not claim that images must be figurative, but he did think that they must represent something, and that representation requires seeing

'things three-dimensionally related' in a marked surface (Wollheim 1987: 21). On this basis, a signature painting by Rothko, with its rectangular planes of colour floating in front of a background, would be an image, while Newman's huge *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*, which is a flat, rectangular expanse of red punctuated from top to bottom by a few thin lines or 'zips', would not be. One sees nothing three-dimensional in its surface. Husserl thought that 'without an image, there is no fine art' (Husserl 2005: 41)—a debatable proposition for which I will not argue here—but I will attempt to show that it is still possible to preserve the connection between image, seeing-in, and subject in Newman's painting, the absence of three-dimensionality notwithstanding. A first step would be to take seriously the artist's claim that the work has a subject, as the title indicates. Even if one does not see anything three-dimensional in its surface, it may still be true that one sees something there. Specifically, Newman claims that what one sees in the painting has a metaphysical significance. 'My painting is physical and ... my painting is metaphysical', he wrote; it has an 'intellectual content' and is therefore 'philosophic' (Newman 1990: 280, 155). Since intellectual contents are 'of an abstract nature', artists such as Newman who sought to embody them in their work were led inevitably to the creation of forms 'that by their abstract nature carry some abstract intellectual content' (Newman 1990: 140). Although these statements are redolent of Abstract Expressionist rhetoric from the 1940s and 1950s, they still tell us much about the possibilities of artistic imagery generally and about Newman's images in particular.

p. 561

This turn to the abstract did not reflect a belief that abstraction automatically guarantees the presence of serious subject-matter. In fact, Newman thought that much twentieth-century abstract art had ignored the subject and become 'decorative'. Newman and his contemporaries, on the other hand, insisted that their paintings, colourful and visually enticing as they often were, would nonetheless 'insult anyone who is attuned to interior decoration' (Johnson 1982: 14). They knew that decoration was ultimately inimical to imaging, or at least to imaging with serious content. Decoration absorbs the art work into its surroundings, compelling it to submit to a larger decorative scheme and obscuring the conflict with its environment that is essential to its being an image. Paintings selected primarily with an eye to decorating a room, for example, probably will not provoke much interest as images. The point in selecting them is to have them harmonize with the other things in the room. The image becomes, in effect, an ordinary object, like the couches, chairs, rugs, and wall coverings surrounding it. It becomes a moment in a pleasing ensemble, chosen not because of what can be seen in it—its content—but because it harmonizes with its exterior environment, just as one might select books with fine leather bindings for one's library because they contribute to the room's overall aesthetic effect, not because they contain important ideas between their covers. The thrust of decoration, then, is toward environmental harmony rather than the environmental conflict that marks imaging. The Abstract Expressionists, on the other hand, sought to 'reveal truth' (Johnson 1982: 14), which, they thought, involves resistance to the ordinary. Their aim in resorting to abstraction was revelatory, not decorative. It is not surprising, then, that Newman said that his paintings 'are hostile to the environment' (Newman 1990: 307). It is this 'hostility' that lets him sow in his paintings the ideas that move and deeply concern him (Newman 1990: 254).

Granting that images intending to be serious art must have serious subjects and must stand out from their environment, the question remains about what it means to say that their content is metaphysical. Indeed, it might be argued that metaphysical content is incapable of exhibiting itself in a visual image. This view, however, represents much too narrow a conception of what can be seen in a work of art. Newman, with his more expansive notion of 'intellectual' or 'philosophic content', agrees with Husserl's claim that the image in art is an 'intellectually mediated semblance' and not merely sensuous (Husserl 2005: 172). Artistic semblances are mediated because they can embrace a broad array of beliefs, feelings, and events that can appear in an image and yet transcend immediate sensuous presentation. As Husserl observes, 'art can be philosophical, metaphysical, elevating one to the idea of the good, to the deity ... to the deepest world-ground, uniting one with it' (Husserl 2005: 654). It is true that bare perceiving, the so-called 'innocent eye', will not suffice to open up such philosophical or metaphysical content. Image consciousness, however, does

not have to be naive; it can and should be as sophisticated as the image of which it is aware. Newman, of course, knew this. His paintings demand what I would call a 'mediated seeing-in' capable of penetrating the intellectually mediated image. The image in art, after all, is a cultural phenomenon, created within a distinct historical horizon and capable of embodying meanings flowing from the religious, philosophical, artistic, and social consciousness of the age. This is particularly true of Newman's paintings, which reflect not only their maker's feeling but also his relation to the tumultuous course of modern art and to a world transformed by war and profound social change. Truly to see Newman's *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*— to see in it its content— involves bringing to it a fund of knowledge and insight about the subject and its way of being presented that straightforward perception may not be able to offer. As Thomas Hess said of the depiction of the crucifixion in the *Eisenheim Altarpiece*: 'If you don't know the New Testament, you can't even see the Eisenheim Altarpiece' (Hess 1978: 187). Mediated seeing-in will not dispel the ambiguity of Newman's painting, which in any case is a condition of its strength and presence, but it can deepen our understanding of it. One must live with the work, becoming absorbed in it over time and getting to know it as one might get to know another person.

p. 562 What, then, are the ideas carried within the abstract form of *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*? Newman said that the titles of his works often furnish a clue to the meaning they embody. *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*— 'man heroic and sublime'— is a case in point. The title is intended to suggest 'that man can be sublime in his relation to his sense of being aware' (Newman 1990: 258). The abstract image gives this intangible idea reality. Jonathan Fineberg observes that the painting 'projects a metaphysical absoluteness': its vast expanse of red 'evokes the universe, the infinite ... The zips, on the other hand, convey the painter's presence and spatially establish the relation of the individual to the wider order of things' (Fineberg 1995: 103). The zips in Newman's paintings thus have an analogizing force. They divide and connect, giving the spectator a sense 'of his own individuality, and at the same time of his connection to others, who are also separate' (Newman 1990: 257–8). Through its form, one sees in the painting these divisions and connections, its 'metaphysical' ideas. Stephen Policari adds that *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* 'renders the joy and sublime heroism of humanity through the rhythmically accented dazzling red' (Policari 1991: 202). The spread and the size of the painting exhibits an expansive idea of human nobility in an image that transcends the particular and lets the spectator see in it something of the nature of a universal condition, the sublimity and heroism of humanity. It is this that the work exhibits and that can be seen in it by the informed and sympathetic spectator. In Arthur Danto's formulation, which is quite congenial to phenomenology, *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* is 'about' something, 'embodies' what it is about, and 'shows' it (Danto 2000: 132, 133).

8 Conclusion

Mark Rothko said that 'there is no such thing as a good painting about nothing' (Johnson 1982: 14). Paintings that matter are about something that matters. But it is precisely because the painting itself, as an image, has the peculiar nature of being 'nothing' that it can be about something. Images enrich our experience by folding into themselves the world and our relation to it, our feelings and our beliefs, offering them to our contemplation and bringing their truth before us, moving and delighting us. Though images may be nothing real, nothing embraces reality better.

References

Danto, A. (2000), 'Art and meaning', in N. Carroll (ed.), *Theories of Art Today* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press).

[Google Scholar](#) [Google Preview](#) [WorldCat](#) [COPAC](#)

Ferino-Pagden, S. (2010), *Brochure accompanying the exhibition 'Arcimboldo, 1526–1593. Nature and Fantasy'*, National Gallery of Art, Washington, 2010–11.

[Google Scholar](#) [Google Preview](#) [WorldCat](#) [COPAC](#)

Fineberg, J. (1995), *Art since 1940: Strategies of Being* (New York: Harry N. Abrams).

[Google Scholar](#) [Google Preview](#) [WorldCat](#) [COPAC](#)

p. 563 Goodman, N. (1976), *Languages of Art* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co.). ↵

[Google Scholar](#) [Google Preview](#) [WorldCat](#) [COPAC](#)

Hess, T. (1978), 'The stations of the Cross: Lema Sabachthani', in Carmean, E. (ed.), *The Subjects of the Artists* (Washington: National Gallery of Art).

[Google Scholar](#) [Google Preview](#) [WorldCat](#) [COPAC](#)

Hopkins, R. (1998), *Picture, Image, and Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

[Google Scholar](#) [Google Preview](#) [WorldCat](#) [COPAC](#)

Husserl, E. (1970), *Logical Investigations*, Volume II (New York: Humanities Press).

[Google Scholar](#) [Google Preview](#) [WorldCat](#) [COPAC](#)

—— (2005), *Phantasy, Image Consciousness, and Memory (1898–1925)* (Dordrecht: Springer).

[Google Scholar](#) [Google Preview](#) [WorldCat](#) [COPAC](#)

Johnson, H. (ed.) (1982), *American Artists on Art from 1940 to 1980* (New York: Harper and Row).

[Google Scholar](#) [Google Preview](#) [WorldCat](#) [COPAC](#)

Newman, B. (1990), *Selected Writings and Interviews* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf).

[Google Scholar](#) [Google Preview](#) [WorldCat](#) [COPAC](#)

Policari, S. (1991), *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

[Google Scholar](#) [Google Preview](#) [WorldCat](#) [COPAC](#)

Sartre, J-P. (2004), *The Imaginary* (London and New York: Routledge).

[Google Scholar](#) [Google Preview](#) [WorldCat](#) [COPAC](#)

Sokolowski, R. (1977), 'Picturing', *The Review of Metaphysics*, XXXI/1: 5–28.

[Google Scholar](#) [WorldCat](#)

Wollheim, R. (1987), *Painting as an Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press).

[Google Scholar](#) [Google Preview](#) [WorldCat](#) [COPAC](#)