

# The Resemblance Theory Revisited

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Aesthetics has its problems with the resemblance model of pictorial art. The resemblance theory, so it seems, harkens back to the long tradition of *mimesis*. Thanks to modern semiotics, art-as-imitation has become superfluous. If one accepts Goodman's theory of the arbitrariness of all symbols, then resemblance is irrelevant, despite what our common sense may tell us.

I think one of the problems of the debate between semiotics (or the conventionalism of signs) and resemblance (or the non-conventionalism of pictorial elements) must be sought in the tenet that semiotics and resemblance are mutually exclusive. In short, I am *not* trying to argue that art is resemblance. I would like to show that the pure arbitrariness of pictorial signs does not satisfy the philosophical mind as a necessary cause for the reference factors of an artwork. There must be more necessary causes, not to mention sufficient ones, to base the genesis of the artwork on.

Nelson Goodman's position on resemblance is well known. For Goodman, the languages of art are symbol systems.<sup>1</sup> Goodman considers the most "naive" concept of representation, namely that of resemblance, incorrect. Similar objects such as cars cannot represent one another. Thus resemblance is not a sufficient cause for representation.<sup>2</sup> If a picture is a symbol, then it must denote an object; resemblance is irrelevant.<sup>3</sup> We always denote in creating an artwork, whether an object exists or not. If an object does not exist, we nevertheless denote, having pictures with so-called zero-denotation, also known as "representations - as"<sup>4</sup> or as-if representations. Goodman concludes his case by stating that representation can never be concerned with imitating objects. Representation is a matter of classification.<sup>5</sup>

Starting with Goodman, I want look at some of the objections to the resemblance theory in detail and then conclude with an evaluation.

Goodman criticized that one car does not represent another car, even if it is identical with the other car (same marque, colour, year of construction etc.). This objection is incontestable. A tree indeed does not represent another tree, a twin does not represent its sister, a car does not represent another car. However, Goodman's criticism is only valid within an everyday context. Taken out of the everyday context of given objects, a car by Duchamp or Picasso can very well represent another car by virtue of its resemblance. In other words, without a context it is impossible to know whether resemblance is at all aesthetically relevant. Warhol's Brillo box, Danto's favourite example, can represent all other Brillo boxes by virtue of its resemblance to them.

Other objections to the resemblance theory are more concerning. Until now, there has been no discussion of what resemblance actually is. What makes the picture of a Campbell's soup can look like a real Campbell's soup can? As Pitkanen remarked, we are obviously lacking a concept of resemblance which could help us to measure the degree of similarity. We have no criteria of resemblance whatsoever. Monroe Beardsley's version of the resemblance theory tries to counter this justified view which has been stated often. Beardsley writes that a picture P can represent an object O if it "looks more like" O as a member of the class of objects O than any other objects.<sup>7</sup> Pitkanen's objection to Beardsley's endeavour to salvage the resemblance theory seems valid. We don't know, Pitkanen writes, what "looks like" really is; the reduction of resemblance to an abstract class instead of basing it on concrete objects in fact obstructs any verification of the resemblance model.<sup>8</sup>

Until now, Pitkanen's objection to the resemblance theory still stands. There is no circumventing the fact that we do not possess a concept of resemblance in order to be able to grasp "resemblance" theoretically. However, one does not have to possess a concept of a thing in the perceptual sphere or in interaction with the perceptual sphere to recognize something as existing. Without having a concept for "man", an uneducated perceiver can immediately and correctly perceive the face of a man - and not that of a dog, a locust, or an elephant - in one of Rembrandt's self-portraits. It seems as if Pitkanen confuses knowledge with perception. If we do perceive the picture of an old man without the shade of doubt as the representation of an old man, this does not imply

that we must have a concept of resemblance to accept a certain resemblance. In short; Pitkanen's objection does not refute the resemblance theory. However, Pitkanen did show that Beardsley's last - ditch effort to salvage the resemblance model for aesthetics was, perhaps, not really necessary and tended to obscure the issue that is at the heart of the matter.

Max Black objected to resemblance as a criterion for representation for a different reason. Black argued that the logical surface structure of the verb "to resemble" makes any idea of resemblance implausible. For if P resemble O, then O resembles P, and both resemble one another. In analogy, every tree could resemble the representation of any naturalistic picture of a tree.<sup>9</sup> This is logically true. But the logical - semantic structure of the statement says nothing about the context of resemblance. Black's analogy is logically correct but incorrect from a contextual point - of - view. As we have already seen when dealing with Goodman's objections: In the context of contemporary art, a tree in fact can represent another tree. In addition, the picture of a tree exists in a different context than a forest. In a forest - and in a different context - one tree does not represent another tree, even if birch no. 1 resembles birch no. 2 more strongly than birch no. 3 which is represented in a picture. In fact, birch no. 3 represents the other birches, not because it resembles birch no. 2 more strongly than birch no. 1 resembles birch no. 2. Birch no. 3 represents the other birches because, due to a certain yet unclear resemblance, it for one is perceivable as a birch at all. And for another it represents in the context of a picture. Let me take another example, Goya's "Saturno", perhaps his most ferocious *Pintura negra*. One perceives an obviously agitated man, He has disheveled grey hair and his eyes are wide - open. He has grabbed a much smaller human figure. The big man is about to stick a red (bloody) arm into his mouth. This representation - as resembles a real old man. He possesses hair, has two eyes, a mouth, arms and legs. The smaller human figure or man consists of a torso, two legs and an arm. His head and one arm is missing. In the context of this picture we infer that the head and left arm have already been eaten by the larger male figure. In short, before we infer anything, we perceive a man - picture which shows one man being eaten by another, larger man. To perceive the picture as Saturn devouring his child it would have been impossible for

Goya to depict a dolphin eating a rabbit. Because he wanted to represent the classic Saturn alias Chronos scene, he had to depict a double - man - picture with an at least vague resemblance to two real male figures. This vague resemblance is a prerequisite for perceiving the picture as a Saturn painting. The required resemblance thus constitutes the (or; a) *necessary but not sufficient* cause for perceiving the double - man - representation as a Saturn picture at all. Of course this resemblance does not suffice to establish the double - man - representation as a picture of Saturn. The pictorial specifics come in next - the act of devouring, the colours, the composition, the overall context of Goya's *Pinturas negras*. The obviously symbolic context permits the deciphering of the double - man - representation as a symbol. It can be viewed as an icon sign with zero - denotation. If one interprets Charles Marris's terminology liberally, an icon sign - whether it possesses the zero - denotation of a unicorn picture or the object - denotation of a represented tree - must always have some resemblance to the things we know as necessary but not sufficient causes for representation. The main determining factor is the context of the individual representation. Thus all arguments about the subject of how portrait resemblance or unreal resemblance (e.g. a unicorn) are to be differentiated are superfluous. *We* give the picture the context in which the as - if - picture of the cannibal cannot mean anything else but Saturn. The logical - semantic weakness of the resemblance theory becomes insignificant as soon as the context determines resemblance as the (or; a) necessary cause for representing a certain subject matter.

Max Black's final objection to the resemblance theory does not dispute the fact that indeed some pictures do look like their objects. Black objects to the fact that if resemblance is granted, then so little is said if only this is said. The resemblance theory lacks the quality of information. Instead of insight the resemblance theory offers but a trivial ersatz.<sup>10</sup>

Black's objection is incontestable if resemblance is misunderstood as a criterion of representing, or, even worse, if it is misused as a norm of "correct" or naturalistic representation. In the visual arts resemblance is irrelevant in very many instances, for instance in the case of abstract expressionism. Therefore resemblance can be only *one* of the necessary causes for our Saturn representation. This necessary cause may not be applied to the whole of art. And this cause of course can never be a criterion which enables a value judgement on Goya's Saturn. The necessary

cause of resemblance is no more than a requirement for perceiving the Saturn picture in the context of the highly symbolic *Pinturas negras*.

The problem of resemblance depends upon the answer to the following question: Which degree of importance and aesthetic relevance does one allow the resemblance theory? The paucity of information of the resemblance factor that Black referred to becomes irrelevant if one expects only a very basic kind of information. This basic information stemming from a picture must not be allowed to become a criterion for representation, nor can it explicate pictorial significance. Resemblance is thus relevant only as basic data.

Until now, all objections to the resemblance theory have been contestable. If one accepts resemblance as a minimum requirement for representation *in certain cases*, then all objections raised against the theory as *the* theory of representation become irrelevant. In certain cases representations without a minimum of resemblance to beings, objects, or events are impossible: An Upper Paleolithic cave painting of a bison resembles a bison and not a snake; Rembrandt's "Aristotle Contemplating the Bust of Homer" resembles a man and not a Dutch farm house; Otto Dix's portrait of Heinrich George resembles Heinrich George and not an antelope; and Warhol's Brillo box does resemble Brillo boxes.

These resemblances constitute no more and no less than basic data. Because this information is naturally perceived, it seems irrelevant. Speaking from a strictly aesthetic viewpoint, resemblances in fact are unimportant because they are solely necessary prerequisites (which is a perhaps more precise and less philosophically bloated term than the concept of cause). They do not allow an interpretation. But they do make an interpretation possible insofar as resemblances are basic for perceiving and recognizing represented beings, objects, and actions. In short, the resemblance theory is not a genuinely aesthetic theory. The aesthetic limits of the resemblance theory are obvious.

The resemblance theory is especially problematical because we still have not found an answer to the question: What makes P resemble O? According to Pitkanen, the resemblance theory must be deemed naive if it demands the whole of an object as a criterion for resemblance.<sup>11</sup> A little moustache on an egg in a picture is enough to perceive a Hitler representation. A few green strokes are enough to indicate grass. Thus realism is realism in a purely relative respect.<sup>12</sup> Resemblance evades all

generally valid criteria. It is important not to expect a concept of resemblance. "Resemblance" need not concern an object as a whole, which would imply setting up norms. Depending upon the context, resemblance can be given when P hardly resembles O, or if only one, two, or three facets of an object are represented. This would nevertheless fulfill the minimum requirement for speaking about resemblance, no matter how distorted P may be. It now should become clear why resemblance doesn't possess a general concept: Resemblance is bound to context. In addition, it is perceptually - and thus biologically and psychologically - conditioned and adheres to the conventions of seeing, thinking, and depicting.

The weakness of the resemblance theory is its conceptual inaccuracy. Perhaps it is impossible to give the concept of resemblance greater accuracy. Carney, for instance, endeavoured to do just this by referring to Wittgenstein and trying to define the logical form of resemblance,<sup>13</sup> But will the contextuality of resemblance permit an operative philosophical concept ? This must be doubted.

I am not trying to establish the concept of resemblance as a vital aesthetic theory. Lacking a better concept, the theory of resemblance can at least assist in discussing the basic requirements of representation. If one limits the inoperable concept of resemblance to the scope of a necessary prerequisite for *some* representations, then this modified understanding could perhaps be acceptable. However, the resemblance theory is too vague and too aesthetically irrelevant to base any aesthetic theory on. Art is not resemblance.

And yet there *is* an element of resemblance in many pictures which seems undeniable. Various reasons make this conclusion probable.

1. Resemblance is necessary in certain contexts whereas in other ones it is irrelevant.

2. Resemblance and semiotics need not exclude one another. Could resemblance constitute one element of semiotics, something similar or identical to icon signs in Morris's terminology ? For example, Vermeer's "View of Delft" would be considered an icon sign whereas an abstract painting by Rothko would be an index. James Heffernan also opts for the contextual approach to resemblance when he concludes his perceptive essay with the following statement: We must stop thinking of resemblance and signification as mutually exclusive terms,<sup>14</sup> Art is too

complex to allow one sided simplifications. Why can't a painting represent via resemblance and simultaneously denote ? The resemblance element would account for at least part of the perception aspect and the denotation element would account for the semiotic aspect. And I presume that even this scheme hardly does justice to the complexity of an artwork.

3. The problem of visual art perception is unsolved and highly controversial. Without trying to take the usual sides of Gombrich vs. Goodman, one can simply say at the present state of the debate that perception is a complex and frail thing. If pictures do resemble objects, then perhaps in the end only "by virtue of failures in discrimination."<sup>15</sup>

### Notes And References

1. Cf. Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art*, 1968 (Sprachen der kunst, Frankfurt am Main 1973, p. 9/10).
2. Ibid., p. 15/16.
- 3 Ibid., p. 17
4. Ibid., p. 32-38.
5. Ibid., p. 42.
6. Cf. Risto Pitkanen, "The Resemblance View of Pictorial Representation", *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 16, No. 4, Autumn 1976, p. 322.
7. Cf. Monroe C. Beardsley, *Aesthetics*, New York 1958, p. 270.
8. Pitkanen, ed. cit., p. 315/316.
9. Cf. Max Black, "Wie stellen Bilder dar ?", in: Ed. Ernst H. Gombrich, Julian Hochberg, Max Black, *Kunst Wahrnehmung, Wirklichkeit*, Frankfurt am Main 1977, p. 137.
10. Ibid, p, 241
11. Pitkanen, ed. cit., p. 320.
12. Cf. Roger Scruton, *Art and Imagination. A Study in the Philosophy of Mind*, London 1974, p. 204.
13. Cf. James Carney, "Wittgenstein' Theory of Picture Representation", in: *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism (J.AAC)*, Vol. XL, No. 2. Winter 1981, p. 181.

14. Cf. James A.W. Heffernan, p. 178.  
"Resemblance, Signification, and  
Metaphor in the visual Arts",  
in: *The JAAC*, Vol. XLIV,  
No. 2, Winter 1985,
15. Cf. Donald Brook, "Painting,  
Photography and Representa-  
tion", in. *The JAAC*, Vol. XLII,  
No. 2, Winter 1983, p. 180.

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