

Representation, Representativeness and ‘Non-Representational’ Art*

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I

Kazimir Malevich spoke of his *Suprematism* as offering a mode which “represents the signs of a force” and of his representing “the energies of black and white” so that they serve “to reveal the forms of action”. Piet Mondrian made similar statements about representing “balanced relations which are the purest representation of universality, of the harmony and unity which are inherent characteristics of the mind”.¹ If we were to take such statements as naive or desperate evocations of neo-Platonist spiritualism, we would have a good deal of company among art historians. But we would ignore both the distinctive conceptual intelligence of these artists and the challenge they offer us to develop a concept of representation capacious enough to incorporate what we usually consider to be “presentational” strategies. The aesthetics developed as a response to these presentational features – in Suzanne Langer, in the British tradition inaugurated by Fry and Bell, and even in much Heideggerian discourse about immanence (some of it mime?) will not suffice in itself. At best it pertains only to the Romantic heritage. And while it explains the immediacy of response and the effects of form, it has no interpretive category for the various rhetorical aspects which distance us from what is presented and guide our interpretive reflections on it.

It is thus all too obvious that neither conventional ideas of representation nor of presentation will suffice as a general account of art’s powers to implicate extra-textual dimensions of experience. Both concepts, I think, are too concerned with the direct relationship between signs and the world – either as a resemblance or as a direct experience. I shall propose instead a rhetorical view which emphasizes the self-conscious use of signs as mediations defined by possible uses, some of which involve conventional representation and others conventional presentation. Both uses share at least one basic function: They invite an audience to identify with some feature of the work on its mimetic or authorial level so that the work can be experienced as representative. The representative work is one that exemplifies in a way that allows members of an audience to see that each of them can participate in the life of the work while recognizing that the same possibility holds for others. Kant saw this state as the image art gives of the moral order, but I will be content if it helps us avoid the mental cramps that develop when we strain to see art, always in a two-term, work-referent model. If I am correct, the theory of representation makes sense as a comprehensive theory of art so long as we recall the connection of mimesis with rhetoric, which gets lost once philosophy develops empiricist standards for judging the “accuracy” of a representation. Representation makes sense and includes presentational elements so long as we take a rhetorical stance equating representation with the way a work becomes representative for an audience connecting it to some area of experience.

I understand “representation” as a use of signs to “make present” phenomena from which the sign differs and yet, in and as its difference, confers certain characteristics on the phenomenon or places it in a set of practices. A flag does not represent a flag, but it can represent a nation or, in another register, a kind of cloth. Exemplifications are representations because they alter the mode of presence – they use particulars to elicit a sense of class terms not typically associated with the entity.

Theories of representation are theories of how the sign which differs from what it represents can take on that additional signification and how it can be itself and a figure within a larger practice. Those influenced primarily by empiricist theory, even if not in its cruder "pictorial" models of the sign, will define that signification primarily in terms of resemblance or how the sign stands for a phenomenon. My rhetorical approach must also treat this as standing for a relation-ship, but it subordinates the static parameters typically invoked to define resemblance to concerns based on possible use values. Thus 'acting for' becomes, in my view, a more inclusive and more flexible class of relations than 'standing for'. This is why representativeness, a condition of actions and examples, strikes me as a concept that can subsume what is valuable about representation theory. Thus I shall try to understand the representativeness of art as a process within our cultural practices, whereby we are invited to identify with a variety of stances – from simulacra of experience projected within the mimetic level of a text, to conditions "representing" possible worlds, to the overall attitude displayed on the authorial level as the work's most comprehensive compositional purposiveness.² We then can treat "uptake" as a matter of reflecting on the possible use of what is represented or exemplified in a text, whether or not it fits the present criteria of "truth".

Representation and presentation lose their oppositional qualities and become means to the same end, while the emphasis on possible worlds provides a theoretical space for understanding why art as exemplification has so often been considered a means of instruction or vehicle for idealization. So long as we remain, however covertly, obsessed with the "truth" of art as in some sense a documentary of external states of affairs, plausible psychology, or realms of ideal universals, we will find its engagement in projection and idealization an embarrassment.³ A rhetorical concept of representative-ness, on the other hand, precisely fits these desires of artworks to extend beyond the boundaries of the specific action they display. Such extensions need not involve truth claims and a hypothetic-deductive model of enquiry, yet they do allow us to speak of several modes of possible significance. The old dichotomy between referential ideas of representation and aestheticist models of autonomy is not our only framework.

II

I shall use as the vehicle for my arguments a visual example, Malevich's *Suprematist Composition: Red Square and Black Square*, because the work's significance clearly eludes both representational and formalist aestheticist categories. We need the terms of presentational aesthetics, but they do not suffice for the intellectual and affective complexity inherent in Malevich's simplicity of surface. Because my concerns are theoretical, I shall treat the painting schematically and shall somewhat simplify, although I hope not to distort, Malevich's intentions.⁴ Moreover, my reading will be perhaps excessively "literary," but the painting invites such thematizing. I by no means assume, that other non-iconic works sustain the same style of enquiry, but I do consider my arguments about mind, movement, and elements metaphors for what takes place in Kandinsky as a musical notation of colour and in Mondrian as the relation of literal forces held in balance. All the major first-generation, non-iconic painters sought ways of making art embody the sensuality of the mind while insisting that as an act of the mind, the very processes objectified retained what Malevich called a principle of non-objectivity. What draws us to the elements leads us to an elemental sense of force and movement no materialist language can describe or account for.

If we provisionally treat the painting in three conceptual stages, we will be able to see just how this movement emerges and signifies as "representation" of "the forms of action". The first stage consists of a series of dynamic principles involved in subverting a potential domination of black. Imagine this work upside down. Everything would achieve rest in the black square, and all the movement and openness would be negated. Here, instead, every-thing denies resolution by that single shape. As the eye moves down to the conventional place of rest, it finds sharp contrast and reversal. The smaller square is by far the more active, because its tilt denies the coordinates established by the black square,

while its primary colour leaps forward from the canvas. The tilt, in turn, opens out into white space, and it asserts, in its small but almost weightless presence, a powerful refusal to echo the black squares echoing the shape of the picture frame. The red's projection forward is duplicated then by its horizontal movement as each denies an order of repetitive form.

The very elementariness of these relations invites us to bring thematic analogues into our visual experience. Too bare to be decoration, the work must signify. And its contrasts fulfil this expectation. Thus on a second level, we reflect upon the "meaning" of the tilt. In simple movement, a separate world is born. Elements themselves project intentionality because the red square introduces the possibility of the canvas enclosing more than one world: the red produces spatial coordinates which entail a different schema, a different model for processing information, and relations to other phenomena. Autonomy becomes a visual experience. In fact, autonomy rendered spatially becomes a remarkably complex visual experience because we see of what it is made – namely, opposition and difference. The bareness of the canvas virtually reduces to the semiotic categories of opposition that make the assertion of autonomous identity possible. For the red square to establish its force, colour requires non-colour, smallness a corresponding larger shape for contrast, new space an old set of coordinates, singleness duality, and freedom or difference a sense of imminent norms and perhaps immanent oppression.

All these forces, we must remember, are at once extremely abstract and yet absolutely literal. Our thematic reflections do not depend on some virtual drama interpreted from the painting but simply describe the force of a concrete set of relations staged as art and hence as inviting us to reflect upon what they can be said to display. Thus on a third level, the painting can be seen as directly addressing the idea of what sustains and grounds the relations and the reflections they allow. But I have been too abstract to capture the significance of these meta-reflections. We must attend to the range of lyrical effects created by the specific way the red square tilts. Visually, it at once leads us out to the surrounding white space and, by that relation, creates or restores a delicate balance with the very figure of order whose demands for repetition it had denied. In studying theosophy, Malevich also learned the dynamics of Hegelian logic. By negating one form of order, the black square's, the red tilt makes the eye seek out larger contexts. In these contexts, we recover a new balance; indeed, we recover a new principle of balance. Instead of balance based on the repetition of shape, we have a balance that in or as movement integrates all the diverse elements. The very pull among the competing coordinates and forms literally produces a sense of their interdependence, while that interdependence has its ground in the white space of canvas. This ground, like the mind and like infinite space, holds all by allowing what is held to become manifest as force and as relationship: "Tranquility itself is defined by movement".⁵

I allow myself the luxury of citing Malevich because statements like these justify taking such complex presentations of balancing force as thematic – that is, as self-conscious figurings of how the painter can understand the powers he has practiced or brought into being. Here the very process of reading this painting in levels allows us to reflect on the strange ontological properties of its elements. Because there is nothing virtual about the painting, it can be said to signify nothing beyond itself. It simply is – as a structure of shapes, colours, and movements. We cannot read these as means intended to represent or stand for something else. Yet as we meditate on the painting, we also cannot treat its literalness as simply physical. What we see, what is only physical form and movement, nonetheless grows in sense so that sense itself becomes an elemental condition bridging the mental and physical. At each level of the painting, its elements signify while never taking any of the allegorical or representational forms of our typical signifying codes. It is as if we were in the presence of a pure form of signification – of the mind in elements and elements in mind – which needs no specific structure of representations. One might say that Malevich sought a form of meaning or something like a Kantian schema which captured semantic force without any of the positivities of semantic content, which are subject to historical displacements.⁶ The meaning of this painting is simply its structure as a force.

Yet its force involves both the series of physical movements we have been discussing and the process of mental movements that recover that literal force. I border here on mysticism, on Malevich's "meaning," so perhaps the best I can do is offer a simple emblem for what I am trying to say about sense in spirit and spirit in the literalness of sense. We must be spiritually moved by the painting in order to experience its physical movement as fully present in its elemental concreteness. Change and meaning become conditions of re-appropriating the life in what we normally see only as already constituted for interpretive sight. Now we are asked to step back and reflect upon the mystery of sense in sensation and the sensation of sense.

As we step back, two further figural extensions of these movements appear possible. They will not be necessary for my argument, but they should help extend its analogical force, so I will briefly indulge in spelling them out. Malevich, we know, desired to produce through paintings a condition of non-objectivity where art captures permanent conditions of "spiritual" force. As one version of the non-objective, "consider" again the nature of the tilt which breaks repetition, creates new coordinates of sense, and opens the possibility and necessity of new forms of balance or coherence among conflicting forces. The tilt itself can be equated with a fundamental force of differentiation; itself never locatable except in the movement it imposes by making us seek new balances. I allude, of course, to Derrida. But here a picture is worth a thousand philosophers: The visual example enables us to see what Derrida imagines – indeed what all thinkers of the self as negation from Hegel to Sartre have imagined. The principle of autonomy is in essence a principle of the tilt of the possibility of new coordinates of desire and interpretation entering an objective, cognitive world. The analytic philosopher and conceptual artist John Perry provides a concrete basis for such attributions in his indexical definitions of self. Self, in my somewhat reductive version of his argument, is not a property agents possess but a function or condition of experience whereby the use of the indexical "I" makes possible "a crossing of life and cognition".⁷ The "I" takes up the world from a point of view: The world does not change, but the investments it allows and sustains do. We approximate here Lacan's "imaginary" – that is, an inescapable source of erotic energies and of an ego ideal/ideal ego which has, in effect, no content but can be characterized as a demand to produce investments allowing an agent to make identifications within positions he occupies in language.

If this tilt will figure the self as a principle of difference, if it figures the imaginary, will it not also present (or represent) the nature of the artwork itself in its non-objectivity? The movement of sense and signification is insistently physical yet entirely dependent on the painting as an organizing point of view. The objects as they take meaning here cannot be substituted, even though each element is infinitely reproducible. So in their very affirmation of the objective sense, the force of this painting in balance insists also on their non-objectivity or untranslatability. The painting is at once within the world and not congruent with it – as is perhaps indicated by the way my attempts at critical description border on the parodic. Roland Barthes coined the concept of *textuality* in order to indicate how certain relations in an artwork resist all naturalizing interpretations. Malevich's point is more general: Even what invites figural elaboration in its ideal specificity as a locus of self-generated forces and stimulus to audience meditation remains ineluctably different from all our efforts to appropriate it. The artwork must, to be an artwork, retain its own control over the coordinates that generate its sense of sense.

III

I must now face my own problem of representativeness. How does so obviously an extreme example allow us to make generalizations on the subject of representation in art? On one level, the challenge is clear: Malevich's stylistic strategies are presentational, while his language for them is representational. So he focusses the question of how we can correlate presentational elements – the signifying force of what artworks display in actions or movements – with representational elements that allow the work to stand for non-aesthetic properties of experience. The problem is complicated, however, by the fact that we do not normally govern our critical practice by clear and distinct ideas of either

presentational or representational elements. Yet the practices betray biases and assumptions that are often reductive in what they take as central and problematic in the links they draw between art and the world. I hope, then, to use my reading of force and exemplification in Malevich as a way of bringing to the surface confusions or limitations of the assumptions often underlying representational theories. As these become clear, we will see why deconstruction seems so appealing an alternative but from a perspective which I think can lead us to concepts not so dependent upon the oppositions deconstruction feeds upon. My intention is not to refute deconstruction (one does not refute a practice) but to show how it is one limited way of serving the end I call representativeness.

We must ask first what views of representation are incompatible with Malevich's work and the modernist strategies it typifies. Clearly, the work does not picture states of affairs – whether they be facts in the world, states of mind, or some version of universals or types. Yet while ideals of descriptive resemblance often creep into our critical practice and evaluations, they are not central to any sophisticated theory of representation in art. Gombrich's work is typical. Representation is not a matter of producing replica but of constructing salient resemblances which “suggest” or “evoke” a referent. Representation works when it “retains the efficacious nature of the prototype” because it preserves the relevant “context for action”. These contexts, I take it, can be either realistic (questions of how something appears) or symbolic (questions of what universal conditions are illustrated).⁸ From my point of view, this idea of contexts for action is an extremely promising one. But Gombrich's dislike of expressionism and non- iconic art make it appear that he confines the idea to contexts constructed as ideas or tonal qualities of depicted worlds which pre-exist and thus authenticate the representation. Thus while Gombrich denies a simple copy theory of representation, his values, his sense of what is salient in paintings and what authenticates them, suggests that he retains from that theory its hierarchy of fit: representations are tested by their power to evoke some truth within a culture's beliefs about the “actual” world (which can be an abstract, mythic one).

Malevich's painting challenges these assumptions primarily by the emphasis it puts on representation as itself a condition of action in the process of interpreting itself and thus of making special demands on the ways an audience understands the directions of fit between the work, its activity, and the world. More important than any state of affairs evoked or suggested by the configurations of the image is the nature of the process displayed by the work. What links to the world is less some condition symbolized than the processes displayed in the art act, which evoke qualities of mind that can transcend art. As Maurice Denis put it in one of the texts most influential in modernism's challenge to older aesthetic, our overwhelming impressions need not “emerge from the motif or the objects of nature represented, but form the representation itself, from forms and coloration”.⁹ Malevich's painting, for example, uses its non- iconic properties to make the entire work a pure display of the very energies its shapes allow us to treat as significant. Picture and picturing are correlative. And because of this, the specific portrayal seems inseparable from an abstract schema exemplifying the very ideas of creativity it elicits. The painting is simultaneously a display, a metacommentary, and an invitation for us to take it as a pure schematic form applicable, as shape and as movement, to a wide variety of particulars. Moreover, the work's significance lies not only in this complex presentation but also in the ordered movement of reflective discovery it invites from its audience. The control of temporal movement is a feature of artistic experience which no spatial model of resemblance will capture, especially when the sense of unfolding in time reinforces and extends the state of being displayed in the work as its authorial act. Similarly, I can imagine no way to describe in traditional theories of representation the way Malevich's work insists on its own condition as difference, at once within the physical world and negating it. Finally, theories which ignore such phenomena have great trouble explaining the way interpretation actually functions in art. If works represent states of affairs, then it makes sense to focus interpretation on the specific ways something is represented. The interpreter wants us to notice how the work treats some feature of the world and allows us to make predictions about it. But with works like Malevich's, and I think with most great

works, interpretation is more Whiteheadian. Rather than emphasizing the ideas we get about objects, we treat those ideas as lures for feelings which deepen our appreciation of the specific action taking place in the entire structure of relations held in specific tensions by the work. It is the dynamics of interpretation which constitutes a complex condition of action in relation to display, and this conjunction produces or can produce genuine originality. Such works require a theory of representation that takes into account the conditions of possibility they display and evoke. This theory will use the display function as a way of preserving the realm of meaning in the text. The invitation is not to make just any response but to fill out the configuration the text offers and to attempt identifying with it. Then, because provisional identification is possible with what the text displays or schematizes as meaning, we have a way of moving from the author's meaning to the use of such meaning in possible worlds. This is a plausible measure of significance.¹⁰

IV

Expressionist or presentational theories will explain some of these phenomena. But such theories involve serious problems of locating the source of expression – in the work or in the maker – and they repeat the same problem on the level of response. What does one do with an expression – try to repeat the original experience or emphasize one's immediate reactions to the work's expressive properties? In either case, Gombrich is right to insist that expressionist theory has difficulty coming to terms with the rhetorical features of expression that, as mediations, require interpretation of structures and meanings which cannot be reduced to responses to the work's manifest qualities. As evidence for Gombrich's views, we need only note how the brilliant observations of British art historians from Roger Fry to Harold Osborne rarely produce a full semantic account of a picture's import. Similar problems plague the expressionism that extends from Dewey and Collingwood to Guy Sircello: Emphasis on experience never quite coincides with a full discourse about meaning. Some expressionist theories do isolate my central concerns – the quality of display in the art act, the power of movement in and through the work, and the understanding of interpretive fit as a relationship between examples and possible worlds. But so long as they must define their terms in sharp opposition to the reductionism that often accompanies resemblance views of representation, they are likely to lapse into psychologism or formalism. When faced with Gerald Graff using an ideal of representation to dismiss most literature in the Romantic tradition or with Gombrich's dislike of non-iconic art, it is tempting to base one's counterarguments simply on the features of form or the evocativeness they ignore. However, we then keep repeating the same oppositions.

For this, I have a strong antidote. It may not cure, but it should help us enjoy the disease while we come to see what elements must be integrated if there is to be a comprehensive theory of representativeness adequate to what Malevich displays. I want to spend a few moments on Jacques Derrida's analysis of how the conventional poles of presentation and representation are condemned to undermining one another's lives while deferring one another's deaths. The following passage seems to me Derrida's most concise trooping on the topic:

If we are to understand Cezanne's sentence, the truth (presentation or representation, unveiling or adequation) must be rendered "in painting" either by presentation or by representation, according to the two models of truth. Truth, the painter's model, must be rendered in painting according to the two models of truth. Henceforth, the abyssal expression "truth of the truth," which will have made it be said that the truth is the nontruth, can be crossed with itself according to all sort of chiasmi, according as one determines the model as presentation or as representation. Presentation of the representation, presentation of the presentation, representation of the representation, representation of the presentation.¹¹

If we abstract from Derrida's playful spirit, we can see him identifying four specific problems reinforcing and paralyzing the traditional oppositions I have been speaking of – the force of signification seems always to evade representation and yet elicit it; the artist's model of truth conflicts with her model of art; the power to claim "truth" confuses the adequacy of representations with the

force of rhetoric; the desire to represent that force creates an endless regress of signs in search of a source they endlessly supplement and displace. The “ground” for such deconstruction appears in Wittgenstein. Where the *Tractatus* thought of representation in the pictorial form ArB, the *Philosophical Investigations* led us to view any description of such acts as entailing an agent S, a special sense of r in terms of the *as* or specific kind of equivalence established and a sense of some conditions of uptake Q, which we can treat loosely here as symbolizing all the intended effects the work may have on an audience and for the artist’s psyche and career. Thus we need to identify in our account of representation how S ArB Q can be accomplished. Derrida points the way by contrast, for he shows that each symbol identifies a point of slippage which renders representation a problematic, but probably inescapable, concept.

Let me spell out only the problem of intentionality, the condition of agency S in representation, as an example of what Derrida recognizes and what artists like Malevich grapple with. Derrida tries to make us see that intentionality cannot be the purely transcendental openness Husserl dreamed of and analytic thought tried to secure by strategies modelled on Russell’s theory of types. As Sartre demonstrated, representation takes place from a position and a desire always surpassing or placing elsewhere what it attends to. The *re* in representation must be taken seriously because it calls our attention to an act of purposive presentation inseparable from the desired process of impersonal description. The S will prove to never be a neutral observer’s stance but instead will combine roles of projection and depiction. And this means that the entire representational process will always be at once overdetermined (by the force of presentation) and undetermined (by carrying insufficient evidence for deciding on the tasks the representation is actually intended to do). Understanding art as the imitation of models confuses ideals of description and constructing works of art that satisfy aesthetic standards, and the pursuit of truth demands rhetorical efforts to displace other dominant versions of the subject.

These problems are not merely epistemological delicacies teased out of the tantalizing ambiguity between subjective and objective genitive in the expression “sign of”. Rather they implicate many of the emotional issues of the relation between positions and descriptions which one might say has become the central topic of contemporary thought. Political cases of representation most clearly illustrate the complexity – for example, in what might be called the dilemma of the politician in a representative government.¹² We expect standing for and acting for to be congruent features of representation: The politician should manage in a disinterested way to act on behalf of interests which are in effect objectively determined by elections. Yet even deciding whom she represents involves two models – the empirical or actual interests of their constituents and the “real” or ideal interests that in her best judgement serve the “true” public interest. Yet the choice of whom to represent is very difficult to separate from how the representor’s interests might at once be served and remain hidden. Whom she represents depends on what self she chooses or needs to present, and that need may, in turn, involve representations which mask it.

We might put the same case in more general terms by saying that treatments of representation by thinkers such as Foucault, Derrida, and Goffman conceive descriptions as more “like” letters of recommendation than like accounts conventionally idealized as scientifically objective. They see idealization and description as interdependent and thus as generating conflicting notions of truth. Consider as a philosophical parable the case of the student who asked a famous professor for a letter of recommendation but was told he could have only a letter of description. In this parable, the object, the social practice, and the representing force are all at odds, and each has a different interest in the process of description. The professor wants his authority properly represented in his act, so he hopes that his picture will reflect his (idealized) character by showing how he refuses to idealize at least this student. (For many of us, all our descriptions of our students have qualities of recommendation because they are our students and “must” represent something of us.) Yet the professor’s “honesty” in one dimension becomes dishonesty in others – not only because another fantasy shapes the presenting energy but also because the refusal to recommend can be more severely marked as negative by the institu-

tional "model" (everybody writes "recommendations") than the agent intends in picturing his "model". Finally, consider the poor candidate for description, cast in his powerlessness as merely an object not worth the effort to falsify which guarantees the "truth" of the message. He experiences the painful vulnerability of having to recognize that description may not capture his "truth" but instead is, from his point of view, distorted by the very authorial act which should guarantee his distinctiveness.

V

Given the luscious ambiguities in concepts like representation and mimesis, it is not easy to say why we should not simply trace their various ways of folding into and displacing one another. Here, by what Geoffrey Hartman calls reading against the text, we can even construct a benign deconstruction that preserves one form of the complexity of spirit. Yet such a choice would condemn us to leaving unexplored two significant alternatives. If we assume that artists honoured by our traditions are generally wiser than most of their critics, of whatever persuasion, it is likely that we will see the problems, and perhaps even possible solutions, more fully if we read with or read through the text than if we read against it. Certainly, Malevich's tilt reflects a profound meditation on precisely these problems of understanding how art can "represent" its own presentational force. Thus, second, it might be possible to construct from such artworks a view of the concept of representation capacious enough to preserve the vitality and complexity of fascinating fields of play like Derrida's without itself being so thoroughly subject to the endless play of vacillating oppositions. Perhaps one can see presentation and representation, or idealization and description, less as oppositions than as complementary ways of pursuing a single end. Such an account can also have an important historical dimension because it should be able to explain why presentational aesthetics developed precisely at the time when the tension between the idealizing and descriptive features of representation could no longer be concealed by symbolic and mythic strategies.

I wish to show that a rhetorical view of representation as representative-ness can accomplish such a reconciliation. First, we must distinguish representation as a question of how the mind relates to the world from the specific conditions of art where signs stand in what can be a culturally grounded relationship to a sense of realities outside, beyond, or through the work.¹³ In this latter context, representation can be a matter of representativeness – not a function of how signs project resemblance to states of affairs but a surrogate inviting an audience to take it as something to be identified with by projecting a possible world. The work uses aesthetic conventions to focus attention on the process of provisionally identifying with the stances, movements, or qualities of perception it constructs so that one can reflect on how they might relate to a variety of existential conditions. The signs in art must still stand for some elements of ordinary experience, but the idea of invitation puts the emphasis on how they act for or act as what they elicit. Malevich's force depends on our accepting the work as potentially schematic and, hence, as a set of conditions of action or relation we all share. When we ask, "Schematic of what?", we begin to see that artworks often reverse the normal standing-for-acting for the relationship we find in politics. To the extent that artworks exemplify new configurations, we project what they stand for largely by construing how they act. And acting for is not a relation to an already existing community but a relation to a community one projects through the construction of a world one can identify with.¹⁴

Representativeness can be a property of any features of the work which allows projective identifications. Nonetheless, the fullest constructed world will obviously be created by our putting together the entire art symbol as a hierarchical organization of meanings. By identifying the authorial stance we establish the richest parameters for identifications. Thus a novel like *Anna Karenina* represents on one level the possible feelings of an adulteress and on another a complex stance towards domesticity and self-discipline. If one follows up on my comments to ask what specific condition of acting for takes place in *Red Square and Black Square*, one begins to get at the profound metaphysical shift Malevich inaugurated and the complexity of what I call critical situating required to get at

this shift. As pure elemental relations, the painting acts for some transpersonal shapes and movements which in their materiality implicate and display conditions of creative intentionality set in the process of a self-contextualizing balance.

The most important achievement of this definition is that it avoids all temptations to collapse the epistemological force of art into any single relation of resemblance or standing for some existing state of affairs. And that means dispelling the myth of foundationalism for literature. I take as my motto for representativeness Wallace Stevens's dictum, "The measure of the poet is the measure of his sense of the world and of the extent to which it involves the sense of other people".¹⁵ From this, we can see why various forms of realism and resemblance models of representation have strong appeal in art and philosophy. If a description is true of a state of affairs, it is transpersonal and in effect compels us to acknowledge that it has representative force for all those who subscribe to the system of evaluation involved. Yet this view of description leaves unresolved the old bugaboo of empiricist theory: how can one give a mentally acute theory of bodily activities governed by sensation. My view does, I think, account for this matter of the possible force of representations. We find them producing significant possibilities for reflecting on conditions of actions. And this view enables us to treat "realism" as having force less on descriptive than on loosely ethical or pragmatic grounds. Fidelity of resemblance matters to the extent that it can be shown to facilitate significant identifications. Graff and Lukacs are wrong in rooting a work's authority in the descriptive accuracy of its signs. Rather, the relevant question is Brecht's: What can this configuration of signs enable us to project in self-reflection about our lives, and how can it show that such identifications matter? Description is only one of many ways to connect signs and worlds, and empirical models of coherence control only some modes for appealing to representativeness.

By shifting to projective and pragmatic terms, we obviously run the danger of tempting critics to impose a single "authentic ethic," just as others try to impose a single "reality". But an emphasis on identifications also allows us to specify how criticism can serve ethical ends that do not collapse into any single dogma.¹⁶ By proposing as its basic value the possibility of significant identifications, my view at least implies a preference for preserving texts as different from one another and us. Identifications grow feeble if they repeat themselves. So there are strong pragmatic grounds for insisting on principles like intentions in the text as our means of saving ourselves to some extent from projecting our own already constituted identities upon it. There are other available strategies, but, as I have suggested, the ideas of masterpieces and authority suggest that authors will do better for us the job of constructing possible worlds than we will do by critical deformations worked out according to our own powers and guidelines. Conversely, the possibility of rich identification serves as a useful, if not very rigorous, guideline for resolving critical knots or evaluating competing critical perspectives. The measure of a critical stance – in general and in relation to particulars – becomes how fully it allows us to recover whatever force led readers we respect (or wish to identify with) to value the work as they did. If this goal is acknowledged, the practice of criticism involves trying out various paths to this representativeness. Treating Malevich as a formalist, for example, simply blocks the possibility of understanding how he, and we, could conceive abstraction as a philosophical drama. Some critical paths lead to dead ends or to mere repetition, others allow us to see how the elements of a work establish rich possibilities of identification. "Rich" remains a contested term, but we at least know what kind of argument we must employ to justify its use.

VI

Once we adopt a rhetorical stance towards representativeness, we put ourselves in a position where many of the conventional oppositions lose their force, and it becomes possible to describe without endless vacillation some of the social roles art and criticism can play. We still need distinctions between representation and presentation, but since the aim is not description the two need not be in pure conflict. Both are means for achieving the same end – possible self-conscious identifications in

specific works as representative of human possibilities. Therefore, an aesthetic theory can try to combine elements of each in its overall design. Theory can hope to account for the force of expressive acts and authorial presence while also adapting itself to questions of structure and deliberate mediation hard to reconcile with presentational theories.

The process of untangling and re-tangling old oppositions is a complex one. Here I can only indicate some of the possibilities that I think follow from the overall shift I propose. Most important is the different attitude we are allowed to take towards the expressive or presentational force. Conventional models of representation as mimesis tend to share the distinction in analytic philosophy between propositional attitudes and the actual proposition. Only the latter easily lends itself to their principles of assessment. Similarly, mimetic theory concentrates on what the text's argument or plot captures. It is paralyzed by authorial investments which change during the course of a work or, more generally, by the action of an authorial sensibility within the structure of resemblances to the world. These are too much like letters of recommendation. If, on the other hand, we emphasize the possible representativeness of a work, the attitude or stance displayed becomes a crucial factor. What links the work to the world is less what it says than what it demonstrates itself as doing in relationship to the world. The presenting activity has representative consequences. For movement, as in Malevich, is precisely what allows the work to have force as a possible display of conditions for acting and reflecting on actions. The work can interpret the very processes of its own rhetorical construction.

My move to rhetoric only holds off Derridean oppositions on one level, although quite a significant one. What can be presented without the displacing energies of descriptive representation remains a matter of degree. Any discussion of intentions opens on to endless regress: We can ask about intending to intend or needing to represent what is presented. Nonetheless, it is precisely against the backdrop of this regress that we can see how much the rhetorical view gains for us. So long as we must represent the presentational act in another medium, we will have translation problems and undeterminations that invite deconstruction. But we can still distinguish from the translational aspect of interpretation, the process by which interpretation serves simply as a means to fill out the lures for feeling engendered by the display function of the art object. As we saw in terms of the invitation in Malevich's painting, interpretation can be content with two senses of reading *through* a work. The interpreter brings dialectical pressure on the work so that its internal movements become purposive, and she tries to see through that movement what can be exemplified as a possible state of being in the world to be reflected upon. There is in principle, and as a possibility of critical practice, no need to translate the exemplified art into some overall meaning stateable in other terms. It is sufficient to identify possible ramifications in what is displayed.¹⁷

Much depends here on the account of the display one can produce for a theory of representativeness. I have discussed various features of the topic in my work on literature as performance, so I will confine myself here to two features of the display made basic and coherent within the view I have been arguing. First, the display becomes a prominent distinguishing feature between epistemological and rhetorical or artistic concepts of representation. In epistemology, thinkers like Wittgenstein, Quine, and Rorty have argued that one can do without the concept of representation entirely.¹⁸ What we need to test warrantable assertions is not some putative resemblance between pictures in the mind and facts in the world but simply some measure of how linguistic formulations affect practices. No discussion of mediation will have any authority or role to play independent of actual stimuli and results. Or to put the case the other way around, it is very difficult to imagine an account of mental representation since virtually anyone will prove compatible with practical experience. So why bother with representation at all? S ArB collapses into the equivalence of Q. But such an account does not fit any view of art that emphasizes the specificity and ideality of the work, the state of difference it produces, or the practices of interpretation attentive to qualities not reducible to hypothetical-deductive reasoning. All these attributes depend on our concern for preserving the work as a particular idea or model to be reflected upon, and we want to locate its ideality in its capacity to exemplify as a specific configuration of experience general enough to apply to a variety of contexts.

Wittgenstein elicited the distinctive sense of experience I am after in his remarks on “sameness” in art. For example, “You could select either of two poems to remind you of death, say. But supposing you had read a poem and admired it, could you say: Oh, read the other, it will do the same”.¹⁹ If we are to have such specificity, we cannot collapse the object into a range of stimuli equivalent to some relevant practice. This would collapse forms or ends into means and make irrelevant the artist’s effort to create a type, or exemplification, which is appreciated in part because it produces shareable identifications we can discuss as particular models. We need to preserve the specific shape of the mediation. What matters is not Q but the exemplification established by the SArB relation. We are concerned not with the motion Malevich’s picture causes but with the distinctive qualities of the specific way the work presents relationships demonstrating and interpreting processes of balancing.

At this point, it becomes necessary again to resist the temptation to treat what art pictures as a description. The representational structure need not refer to existing states of affairs precisely because we preserve all of its configurational elements. The display is thus free to apply to possible situations: The work becomes an element of our grammar, not of our stock of truths. And as such an element, there is no problem with idealization or with closure. Idealization is simply built into art by virtue of the fact that it invites us to try on possible attitudes. We come to art knowing that it can project a variety of presentational modes – from pure fantasy to pure description – and a variety of ways of accounting for its own rhetoric as a means for developing the mode. Artworks can be dialectical engagements with precisely the tensions Derrida articulates. But they neither need deconstruction nor deconstruct themselves because they offer themselves simply as conditions of possible identifications. Malevich, in fact, has his work exemplify precisely the condition of ideality which is the state of difference art produces in its refusal to be subsumed under any specific existential description. Yet even this has representative functions that lead beyond art, that suggest basic possible attributes in any condition of ecstasy or of intentionality.

Often, the work will project both a condition of possibility and a plausible way of testing those possibilities. This I take to have been the project of many 19th-century novelists. *Middlemarch* projects a model of reading society and human actions which in turn is imaginatively tested by its events. The book’s concern, then, is less with resembling states of affairs than with inviting us to try on what the text exemplifies as an ideal in order to explore a better way of reading than we ordinarily practice. The descriptive adequacy is rhetorical means, not a thematic end. Yet we ignore this point constantly in our fear of closure by acting as if the work wanted to impose its descriptive categories as exclusive interpretive ones. It is, of course, possible and sometimes necessary to idealize counter-ideals and to exemplify attitudes devoted to resisting the imposition of types. Yet it is equally possible and necessary to try out possible forms of totalizing interpretation. Closure, in other words, is a projected ideal to be tested as such. We can take the effort as a description and exalt it into a dogma. But we can carry anything to extremes. We come much closer to the way works project identifications if we take the effort to produce closure as simply a rhetorical, imaginative test of how far a given stance will take us. The end is not to close off other ways of reading but to project the possibilities inherent in one attitude or mode of integrative thought. To stress only resistance to closure is like reading Malevich’s painting only for the tilt, without attention to its quest for a composing balance that idealizes a presentational force capable of regathering what desire sunders.

I do not intend to suggest that because art is an invitation to provisional identifications that it is culturally benign. Art has culturally constructive roles. Of this, we occasionally need reminding. But all invitations have their demonic features. Representativeness, like representing, involves wills to power. But by stressing representativeness we can preserve the extensive and rich features of the work of art which function as display and allow us to judge in terms of our identifications the nature and value of the power projected. Artists can give audiences credit for recognizing and using in their own ways what gets exemplified as forms of power. There remain, of course, forms of power which are not exemplified, not self-consciously displayed by a work but hidden in it or hidden by it. Of these, I can only say that a rhetorical approach to representation puts suspicion back in the right place

or at least in the dramatically most interesting place. Stanley Cavell argues that philosophy's mistake is assuming that scepticism is only a philosophical problem rather than one deeply embedded in difficulties of establishing human trust and shareable projects.²⁰ Similarly, much of modern theory errs by treating the source of suspicion in art as an epistemological condition located in signs and a problematic of description. Art's danger is far more serious – we must suspect the very condition of agency, which offers the work to us as a structure of possibilities. Only by such extreme measures can we at once defend ourselves against being taken in and recognize the full joy of finding a community based on invitations that resist our attempts to discredit them. The condition of resistance is precisely the condition which allows us to surpass tests of description and to explore what imaginative identifications with a range of works will produce as criteria of judgement.

VII

Because so much of this chapter is obviously addressed to problems most pressing upon literary critics, I want to conclude by stating why Malevich seems to me so useful a representative for my case. (I might add that if *La Verite en Peinture* is a sign, art critics will soon face the same problems their literary brethren do.) The primary connections are historical. Non-iconic painting has qualities of literalness and immediacy which allow it to exemplify better than any literary work the properties most important to the presentational aesthetics of modernism. It is fairly easy to show how these properties become important because of the painters' and poets' profound distrust of a representational heritage no longer able to hide problematic transitions between empirical descriptions, type universals, and idealizing recommendations of human powers. But my concern here is with the historical dialectic one can construct in relation to those presentational strategies. Malevich did not share my theory. There is no one less likely to have accepted a rhetorical view of art than Malevich. He saw art as a compulsion, not as an invitation. Indeed, he accepted the dominant ideal of empiricist representation – that a structure of signs, properly fitted to the world – should and could compel universal assent. He differed from that tradition in where he located the compulsion. Aware of the duplicities inherent in description, Malevich turned to a neo-Kantian strategy. He would impose compulsion not by the force of resemblance but by producing literal schema that in themselves captured the essential truths of our mental powers of construction. Abstraction, then, seemed a form of compulsion deeper than any description because descriptions are only historical positivities, while abstraction captures what remains constant for everyone's mind in a variety of descriptions.

In this light, modernism is reduced to abstraction because its scepticism about the duplicity inherent in traditions of representation that could combine realistic and idealistic (or religious) elements forced it to take mental structures as the only possible ways of compelling representativeness. All other art forms were masked letters of recommendation. Yet in that very act of abstraction, modernists like Malevich enable us to recover what is perhaps the most typical classical attitude towards representation. From Aristotle's 'probable impossibles' to Reynold's 'universals', artists and theorists rarely had to grapple with the epistemological framework that equated representation with description.²¹ So they were free to understand representation as the production of possible schema for imaginative stances. But schema in a pre-Kantian universe are not candidates for expressing the essence of the mind so much as specific displays which can function to indicate typical possibilities of identification. The schema displayed in artworks function simply as rhetorical invitations. At our culture's most self-critical and reductive moment, it may have rediscovered the ideas of art as projection which sustained its most generous and capacious spiritual ideals. And if this is even half-true, there is a good deal not to despair about in the current emergence of a variety of philosophical perspectives that replace positivist ideals of compulsion by description with invitations to explore possible worlds.

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Notes and References

- ¹ Malevich, *Essay on Art*, 1915–1928, vol. 1, trans. Xenia Glowacki-Prus and Arnold McMillan (Copenhagen: Bergen 1968), pp. 123–5. For Mondrian, see “Natural Reality and Abstract Reality” in Herschel B. Chipp, ed., *Theories of Modern Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), pp. 322–3. The best work I know on how these “representations” have “content” is Leo Steinberg *Other Criteria* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), pp. 289–306 and Marcelin Pleynet, “Mondrian vingt – cinq ans apres,” in his *Systeme de la Peinture* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1977), pp. 133–43. And for my understanding of specific concepts related to abstraction, I am indebted to Harold Osborne, *Abstraction and Artifice* (London: Oxford University Press, 1979).
- ² In using an idea of coherence, I refer simply to an attitude we take towards a text as we attempt to integrate its salient features. We may find them incoherent or a coherent analysis of incoherence, etc. I also wish to acknowledge here that some of my terms and specific formulations derive from the following lecturers at an International Association for Philosophy and Literature Meeting on the subject of representation: Geoffrey Hartman, Linda Dittmar, William Grimes, and Gerald Bruns.
- ³ For the best summary I know of versions of realism, which also reveal the quest for grounds of resemblance, see Marshall Brown, “The Logic of Realism: A Hegelian Approach,” *PMLA* 96 (1981), pp. 224–30.
- ⁴ I hope that this one quotation from Malevich, *Essays*, vol. 2, pp. 138–9, will suffice to indicate the nature of his intentions:

“In the case of Suprematist contrast it is the different scales of the form, i.e., the sizes (dimensions) of Suprematist Elements in their mutual interrelations that have the greatest significance. In this case color in no way corresponds to form like form to color, but it is only combined by means of the dimensions and scales of space. . . . The creation of these sensations may really be an expression of the essence of phenomena in the non-objective functions of the universe.”

“This essence of phenomena is sensed non-objectively, since that is the nature of its reality. This reality will never be consciously realized, since the consciousness of form is contained in the object, in something concrete, and man strives to understand it”.

“The world which is understood by sensation is a constant world. The world which consciousness understands as a form is not constant. Forms disappear and alter, whereas sensations neither disappear nor alter. A ball, motor, aero- plane or arrow are different forms, but the sensation of dynamism is the same.”

“Thus, the investigation of phenomena by purely formal method brings us to forms. . . , but after that we must rely on sensation which should complete that which cannot be shown by the formal method

“Only the formal approach to the universe still does allow complete: fusion between man and the universe.”

“The formal method discovers the forms of phenomena, but not their reality or spirit. . . . For form, colour and spirit are phenomena with different states of energy. The total combination of their states in the universe in which my life is determined is a constant link with or in constant sensation of the spiritual aspect of the forces of the universe, both with and without image. This link in its turn calls for the activity from one which is expressed in the creation of a new phenomenon; the creation of these phenomena will depend on the quality, or capacity to conceive the image, its stableness will depend on the power of the imagination. Thanks to this striving there arises a mass of things that ought to determine my ideas.”
- ⁵ Malevich, *The World at Non-objectivity*. Unpublished writings, 1922–25, trans. Xenia Glowacki-Prus and Edmund Little (Copenhagen: Borgen, 1976), p. 16.
- ⁶ Alexander Gelley uses the idea of schema to handle specific “mimetic” representations on a level more abstract than most commentators on realism do. See his “Metonymy, Schematism, and the Space of Literature” *NLI* 13 (1980), pp. 46–88. Gelley provides a framework within which we can see non-iconic artists taking a more radical Kantian step in an already established direction of enquiry.
- ⁷ I cite from Perry’s “Perception, Action, and the Structure of Believing” forthcoming in a festschrift for Paul Grice edited by Richard Grandy and Richard Warner.
- ⁸ For Gombrich on representation, see especially “Meditation on Hobby Horse” in *Meditation on a Hobby Horse and Other Essays on the Theory of Art* (New York: Phaidon, 1978), pp. 1–11; and *Art and Illusion* (Princeton: Bollingen Press, 1960), p. 1, quote from *Art and Illusion*, pp. 38, 111. I distinguish symbolic from realistic in

- accord with Gombrich’s discussion of Egyptian’s treating the Pharaoh’s size as representing status while the Greeks read the painting as the actual story of a hero, larger than life (cf. pp. 135–6). For Gombrich’s dislike of expression theories and of abstract art, see in *Meditations*, pp. 56–69, 143–150.
- ⁹ Maurice Denis, “Definition of Neo-Traditionism, in Chipp, ed., p. 99.
- ¹⁰ G. Graff, *Literature Against Itself: Literary Ideas in Modern Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), especially Chapters 1, 2, 6, 8. I analyze specific problems in his arguments – for example, what can be said to represent what in a story – in my *Act and Quality* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981), a work which also provides a general account of the rhetorical or “*dramatistic*” perspective I develop here and which clarifies how I use Goodman on exemplification. I should also note an increasingly popular contemporary perspective on representation as resemblance which seems to combine expressivist and descriptive categories in a way absolutely opposed to my own. From Bakhtin on the one hand, Paul de Man on the other, we find emerging a realism based on negative rather than positive categories: A “true” representation is one that shows the failure of all our interpretive categories and leaves a residue we take as full or recognizable human reality. For this applied to the drama, see Howard Felperin, *Shakespearean Representation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), and for an idealized application that makes the novel a privileged form (and reveals Felperin’s bias), see Michael Holquist and Walter Reed, “Six Theses on the Novel—and Some Metaphors,” *NLI-I 3* (1980), 413–24. These seem to me profoundly Pyrrhic arguments, like new critical versions of the non-discursive because they give literature a content which transcends and cancels any predications the medium might allow us to make about non-textual experience.
- ¹¹ Jacques Derrida, *The Truth of Painting*. Translated by Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987, p. 6.
- ¹² My use of ideas like “standing for” and acting for are strongly influenced by Hannah Pitkin, *The Concept of Representation* (Berkeley: University of California, 1967) pp. 60, 92, 119, and 121.
- ¹³ For my purposes, it does not matter whether we ground the art function or purpose in illocutionary conventions, aesthetic attitudes, art worlds, or authorial intentions. And I claim adequacy only within traditions that grant some distinctive attitude to how we examine an aesthetic object as a significant particular. These are compatible with a wide variety of theories on how we use what is so constituted.
- ¹⁴ For an analytical account of artworks as not bound by Kripke’s causal view of names and hence as providing a range of imaginative identities, see Mary Bittner Wiseman, “Identifying Subjects,” forthcoming in *American Philosophical Review*. And for a radical literary account of Romanticism as the projection of possibilities rather than description, see Donald Pease, “Blake, Crane, Whitman and Modernism: A Poetics of Pure Possibility” *PMLA*, 96 (1981), 64–85.
- ¹⁵ Wallace Stevens, *The Necessary Angel* (New York: Vintage, 1965), pp. 123–4.
- ¹⁶ My alternative is a pluralism of means that I do not think necessarily entails an individual supporting a pluralism of ends. See on this subject my essay “Taking Ends Seriously: Criteria for Discussing the Purposes of Literary Criticism”.
- ¹⁷ This, I realize now, is what Wittgenstein means by displaying one’s critical grasp of a work by performing it or showing someone how to go on with it. See his *Lecture and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, ed. Cyril Barrett (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1966). And for an attempt to generalize this criterion of going on, which I now see (from Henry Staten) misses the radical nature of Wittgenstein’s questions but works for practical cases, see my “Going on and Going Nowhere: Wittgenstein and the Question of Criteria in Literary Criticism,” in William Cain, ed., *Literature and Philosophy*.
- ¹⁸ For a good summary of the arguments against using ideas of menial representation in epistemology, see Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), Chapters 1–3.
- ¹⁹ Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations*, p. 34.
- ²⁰ Stanley Cavell, *The Claims of Reason* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), Parts 1 and 4.
- ²¹ W. J. T. Mitchell makes a similar point about the change in the status of image from being largely verbal to being largely pictorial once empiricism takes hold. His essay, “What Is an Image” overlaps with mine, I think, in several supportive ways.