

SEEING-IN AS THREE-FOLD EXPERIENCE

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It is generally agreed that Edmund Husserl's theory of depiction describes a three-fold experience of seeing something in pictures, whereas Richard Wollheim's theory is a two-fold experience of seeing-in. The aim of this article is to show that Wollheim's theory can be interpreted as a three-fold experience of seeing-in. I will first give an overview of Wollheim and Husserl's theories of seeing-in, and will then show how the concept of figuration in Wollheim's theory is analogous to the concept of the image subject as the depicted object in Husserl's theory. I will claim that our experience of non-figurative pictures is a two-fold seeing-in, while that of figurative pictures is a three-fold seeing-in.

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Richard Wollheim calls seeing-in a special kind of experience that is marked by a duality called two-foldness: We see

1. the marked surface, and
2. something in the surface.¹

In other words, seeing-in permits simultaneous attention to the medium and to the object.² To understand the difference between

¹Wollheim 1998, p. 21.

²Wollheim 1980, p. 212–213.

ordinary visual experience and pictorial experience, Wollheim introduces the terms *configuration* and *representation*. A picture that depicts something is both a two-dimensional configuration of lines and strokes on the picture's surface, as well as a three-dimensional representation. The configuration is something physical and definitely visible. However, it is wrong to compare our visual experience of an object with that of a picture's configuration: "it is only when we think of our drawing as a flat configuration that we can talk of the unalike-ness or dissimilarity of the thing we draw and the thing we see."³ Seeing the configuration means to attend to what might be called the *physical dimension* of a picture, which must be differentiated from its *pictorial dimension*. For example, when black paint is put on a white canvas, our seeing of the paint on the canvas is the physical dimension, and our seeing how the black is on the white is the pictorial dimension.⁴ The latter involves awareness of depth, which is also the minimal requirement for representation.

Edmund Husserl describes the experience of seeing something in a picture in his lecture course 'Phantasy and Image Consciousness,' of 1904/5. According to Husserl, depictive or image consciousness involves three objects:

1. the physical image [*das physische Bild*];
2. the image object [*Bildobjekt*];
3. the image subject [*Bildsujet*].⁵

Husserl gives the example of a black and white photograph representing a child. In this case, the image as a physical thing is the imprinted paper, which is a real object taken as such in perception. The physical thing can be torn or warped, and even destroyed. The image object or representing/depicting object, on the other hand, "has never existed and never will exist."⁶ It is a photographic image of a child that deviates from the real child in many respects. The real child, that is, the

³Wollheim 1974, p. 22.

⁴Ibid., pp. 26-27.

⁵Husserl 2005, p. 21.

⁶Ibid., p. 21.

image subject, has red cheeks and blond hair, for example, but the photographic image of the child has none of these colours. It displays photographic colours and deviates from the real child in size.

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Until now, minimal attention has been paid to the similarities and differences between Husserl and Wollheim's theories of seeing-in. But from the few texts that have been published, a general view emerges, which sees Husserl's theory as providing two levels of seeing-in: we see the image object in the physical image, and the image subject in the image object; whereas Wollheim's theory deals only with the first level of seeing-in. Göran Sonesson, for instance, thinks that Husserl's explanations are more precise only in explaining the seeing-in of the image subject in the image object, but, in his view, the question of how to see the image object in the physical image is more important, and this is the question with which Wollheim is concerned.⁷ In like manner, John Brough thinks that there are two senses of seeing-in, and this is why we should speak of three-foldness instead of two-foldness in image consciousness. That is, 1) we are aware of the surface of the physical support; 2) we see something in it (that gives us the image); and 3) we see the subject in the image.⁸ Brough adds:

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, pp. 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 [. . .]. 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.⁹

⁷Sonesson 1989, p. 272.

⁸Brough 2012, p. 552.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 551.

Brough thinks that the subject we see in a picture of Cartier-Bresson's photograph, for instance, is Simone de Beauvoir. This means that the subject is a specific person and not, as we might want to claim, a small grey figure of a woman. In my view, the fact that the image subject is a specific person or a thing plays an important role in understanding the three-foldness of the seeing-in experience. It becomes evident when we compare Husserl's earlier texts from 1904/5, in which he defends the three-fold theory of image consciousness with his later texts from 1918, in which he starts to doubt whether image consciousness must always occur in the mode of depiction and claims that, in some cases, the subject as a depicted object is not involved in image consciousness. He thinks that in a theatrical performance an actor (in most cases) creates an *image of* [*Bild von*] a character in the play or some tragic event but not a *depiction of* [*Abbild von*] the character or the tragic event. In this sense, the image subject is absent.¹⁰ To quote Husserl:

The actor's presentation is not a presentation in the sense in which we say of an image object that an image subject is presented in it. Neither the actor nor the image that is his performance for us is an image object in which another object, an actual or even fictive image subject, is depicted.¹¹

In Brough's view, we have the same kind of experience when we look at nonfigurative art: the images do not represent any particular subject or a subject of a particular kind.¹² Accordingly, abstract painting is a two-fold image consciousness.¹³

¹⁰In Brough's view, this does not mean that theatrical presentations do not have subjects in a more general sense. A theatre play is definitely about something, although not depicting any particular person or place or event (Brough 1997, p. 44).

¹¹Husserl 2005, p. 616.

¹²Brough 1997, p. 45.

¹³Ibid., p. 30.

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Now, if we agree with Brough that leaving out the image subject as *depicted object* makes Husserl's theory of image consciousness a two-fold experience of seeing-in, then Wollheim's distinction between the representational content and the figurative content (that is more than just representational content) could be taken as a way of adding a third *fold* to the seeing-in experience. According to Wollheim, figuration is a specific form of representation: if we see in a marked surface things that are three-dimensionally related, then we have representation; if we can correctly identify those things, we have figuration.¹⁴ To quote Wollheim:

The idea of representational content is much broader than that of figurative content. The representational content of a painting derives from what can be seen in it. The figurative content derives from what can be seen in it *and* can be brought under non-abstract concepts, such as table, map, window, woman.¹⁵

Accordingly, abstract paintings have representational content but no figurative content. Abstract paintings are representations since the minimal requirement of representation is that we experience *depth* or "that we see in the marked surface things three-dimensionally related."¹⁶ Very few abstract paintings lack representational content, like Barnett Newman's *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*.¹⁷ Thus, Hans Hofmann's *Cathedral* has representational content but Vermeer's *Officer and Laughing Girl* has representational and figurative content.¹⁸

¹⁴Wollheim 1998, p. 21.

¹⁵Wollheim 2001, p. 131.

¹⁶Wollheim 1998, p. 21.

¹⁷Wollheim 2001, p. 131. It has been pointed out that the requirement of depth is not always fulfilled even in the cases of figurative pictures. For example, the stick figure drawing has no background. Paolo Spinicci shows, however, that the requirement of apparent depth is nevertheless fulfilled, since the figurative content constitutes a figurative space of its own (Spinicci 2012, p. 99).

¹⁸Wollheim 2001, p. 131.

As an aside, we may observe that Wollheim also thinks that representations can be divided according to the particular or kind of object they represent. That is, representation can either be of a particular object or event, or it can be of an object or event that are merely of some particular kind. For instance, a painting can represent a particular person, say Madame Moitessier in Ingre's painting of the same name, or it can represent *a* woman, like in Manet's *La Prune*.¹⁹ Hence, it is interesting to ask whether the particularity of the object depicted adds a further, fourth level or *fold* to the experience of seeing-in though. This is not a line we will pursue here.

At this point, I only want to emphasise that Wollheim's view implies two different kinds of experience: seeing non-figurative and figurative pictures, where the first can be explained as two-fold and the second as three-fold seeing-in. In the case of the non-figurative picture we experience the configuration of lines and strokes on the picture's surface and the representation. In the case of the figurative picture, we also see figuration. Thus, the three *folds* of the seeing-in of a figurative picture are: 1) configuration, 2) representation, and 3) figuration.

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Now, one could argue that the "missing" third fold in Wollheim's theory of seeing-in is another experience that *connects* the experience of seeing the picture and that of seeing something or someone in the picture. This criticism is presented by Flint Schier:

So what we really require is (as it were) a three-fold experience: an experience as of seeing the canvas, an experience as of seeing you, and an experience as of there being certain features of the canvas which make it 'appropriate' that I should be seeing you as having certain features.²⁰

Schier thinks that Wollheim's theory of seeing-in does not adequately describe pictorial experience. He believes that Wollheim's

¹⁹Wollheim 1998, pp. 67-68.

²⁰Schier 1986, p. 201.

double-experience model of the seeing-in only gives us two simultaneous experiences: an experience *as* of seeing the picture canvas (seeing S) and an experience *as* of seeing what is depicted on it (seeing O). However, in Schier's view, this does not explain how the experience of S is related to the experience of O, for the simple coincidence of the two experiences "cannot amount necessarily to an experience *as* of their being related in a certain way."²¹ In other words, what is missing is the picture-relation: "The brute fact of a double experience of S and of O [. . .] does not add up to seeing S as a picture of O."²²

In my view, there are at least two reasons to discredit Schier's account of Wollheim's theory. First, Schier does not make a proper distinction between seeing-as and seeing-in theories. Although he refers to the second edition of *Art and its Objects*, in which Wollheim makes the distinction, he is willing to admit that he does not see any real change in Wollheim's account, instead claiming that all Wollheim does in the second edition is to make the account of seeing-as more nuanced.²³ Given this, it becomes clearer why Schier tries to find the connection between an experience *as* of seeing the canvas and an experience *as* of seeing the (depicted) object. But in Wollheim's words, seeing-in is marked by the duality of simply seeing the marked surface and seeing something in the surface.²⁴

Second, for Schier the main question seems to be how these separate (although simultaneous) experiences of seeing-in can be united into one pictorial experience. He does not take the seeing-in experience to be one single experience with different aspects. But this is not in accordance with Wollheim's theory, especially not with his later specifications about the two-foldness thesis. In the text "On Pictorial Representation," Wollheim writes that he originally identified *two-foldness* with "two simultaneous perceptions: one of the pictorial surface, the other of what it represents," and says that he recently reconceived the theory, now understanding it in terms of a *single experience*

²¹Schier 1986, p. 204.

²²Ibid., p. 201.

²³Ibid., p. 19. Moreover, Schier thinks that seeing-as is a stronger notion than seeing-in and "a better basis for an analysis of pictorial experience" (ibid., pp. 203-204).

²⁴Wollheim 1998, p. 21.

with two aspects, which he calls, in this text, the configurational and the recognitional.²⁵

In my view, there is nothing “missing” in Wollheim’s theory of seeing-in, and the three-foldness thesis emerges naturally from his theory. It is coherent with Wollheim’s theory to claim that the three *folds* of the single experience of seeing-in are configuration, representation, and figuration.

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In this paper I have not tried to claim that Wollheim’s theory is identical to Husserl’s theory of seeing-in. Their theories differentiate in many respects. For example, in Wollheim’s view representation requires the awareness of depth but, as Brough has shown, seeing depth is not a necessary condition for having an image, according to Husserl.²⁶ In addition, Wollheim would not say that we see a photographic image of a child in miniature in a black and white photograph. Instead, he would say that we see the real child. I have tried to show that there is a similarity between Wollheim and Husserl’s theory in the sense in which they differentiate the experience of figurative and non-figurative pictures. Our experience of seeing-in a picture depends upon whether the picture has the figurative content: only in the case of figurative picture is seeing-in a three-fold experience.

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²⁵Wollheim 2001, p. 221. It is another question, of course, whether Schier should be blamed for misunderstanding Wollheim’s theory since the article ‘On Pictorial Representation’ (1998) was published many years after Schier’s book *Deeper into Pictures* (1986).

²⁶Brough 1996, pp. 49-50.

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