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The Triangulation of Images. Pictorial Competence and its Pragmatic Condition of Possibility

Abstract

Ausgehend von der Frage nach der Möglichkeitsbedingung von Bildkompetenz wird ein ›pragmatisierter‹ Begriff von Bildkompetenz entwickelt, zu dessen Beschreibung Davidsons Konzept der Triangulation auf Bilder übertragen wird. Durch die Pragmatisierung werden die Schwächen der von den vorherrschenden Bildtheorien vorausgesetzten Begriffe von Bildkompetenz vermieden. Vermittels der Triangulation kann der öffentliche sowie der dynamische Charakter der Bildkompetenz und die anthropologische Relevanz des Bildgebrauchs herausgestellt werden.

Beginning with the question of the condition of possibility of pictorial competence, this paper develops a ›pragmatized‹ concept of pictorial competence. In order to describe pictorial competence, Davidson's model of triangulation is applied to images. Such a concept avoids the deficiencies in the concepts of pictorial competence presupposed by the predominant picture theories. By means of triangulation, the public and the dynamic characters of pictorial competence and the anthropological relevance of picture practice are highlighted.

1. Introduction

Pictorial competence is considered to be the condition of possibility of understanding pictures. Or more specifically: for understanding pictures correctly. But what is the condition of possibility of pictorial competence? I will answer this question in three steps. First, I am going to criticize the concepts of pictorial competence implied by the two predominant approaches of picture theory. In the second step, I will sketch an alternative model based on Davidson's concept of triangulation. In the third and last step, I will be outlining the consequences and implications of such a concept of pictorial competence.

2. Critique of the Predominant Concepts of Pictorial Competence

In order to introduce my concept of pictorial competence I will now develop a critique of the two predominant approaches of picture theory as a starting point – namely the similarity and the conventionalist approach. Each of them assumes an unique concept of pictorial competence.
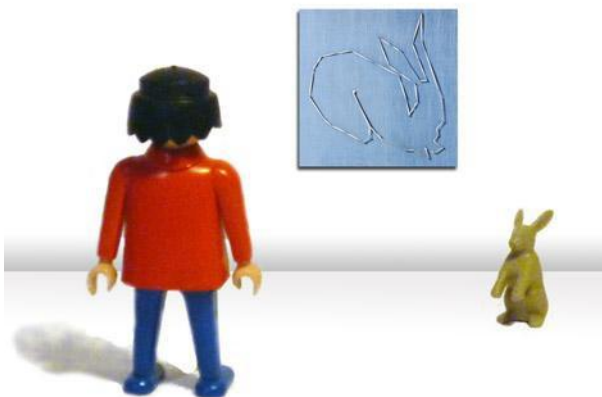

Fig. 1

The *similarity approach* regards pictures as a kind of natural signs (for the distinction between natural and conventional signs see ROLLIN 1976). According to this, a picture represents something, because it resembles the depicted object (cf. BEARDSLEY 1958: 270ff.; HOSPERS 1946: 30ff.). This concept of representing or depicting something implies a specific concept of pictorial competence. Pictorial competence is then a specific kind of perception which enables us to detect similarities between a picture and what it represents. For the perception theory approach (as a special version of the similarity approach), understanding a picture is a kind of classifying something. This is how Wollheim (cf. 1980: 219) maintains that perception is always a perception of something as something. What is seen is always subsumed under a special

concept. In the end, Wollheim gives no further explanation for this act of classification. Other proponents of the perception theory approach tend to explain it through the similarity between the representation and the represented (cf. HOPKINS 1995; PEACOCKE 1987).

The specific problem with this approach is the concept of similarity itself. Similarity is no sufficient condition for fixating the reference of a picture. Because of this, similarity alone cannot explain pictorial competence. Each thing resembles any other thing in some respects. Many advocates of a similarity or perception theory approach try to solve this problem by introducing the concept of intention as a ›standard of correctness‹ (WOLLHEIM 1980: 205ff.). But in doing so, they only shift the problem. The question arises how we can recognize the intention of the picture's producer. We are not telepaths, so the intention must be communicated by the picture itself. But if we recognize the (realized) intentions by means of the picture and then use the intentions to explain or understand the pictures, then this procedure would either be circular or referring to intentions would be redundant (cf. BLACK 1972: 112; SCHOLZ 2004: 142ff.).

Fig. 2

The similarity approach conceives of pictures as a kind of natural signs, while the *conventionalist approach* regards them as conventional signs. Such an approach presumes that pictures are pictures because they belong to a specific symbol system. »Nothing is intrinsically a representation; status as representation is relative to symbol system« (GOODMAN 1968: 226). It follows that knowing the symbol system in question is the condition of possibility for correct understanding. So the *conventionalist approach* understands pictorial competence as an application of learned pictorial symbol systems. According to this approach, the condition of possibility of pictorial competence is the ability to learn such a symbol system. But the explanation of learning the

symbol system is exactly the sore spot of this approach, because such an approach cannot really explain how anyone could be brought into a symbol system in a first place. At best, a conventionalist can explain learning a symbol system as it being taught within another symbol system which teacher and disciple already know.

The main problem both the similarity and the conventionalist approach have in common is the *static character* of their concepts of pictorial competence, as if there could be no advancement of pictorial competence. According to the similarity theory, the observer has or doesn't have the innate ability to detect the resemblances. Following the conventionalist approach, someone knows or doesn't know the relevant symbol system. Just like in Carnapian constitution systems, such an approach does not allow for the adjustment of a symbol system, at most a system could be replaced by another, if needed.

The static character of the two concepts of pictorial competence is the result of a structural trait both approaches have in common. They both separate the genesis of pictorial competence from their application in pictorial practice. According to these approaches, the pictorial practice is only an application of the competence; practice cannot retroactively shape pictorial competence. This distinction has a hierarchic character. In this respect, it is comparable to the distinction between a pattern and its actualization according to the two-world-model of language (cf. KRÄMER 2001: 9ff.; 95ff.). Within this framework the competence is detached from practice and the dynamic of pictorial competence cannot be explained.

2. Triangulation as an Alternative Model

In contrast to this, I would like to develop a model that roots the genesis of pictorial competence in practice itself. We could call such a model a ›pragmatized‹ approach, where I understand ›pragmatism‹ primarily as a method which asks for the analysis of the phenomenon in question in its context of practices (cf. VOGEL 2003: 213). Accordingly, I will assume an *action-theoretical concept of media*. Media are not primarily things or tools, but sets of *activity types* (»Mengen von Tätigkeitstypen«, VOGEL 2003: 130).

In this perspective, pictorial competence can be described by using a modified version of Donald Davidson's concept of triangulation. With this metaphor, Davidson describes linguistic practice as a reciprocal interpretation of the agents interacting with their subject area. Just as in the mathematical process of triangulation, the two agents locate the object they speak about.

> Without this sharing of reactions to common stimuli, thought and speech would have no particular content – that is, no content at all. It takes two points of view to give a location to the cause of a thought, and thus to define its content. We may think of it as a form of triangulation: each of two people is reacting differentially to sensory stimuli streaming in from a certain direction. Projecting the incoming lines outward, the com-

mon cause is at their intersection. If the two people now note each other's reactions (in the case of language, verbal reactions), each can correlate these observed reactions with his or her stimuli from the world. A common cause has been determined. The triangle which gives content to thought and speech is complete. But it takes two to triangulate. (DAVIDSON 2001: 212f.)
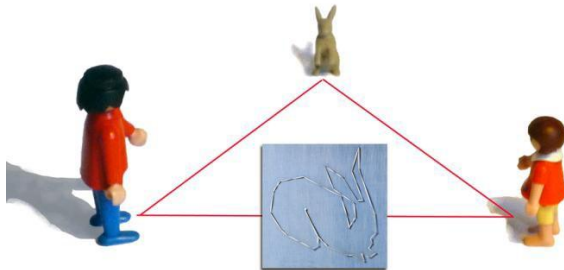

Fig. 3

The triangulation's main task consists in individuating thoughts and things. »Until a base line has been established by communication with someone else, there is no point in saying one's own thoughts or words have a propositional content« (DAVIDSON 2001: 231). Even though Davidson develops his model of triangulation for the philosophy of language, his model can be transferred to non-linguistic media like pictures (cf. VOGEL 2003: 121ff.). Just as an act of triangulation with linguistic media constitutes the propositional content of linguistic thoughts, so does triangulation with non-linguistic media help to individuate non-linguistic thoughts (cf. VOGEL 2003: 119).
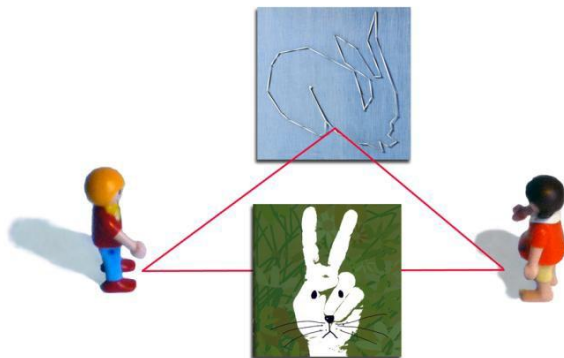

Fig. 4

According to the triangulation model, the prototypical situation of pictorial practice is the interaction of (at least) two individuals by means of an image – instead of the somewhat solipsistic examination of a picture by one single individual as assumed by the similarity and the conventionalist approach. Following the triangulation model, the participating individuals coordinate their actions by using pictures in a process of constant reciprocal adjustment.

Conditions of possibility of the genesis of pictorial competence are therefore the interaction of individuals and the interconnectedness of the pictorial acts with other acts. These acts could be the identification of an object

by means of a picture or speaking about the picture or comparing the picture with other pictures or the use of icons like for labeling toilets and so on. Wittgenstein maintains the same idea for the relation between language games and other kinds of action: »Our talk gets its meaning from the rest of our proceedings« (WITTGENSTEIN 1969: § 229). The interwovenness of symbolic actions and other actions can explain the learning of such symbolic actions. Learning a language or a special kind of pictorial symbol system is not to be understood as interpretation and application of rules, but as a replicating of learned models or patterns (cf. KRÄMER 2001: 129).

3. Consequences and Implications

My pragmatized concept of pictorial competence has three consequences or implications, namely its *public character*, its *dynamic character* and an implication of *anthropological relevance*.

First, my approach emphasizes the *public character* of pictorial competence. Pictorial competence is not a private state of a subject, but instead coincides with the appropriate interaction. Thereby, the concept of triangulation can explain the selection of relevant similarities. Their relevance depends on the context, namely the interaction between the participants of communication.

Second, unlike the two predominant approaches, the pragmatized model reveals the *dynamic character of pictorial competence*. Pictorial competence is not to be understood as something that is acquired once and then applied again and again to different cases. Instead, it appears as something that is modified in each case and each practice through the reciprocal adjustment of actions by the individuals involved. The participants generate provisionary symbol systems. These symbol systems do not have the supraindividual character which is presumed by most conventionalist approaches. In fact, the involved individuals all have their unique symbol systems which they change in each interaction in order to communicate with each other.

Third, the pragmatized concept has an implication of *anthropological relevance*. According to Davidson language as well as other individuals are the conditions for thoughts – in the sense that using media helps us not only to individuate things in the world, but also thoughts. Thoughts receive their propositional content only by verbal communication. By expanding Davidson's perspective to non-linguistic media, we can say that pictures help us to individuate objects in visual thinking (understood as a mode of thinking in addition to linguistic thinking).

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