CHAPTER SIX

THE PICTORIAL POINT OF VIEW

A picture can be used to explain and clarify a written passage; and there are occasions when a written passage is used to explain a picture. I can imagine someone being puzzled by this, and asking how we can tell, in any given case, whether the passage explains the picture, or whether the picture explains or clarifies the passage?

At first sight the answer seems simple enough. One is tempted to reply that for the most part one tells by reading the passage. If the written word purports to explain the picture, it would seem that the picture is not being used to explain the written word. If, on the other hand, the passage reveals no attempt to explain the picture, and itself stands in need of further explication, one may well assume that the picture is meant to explain it. But this answer, while by no means entirely wrong, tends to oversimplify the issue. Suppose, for instance, that a book is published which gives a formalist analysis of the Mona Lisa, and that the only picture printed in the book is a reasonably accurate reproduction of this painting. Now, if the answer given to our question is correct, the written pages explain the picture — and not the other way round; but anyone who has read a book of this nature will know that in order to understand the text he is forced, from time to time, to refer to the picture. In other words, the picture is both explained by, and explains aspects of, the text.

Similar two-way relations may obtain when a picture is used to map, to advertise, to warn, to describe or to perform any other illocutionary act. Just as the picture in a pictorial illustration may draw attention to certain features of the text, while the text, in its turn, draws attention to certain features of the picture: so, in the case of a pictorial map, one’s knowledge of the terrain may draw one’s attention to specific features of the map, while the map draws attention to, and is capable of influencing beliefs about, specific features of the terrain. Again, the fact that we know certain things about an object may facilitate our comprehension of the use of a picture to describe it; while the pictorial description, in its turn, draws our

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attention to certain aspects of what is described. In each of these cases there is what we might call a two-way cognitive relation between the representation and its viewing audience.

To speak of a two-way cognitive relation between a pictorial representation and its viewing audience, is to stress, among other things, the fact that any pictorial illocution which is understood by a viewing audience, both exploits, and is capable of contributing to, an audience's knowledge and beliefs. And there is nothing startling about this. The same is true of verbal descriptions, explanations, warnings and the like. It is one of the commonplace of contemporary philosophy that the way in which one describes events, objects and so on, influences not only an audience’s attitudes to these objects, but as a result, what it notices about them, how it sees them, and what features it singles out for attention. If I may be permitted the use of N.R. Hanson’s now famous phrase, our verbal descriptions of the world around us are ‘theory-laden’, and anyone who accepts and uses these descriptions is likely to ‘build’ these theories into his perception of the world. He acquires a range of beliefs and expectations which influences how he selects, organizes and discriminates what he sees.¹ Of course, I do not wish to dwell on verbal descriptions here. Rather, I will explain and defend the claim that there is a two-way cognitive relation between a pictorial representation and its viewing audience: that a pictorial representation exploits, and is capable of contributing to, an audience’s knowledge and beliefs.

Of course, since depicting involves solving coordination problems, every picture which is recognizably of something, depends on, and in this sense exploits, a viewing audience’s knowledge, beliefs and expectations. Moreover, we have learned that when one uses a picture in an illocutionary act, one inevitably exploits certain cognitive skills and capacities on the part of a viewing audience. Now, I take myself to have explained all of this in the preceding chapters, and I do not wish to repeat these remarks here. As yet, though, I have said comparatively little about the ways in which pictures and pictorial representations contribute to, and so influence, the viewer’s knowledge, beliefs and expectations. It is now time to remedy this deficiency; and in order to do this, it is best to begin by mentioning a number of examples of the sorts of phenomena that I have in mind: cases in which pictures and pictorial representations are standardly said to influence the viewing audience.

¹ See, for example, N.R. Hanson, Patterns of Discovery, Chapters One and Two; Gilbert Ryle, The Concept of Mind, Chapter Seven.