

IMAGINATION, FICTION AND THE ARTS

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Imagination was the glue of Modern Aesthetics, putting together the phenomena of art and aesthetic judgment, and providing them autonomy from perception, knowledge and sensory pleasure. Aesthetic pleasures were taken to be pleasures of the imagination (Addison 1712), involving the collaboration of all mental faculties without been reducible to none of them. In turn, aesthetic judgment, as the expression of aesthetic pleasure, is not mere expression of subjective preferences, but expression of works of art value.

Fiction was also part of the frame, since the creation of non-real worlds allows the free development of the mind united by imagination. However, the expansion of a subjectivist and relativistic conception of taste and the small development of a theory of creativity, has made imagination to miss the central place it occupied in modern aesthetics. It is still central however in contemporary theories of fiction. During the last half century, imagination has served to define fiction as the communicative practice that prescribes from the recipient the imagining of the represented content of the work.

My aim in this paper is to reconsider the role of imagination in the global understanding of artworks. While I share Friend's (2011) concerns about the insufficiency of a prescription to imagining as a criterion of fictionality, I find imagination is still a necessary notion in a proper account of aesthetic understanding and artworks' appreciation.

Unlike contemporary fiction theories, that consider imagination basically from an epistemic perspective, as a mental state different from belief and perception or a propositional attitude different from belief, I will endorse Dorsch' (2012) agential theory of imagining as a mental voluntary direct determining activity.

I will examine examples from Capote's *In Cold Blood* as a non-fiction novel and the pictorial portrait *Margaret Evans pregnant* by Alice Neele, in order to show the relevance of imagination to the understanding of non-fictional artworks. In the

case of the novel I assume that reading a novel is always an imaginative project (Dorsch 2012), even when all utterances within the narrative are true, and, more to the point, when the illocutive prescription is that of believing, and not merely imagining, make-believing or pretending to believe. Since understanding the utterances of *In cold blood* does not require an epistemic stance different from believing, imagination does not play a role in the characterization of the novel as fiction or not fiction. However, imagination is required to fully understand the work.

To understand the text requires the imaginative collaboration of the reader filling the gaps, making inferences about time, interpreting metaphors, providing contextual information, etc. Moreover, beyond understanding the linguistic meaning of the work, imagination enters decisively the picture when the novel is read as art, that is, when the content of the work is appreciated in relation to the represented world itself. Then, visualization, sensory and affective imaginings, empathy and sympathy towards characters and all kinds of experiential imaginings are, together with beliefs and propositional imagining, kinds of imaginative activities that take part in the understanding of the work.

Regarding visual representations, Walton's theory of make-believe (Walt-fiction-theory) held that imagination is required to account for the recognition of any representational content of pictures. According with these accounts, *Margaret Evans pregnant* is considered fictional exactly like Gustave Doré's *Don Quixote tilting a windmill* is. This is an undesirable counterintuitive effect for, as a matter of fact, many paintings prescribe believing, rather than make-believe or imagining. *Margaret Evans pregnant*, like *Las Meninas*, or *Henry the Eighth* prescribes believing that their sitters have certain properties and look like their representations. According to the criterion of prescribing belief and not imagining, the genre of portraiture is non-fictional.

And nevertheless, Walt-fiction-theories change decisively the criterion of fictionality from linguistic representations to visual ones. In relation to linguistic representations imagining that something is the case is basically considered a propositional attitude opposed to belief, but regarding visual representations imagining is not a propositional attitude but a psychological condition opposite to

seeing face to face. What seems to be at the ground of imaginary theories of visual representations is the assumption that it is not possible to see something – the represented object – which is not really in front of the viewer. According to them, looking at *Margaret Evans pregnant* we are not seeing Margaret Evans, but imagining seeing her (Walton 1990).

I will endorse the most common general view, which considers visual representation as grounded on seeing-in. According to the view, pictorial modes of representation in central cases don't require imagination to grasp their representational content. Seeing Margaret Evans in the canvas or Don Quixote in Gustave Doré's engravings is equally a kind of seeing, and not of imagining. And it is not a mere terminological choice between seeing-in and imagining. Imagining something requires a grade of voluntariness and freedom in the determination of content that recognizing the representational content of a painting don't permit. Looking at Margaret Evans portrait and Don Quixote drawing prompts the visual recognition of both objects. If the portrait is commonly accepted as veridical and Don Quixote's drawings as fictional it is because the painting refers to an existing individual, which is not the case in the drawing. However, the interpretation process is the same in both cases as Walton's theory contemplates.

By analogy with literary artworks, regarding pictorial representations imagination enters the scene when the beholder actively engages in the significance of the representation or the meaning of the work as an artwork: when sensual elements are connected to affective or intellectual ones, and when empathy or sympathy plays a role in the appreciation of the work.

References

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