

# Depiction at its Limits: How Segantini's *Alpine Triptych* Challenges Hyman's Conception of Depiction

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John Hyman's *The Objective Eye* is an insightful and clear-headed discussion of appearance and reality. The discussion is based on a close examination of the role of colour, form and realism in visual art. But despite its advertisement as being about fundamental concepts in art theory, the insights to be gleaned from Hyman's book are not only applicable within the confines of discourses about art. Readers interested in more general problems concerning reality, experience, appearance, perception and illusion can also learn much.

Hyman maps out how the concepts of colour, form and reality are to be applied in order to enable sensible thought and conversation about visual art. The present paper first examines the scope and the usefulness of such a map. Worries will be raised which are driven by the intuition that art educates and that education involves revision of concepts and overcoming habits of perception. In the case of visual art, education through visual media requires challenges to concepts of form and to habits of perceiving what is. A map of the fundamental concepts (viz. colour and form) employed in thought and talk about visual art will be of questionable value if it violates this intuition and

art's educating function. But even if such violations can be found, they will not permit general conclusions concerning the usefulness of the conceptual map. Only parochial conclusions for art theories which share the intuition about the educating aspect of art ensue and it will be made clear that Hyman is not directly committed to take such intuitions in. The primary example for discussing Hyman's conception of depiction will be Segantini's *Alpine Triptych*, because it allows us to consider the sort of figurative content most relevant for Hyman's discussion.

The second part of the paper attempts to formulate reasons for drawing a more general conclusion. It introduces the idea that the concept of depiction, as Hyman defines it, is inherently paradoxical. More specifically, it will be argued that the account of depiction can be used to derive what Graham Priest has called an 'inclosure contradiction'.<sup>1</sup> Such contradictions are not defects. Inclosure contradictions characterise, according to Priest, limits of thought and are necessary to capture concepts which mark such limits. Returning to results from the first section, it will be argued that the limits of depiction, qua Pristean limits of thought, enable any educating effect visual art may have. Artistic value in visual art will then turn out to depend on how the limits of depiction challenge concepts of form and habits of perception through specific artworks.

## **1. Hyman's Conceptual Map**

Hyman first maps out the concept of colour and then uses it to derive an account of depiction in a discussion on form. After that he applies those findings to clarify and defend the concept of realistic art. A pivotal element of the map is the second step where he discusses

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<sup>1</sup> Priest, 2002.

depiction and argues that its basic principles can be defined in objective terms. This means that depiction can be defined 'without referring to the psychological effect that a picture produces in a spectator's mind' and it also means that 'the nature of pictorial art cannot be explained subjectively, that is, by defining this effect'.<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of the present paper, I shall focus on Hyman's discussion of depiction, the pivotal element of the map. It will be conceded that Hyman correctly rejects those attempts to define depiction which shun objective terms. But the idea that psychological effects do not matter will be challenged nevertheless.

A few examples suffice to show why depiction should be defined in objective terms. If there is no map clarifying that (and which) objective terms are necessary, we may be misled into making contentious claims about what we see. Descartes and Hume have made such claims about perceiving the size of the sun. To start with Descartes, he had claimed that he is puzzled by the fact that astronomical grounds suggest that the sun is many times larger than the whole earth, whereas his senses suggest that the sun is rather small. This leads him to conclude that the astronomical grounds are objective, whereas the sensory grounds are not. Hyman objects that the sun does not appear to be any size at all, simply because the size of the appearance of the sun is not the same as the size of the sun.<sup>3</sup> Hume, on the other hand, had claimed that the size of the appearance of an object, which changes as the distance of the viewer to it varies, misleads viewers to assume that the size of the object changes whenever a viewer's distance to it changes. He concluded from this that the size of an appearance is an illusion and has, therefore, no objective grounds. But again, Hyman points out that this conclusion is

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<sup>2</sup> Hyman, 2006, 237.

<sup>3</sup> Hyman, 2006, 98.

based on a mistake.<sup>4</sup> Hume confused, as did Descartes, the size of an appearance with the size of what appears. It is important to see that such confusions are not merely historical, but prevail today.<sup>5</sup> We thus need some conceptual map to prevent this and related errors. An adequate understanding of depiction defined in objective terms is its central tenet.

Of course, this is not to suggest that all philosophers who seek to define depiction in terms of psychological effects are bound to the view that appearances already are all there is to the iconic representations we experience as pictures. They may define their psychological effects in terms of what effects things have on perceivers or they may focus on what effects appearances have on perceivers. The important point for present purposes is that the writers Hyman attacks (including Descartes and Hume) do not sufficiently distinguish between the properties of things and the properties of appearances of things. For Hyman, things and their appearances are logically independent, but they are not epistemically independent. When talking about appearances, especially colour, experience is the basis for settling questions about these appearances, but experience does not fix facts.<sup>6</sup> This is the sort of objectivity Hyman is after.

We have now seen what is good about Hyman's map of the fundamental concepts. An account of depiction which employs objective terms can prevent us from making the mistakes that Descartes, Hume and others made by confusing appearance and reality. But this must, pace Hyman, not be taken to suggest that examining psychological effects cannot further our understanding of

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<sup>4</sup> Hyman, 2006, 99.

<sup>5</sup> Compare Hyman, 2006, 232-5, where he shows how Hume's confusion survived in the works of contemporary writers.

<sup>6</sup> Hyman 2006, 56; where Hyman makes these claims about colours, which, for Hyman, are the pith of appearances.

depiction. In the second part of the paper, I shall even suggest that certain psychological effects are indispensable, but here I want to start out by explaining what sort of psychological effects I have in mind and why they are relevant.

Let us begin by considering a simple association between the name for a category of art and the function of the works subsumed under the category. The German translation of 'fine arts' is 'Bildende Künste', the adjective 'fine' suggests that art has something to do with refinement and the adjective 'bildende' suggests that art has an educational value; both notions connote an aesthetic platitude through the adjective. Acquired concepts and habits inform how we perceive. It is a platitude about aesthetics that taste is to be cultivated and that such a cultivation involves abandoning some acquired concepts and many habitual ways of perceiving. Abandoning acquired concepts and habitual ways of perceiving is a psychological effect, the extent of which cannot be captured in objective terms. This is so, because the psychological effect will vary from individual to individual, it will vary with time and context, and it will be beyond the conscious control of the artist. After all, classical works of art have served to change acquired concepts and habits of perceiving at many different times and in ways which are often far beyond anything the artist had imagined. Furthermore, cultivation takes on different forms for different individuals and one individual may profit from encountering one work of art at different times and for different reasons. That all of this should or could be recorded in objective terms cannot be demanded.

But is this platitude really evident? Maybe not immediately, but there are good arguments for it. Assume, for the sake of argument, one of its contraries:

(1) Taste is not to be cultivated.

(2) Cultivation does not involve abandoning some acquired concepts and many habitual way of perceiving

Taste is something human beings can reflect on. Through reflection they can come to an understanding of whether following their tastes leads them to pleasant aesthetic experiences in the long run and they can also understand whether following their taste has an effect on their moral judgments and on their understanding of values and ideas. Assuming that beauty, moral goodness and understanding of values and ideas enhance a person's life and that enhancing one's life along these lines is a rational goal, it would be irrational to endorse (1). Therefore, we should reject (1) and claim that taste is to be cultivated. (2) should also be rejected as irrational, because acquiring new understanding involves conceptual change and developing taste - learning to appreciate beauty one did not appreciate before - involves changing habitual ways of perceiving. The rejection of (1) hence supports rejecting (2).

The platitude about aesthetics gives rise to a tension. On the one hand, Hyman claims that depiction is to be defined in objective terms only. On the other hand, the platitude about aesthetics has it that one sort of psychological effect matters much. I agree with Hyman that objective terms are necessary for any useful map of the fundamental concepts of visual art and that depiction is a pivotal element. This makes the tension more acute: how can a map focusing on a correct understanding of depiction be made out in objective terms only and, at the same time, retain the platitude about aesthetics? Prospects look bleak if we remind ourselves that the objective terms Hyman employs are thought to make reference to psychological effects redundant. Catering for all intuitions involved requires conceding, it seems, that the concept of depiction is inherently paradoxical - a concession most people find abhorrent.

We should pause for a moment and look at an example to prevent misunderstanding. That should enable us to see more clearly what sort of psychological effects are at stake here. Take a look at the second part of Giovanni Segantini's *Alpine Triptych* (fig. 1) and consider how it might challenge acquired concepts and habits of perceiving. To a contemporary man born in the alps the actual scenery is rarely as idyllic as in Segantini's work. Tourism, to mention one factor, has left its marks and many more people live in the alpine areas than in Segantini's times. Segantini's work can challenge habitual ways of seeing the alps, as it draws our attention to what remains intact about alpine nature and life in the midst of it. It may even teach one to feel some sort of nostalgia towards the nature perceived there and one might gain an access to idyllic aspects of those landscapes which were hidden before. The psychological effect that I am after here, the way in which Segantini's work educates and cultivates viewers, is constituted by the fact that a work of visual art can enable us to see aspects of the world which we did not see before. In other words, visual art can break up acquired concepts and habits of perception and, thereby, teach us to perceive afresh.



Giovanni Segantini, *Alpine Triptych. Nature*. 1989-99.  
Oil on canvas. Segantini Museum, St. Moritz.

That said, a caveat must be added in order not to read too much into the effects works such as Segantini's have on people. Segantini wanted to have an influence on his viewers, his works were designed to have psychological effects along the lines mentioned above. The point of the example, however, is to make clear that it is not important what specific sort of effect works of art have, but that the sort of educational value they have can be captured in the following terms: works of visual art cultivate us, because they break up concepts and habits of perceiving and, thereby, enable us to perceive the world afresh. In other words, a work of visual art takes us by the hand and allows us to glimpse the objective world beyond our concepts and habits. The psychological effect that the platitude of aesthetics – that taste is to be cultivated – plays on does not require a subjectivist psychology which meticulously disentangles how experiencing the artwork feels. In addition to that, the psychological effect under consideration cannot mislead us into mistaking the appearance of something for what it is, as the effect (if it is a genuine one) takes us from appearance to reality. The psychological effects Descartes and Hume thought important, and against which Hyman quite rightly cautions us, were assumed to dissociate us from reality and are thus diametrically opposed to the effects presently at stake.

Still, an approach along the lines suggested by my example must seem contentious from Hyman's perspective. It might seem unclear how the platitude about aesthetics explains what a picture is. And if it does not deliver (or support) such an explanation, the Segantini example does not matter much for the map of the fundamental concepts that Hyman wants to draw. The example might at best suggest a further area of inquiry. He writes:<sup>7</sup>

It is true that we can think of a picture as an object designed to produce a psychological effect. But we can think of a beer or a cheese or a

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<sup>7</sup> Hyman, 2006, 144.

sonnet in the same way. Guinness is designed to produce the experience of tasting its smooth malty taste, Roquefort is designed to produce the experience of tasting its tangy taste, and a sonnet is designed to produce the experience we have when we read it or hear it being read. So there is no harm in saying that the goal the brewer, the cheesemaker, or the poet seeks with such self-critical persistence is a psychological effect. But we cannot infer – and in fact it is not true – that something counts as a beer or a cheese or a sonnet because of this effect or that describing the effect is the right way to explain what a beer or a cheese or a sonnet really is. Nor does it follow in the case of pictures. As Picasso said, a picture only lives through the one who is looking at it. But we cannot infer that the inky marks of an engraving and the colored pigments that make up a painting are transformed into an image by “the beholder's share”.

In order to establish a relation between this quote and the Segantini example, we must take a closer look at the aesthetics of beer, cheese and sonnets. It is certainly true that we can construct examples in analogy with the Segantini triptych. Guinness, if offered to a beer aficionado raised on Bavarian brews, challenges the drinker's taste and may effect a revision of his general conception of how beer tastes. We can say the same thing about Roquefort. After all, most people are not used to the rich taste of produce made from ewe's milk. It is ludicrous to claim that it can be explained what Guinness or Roquefort are by describing their psychological effects only. But, and here Hyman is too quick, it is perfectly normal to say something about what Guinness or Roquefort are by saying something about how they taste.<sup>8</sup> So, taste itself is not a psychological effect, because people react in different ways to different tastes. Furthermore, the tangy taste of a Roquefort does have very different psychological effects on different people and in that respect it is just like a coloured patch of a painting.

Things are even clearer with sonnets. We have clear cases of Petrarchian, Spenserian and Shakesperian sonnets, but we also have unclear cases like Shelley's *Ozymandias*. One is tempted to say that

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<sup>8</sup> I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer of *Kairos* for pressing me on this.

the unclear cases do sound like sonnets even though they do not have a received sonnet form. Unclear cases are abundant and it is common practice in literary studies to judge by ear whether an unclear case counts as a sonnet or not. Here, it is actually true that an explanation of what a sonnet is often rests on a description of how the rhyming pattern sounds and that surely is a description of psychological effects.

How are things with pictures? There are no unclear cases in this area, we usually have no problems determining whether something is a picture or not. Pictures seem to behave much more like Guinness and Roquefort after all. There is, however, a major difference between pictures and culinary artefacts. Pictures depict something and culinary artefacts do not. Any psychological effect drawn out from the Segantini example is not one that can ever be found in beer or cheese. Recall, works of visual art were said to cultivate us, because they break up concepts and habits of perceiving and, thereby, enable us to perceive the world afresh. They do so, because they depict. Therefore, the sort of cultivation they offer cannot be found in beer or cheese. There is, however, a caveat we must add. The aesthetics of beer and cheese show that the platitude of aesthetics must not be applied without scrutiny; Hyman's examples show that the platitude must license conclusions about Segantini's triptych in a different way than it licenses conclusions about beer and cheese. But that is not astonishing at all, for – to rehearse this important fact – pictures depict and culinary artefacts do not.

There is a completely different objection Hyman can make. He can, for the sake of argument, grant all the points I have raised and argue that it leads to an absurd conclusion. One way of doing this involves focusing on my claim that the relevant psychological effect in the Segantini example cannot mislead us to mistake the appearance of something for what it is, as the effect (if it is a genuine one) takes us

from appearances to reality. Hyman may ask how it is possible that a picture depicts something, while it also makes us see what is depicted more clearly. One might think that depiction takes us away from what is depicted, because it cannot (and need not) faithfully record all aspects of an actual perception. We get a contradiction if it is an inherent property of depiction that it can make us see the depicted entities afresh, because it might then be thought that pictures take us away from what is depicted and, at the same time, take us closer to it. Such a paradoxical claim is, Hyman might want to add, absurd and its footing should therefore be rejected.

It is important to note here that I do not think that this contradiction can be dispelled once one has accepted both the platitude about aesthetics and Hyman's conception of depiction in objective terms. Seen from the point of view I recommend, the contradiction is mandatory. Of course, the concepts of a rational viewer are built not to allow contradictory judgements about pictures. So, contradictions should not be forthcoming if the viewer thinks his judgements through. The psychological effect I am after does, however, challenge such concepts – and challenges to concepts tend to manifest in contradictions or silence. Focusing on contradictions for now, not any sort of contradiction will do. Following Graham Priest's proposal, those contradictions which manifest challenges to acquired concepts can be characterised by a specific schema. Furthermore, the relevant contradictions mark limits of thought. The psychological effect I am after thus educates and cultivates viewers by allowing them to think and judge in new ways.

I have said nothing so far that would compel Hyman to accept a paradoxical conception of depiction. I have, however, claimed that it is an alternative for anybody who takes seriously the platitude about aesthetics and how I have applied it to the Segantini example. Hyman may simply reply that his account is not concerned with theories of art

which are wedded to the platitude and that he rejects my proposal, because the idea of depiction being inherently paradoxical is nonsense. I shall try to block such a move in the next part of the paper.

## **Paradoxical Depiction**

The conception of depiction Hyman advocates is founded on a simple idea: 'an artist depicts an object by imitating its form and color'.<sup>9</sup> That is obviously innocuous and bearing it firmly in mind will prevent the sort of confusions Descartes and Hume entertained. But Hyman goes one step further and writes that this does not contain anything that would help explain artistic perception. This is allegedly so, because the intuition on which the simple idea is built 'does not purport to define either the kind of experience that occurs when we look at pictures and see what they represent or the kind of experience an artist needs to have or should be encouraged to cultivate'.<sup>10</sup> I shall now attack this second claim and argue that the psychological effect introduced in the first part of the paper is actually part and parcel of the simple idea.

We first need to introduce a technical concept Hyman employs. After that, we can return to the Segantini example and look at it in Hyman's own terms. The relevant technical concept to be introduced is called 'occlusion shape' which yields, if combined with the simple idea just mentioned, Hyman's occlusion shape principle. So, what are occlusion shapes? When discussing pictures, we obviously refer to forms of a depiction and forms of a depicted. Forms of a depiction are often called 'apparent shapes' and the simple idea introduced above

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<sup>9</sup> Hyman, 2006, 72.

<sup>10</sup> Hyman, 2006, 75-8.

requires that we distinguish them from the actual shapes of things. Apparent shapes are, however, the shapes things appear to have and are, therefore, usually three-dimensional. Forms of a depiction, on the other hand, are usually two-dimensional and relative to a line of sight. We must therefore also distinguish between forms of a depiction and apparent shapes. Hyman introduces the technical concept of an occlusion shape to write about forms of depiction. An occlusion shape of an object is the two-dimensional shape which occludes the shape of an actual object if it is inserted in a viewer's line of sight. Note that it must be inserted perpendicular to the viewer's line of sight and that the viewer must look with one eye only in order to enable an occlusion at all. Combined with the simple idea on which Hyman's conception of depiction is founded, we get the occlusion shape principle:

If O is a depicted object and P is the smallest part of a picture that depicts O, the general principle can be stated as follows: the occlusion shape of O and the shape of P must be identical.

The occlusion shape principle explains what depiction comes down to, it is 'a precise statement of the basic and indispensable thought that a picture represents an object by defining its form'.<sup>11</sup> It might seem as if the occlusion shape principle did indeed make it impossible to read any kind of psychological effect into depiction. To show that this impression is wrong, let us first reconsider the Segantini example.

The paradoxical claim about depiction which was extracted from the Segantini example was that pictures take us away from what is depicted and, at the same time, take us closer to it. In Segantini's alpine triptych, we have various shapes. We find shapes of summits, of about five cows, shapes of a woman and of a man and there are also shapes of rocks, flowers and a glacier. So we can say that the totality

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<sup>11</sup> Hyman, 2006, 81.

of the picture contains a variety of shapes and that those shapes constitute the picture. The occlusion shape principle requires (by extension to totalities of shapes) that the totality of shapes in the picture is identical with the totality of the occlusion shapes of summits, cows, people, rocks, flowers and glaciers.

We can also group the shapes into subgroups which constitute the picture. We may, for example, distinguish between the shapes of living beings (people, cows and flowers) and other shapes (summits, rocks and glaciers). All that is required is that a subgroup of shapes in the picture is identical with a subgroup of occlusion shapes. We should, however, expect that, regardless of how we form the subgroups of shapes, there will always be occlusion shapes that have not been depicted. After all, pictures do take us away from what is depicted by abstraction, an artist depicts an object by imitating its form and colour. Abstraction and imitation require that some occlusion shapes are not depicted. On the other hand, we have seen that the occlusion shape principle holds that the totality of shapes in the picture is identical with the totality of the occlusion shapes. This is so, because the occlusion shape principle explicitly invokes the concept of identity and without it, depiction cannot be defined in objective terms. From all this, we can directly infer that the picture takes us away from what is depicted and, at the same time, takes us closer to it.

The argument can be made clearer and its general form can be accounted for if we employ Priest's way of formalising such kinds of reasoning.<sup>12</sup> It then appears that the argument fits a specific schema – the inclosure schema – which characterises a special sort of contradictions which, Priest thinks, captures limits of thought. The conclusion we can draw from this is that Hyman's conception of depiction is indeed paradoxical and that it hence suffices to enable the sort of limits my reading of the platitude about aesthetics requires.

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<sup>12</sup> Priest, 2002, 156-7.

This is, however, not a defect of Hyman's conception of depiction. It is precisely because it operates at the limit of thought – along with other concepts which fit Priest's inclosure schema – that it might capture a deep truth about the human mind.

Priest's formalisation has three parts, together they constitute the inclosure schema which characterises inclosure contradictions--which is the general mark of concepts at the limit of thought. The first step is called 'existence' and we obtain it by writing  $\Omega$  for the totality of shapes which make up Segantini's picture. We can write  $\varphi(y)$  for 'y is a shape (within the picture)' and  $\psi(y)$  for 'y is identical with one or several occlusion shapes'. We then write  $\psi(\Omega)$ , because the occlusion shape principle requires that the totality of shapes in the picture is identical with the totality of the occlusion shapes of summits, cows, people, rocks, flowers and glaciers. This establishes the first part of the inclosure schema:

(Existence)

$\Omega = \{y; \varphi(y)\}$  exists and  $\psi(\Omega)$

Call any arbitrary subgroup of shapes in the picture  $x$ , thus we have  $x \subseteq \Omega$ . Now we need a marker for occlusion shapes which are not depicted and write  $\delta$  for it. Remember that there will always be occlusion shapes that have not been depicted in any subgroup, call them  $\delta(x)$  and note that  $\delta(x) \notin x$ , for any  $x$ . This is an obvious fact about abstraction which appears in the process of depicting something. In Priest's schema, the important idea is that  $\delta(x)$  transcends any set  $x$  and he therefore calls the second step of his schema 'transcendence':

(Transcendence)

If  $x \subseteq \Omega$  and  $\psi(x)$ , then  $\delta(x) \notin x$

Any shape in the picture is obviously identical with an occlusion shape and any subgroup of shapes in the picture is identical with one or several occlusion shapes, hence  $\psi(x)$ .  $\delta(x)$  picks out a shape which is

not depicted. But  $\psi(\Omega)$  holds and urges us to acknowledge, by the occlusion shape principle, that the totality of shapes in the picture is identical with the totality of occlusion shapes. Despite a certain uneasiness we may feel here, we must infer that  $\delta(x) \in \Omega$ . This establishes the last step of the inclosure schema which is called 'closure'; it reminds us about general constraints on the concept of depiction:

(Closure)

If  $x \subseteq \Omega$  and  $\psi(x)$ , then  $\delta(x) \in \Omega$

Taken together, (Transcendence) and (Closure) commit us to assert that  $\delta(x) \in \Omega$  and that  $\delta(x) \notin x$ . But since  $x \subseteq \Omega$  also holds, we obtain the contradiction that  $\delta(x) \in \Omega$  and, at the same time,  $\delta(x) \notin \Omega$ : some occlusion shapes are and are not depicted.

One might want to defend Hyman by attacking the first step of the schema. Surely, the totality of occlusion shapes is not identical with the totality of actual shapes. But note that such a reply jeopardises the simple idea that an artist depicts an object by imitating its form and colour. It must be held that an artist depicts a scenery in its entirety, as in the triptych, by imitating its form and colour and by Hyman's reasoning it follows that the totality of occlusion shapes must be identical with the totality of actual shapes. It hence appears that the problematic concept of a totality is indispensable as long as we want to talk about pictures as unities.

One might also think that the concept of depiction does not require speaking of totalities of shapes and that, therefore (Existence) does not hold. That is certainly true, but does no real damage to the argument. (Existence) is better regarded as being established by the requirement that various shapes are united in a picture and that these unities require speaking of totalities of shapes. Otherwise, pictures do not depict as a whole and that claim is, I think, completely wrong.

Another potential objection to the argument builds on the idea that a viewer might, when looking at the picture, either focus on the fact that it abstracts or on the fact that it takes us closer to actual shapes. After all, looking at a picture of Paris Hilton on an advertisement board does not throw me into contradictory judgements. This is certainly true for cases of depiction for which the aesthetic platitude does not hold and which, therefore, do not educate viewers in the relevant sense. Nevertheless, the argument shows that the very possibility of the relevant psychological effect is inherent in the concept of depiction Hyman advocates and that accounting for it does not require anything besides defining depiction in objective terms.

If these further considerations are correct, Hyman has two options. He could bite the bullet and acknowledge that there are psychological effects which are characteristic of what depiction is. The price for this is not very high. There will be no need to change the definition of depiction in objective terms. All that one might want to add is a rider stating that an explanation of artistic perception requires invoking a psychological effect which can be readily derived from Hyman's account as it stands. The second option requires much more work. It must be shown that the aesthetic platitude does not add anything to an adequate understanding of depiction. In connection with that, it must also be shown that we can give a definition of depiction in objective terms from which no inclosure contradiction can be inferred. I find it hard to see how that is possible. But if it turns out to be possible, it might require a substantial revision of the occlusion shape principle. Such a move is not desirable, as Hyman's occlusion shape principle has many important virtues as it stands. I therefore suggest the first option.

## References

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