

RESEMBLANCE AS REPLETENESS: A SOLUTION TO GOODMAN'S PROBLEM

DANIEL BARNES

UNIVERSITY OF NOTTINGHAM

ABSTRACT: In this paper I consider the view that Goodman altogether rejects the notion of resemblance in depiction. I argue that, although Goodman's case seems to be a decisive challenge, he can in fact hold a positive view of resemblance if we weaken the standard usage of the word 'resemblance'. The result of this is that Goodman's commitment to the notion of repleteness enables him to say that pictures can and do resemble their subjects, as resemblance relies on the relative complexity of the depiction.

Right at the beginning of *Languages of Art*, Goodman plainly denies that resemblance is a sufficient condition for depiction on several grounds. Firstly, because "An object resembles itself to the maximum degree but rarely represents itself; resemblance, unlike representation, is reflexive" (1976:4). Secondly, resemblance is symmetric in the sense that *A* resembles *B* as much as *B* resembles *A*, but a picture of the Duke of Wellington may represent the Duke without the Duke representing the picture. Thirdly, whilst any given pair of objects resemble one another in some way, like cars off an assembly line, neither of them represents one another. And finally, against a resemblance condition, there is the fact that a Constable picture of Marlborough Castle is more like *other pictures* than it is like the Castle, but it still only represents the Castle and not other pictures.

Another reason why Goodman rejects the necessity and sufficiency of resemblance is that "the object before me is a man, a swarm of atoms, a complex of cells, a fiddler, a friend, a fool, and much more...I cannot copy all these at once; and the more nearly I

succeed, the less would the result be a realistic picture” (1976:6-7). That is, what we copy is only ever an aspect of the object, rather than all its aspects, which is the idea behind representation-as: we represent objects as one of the many things which they are. To this extent, a picture can only represent a finite number of an object’s aspects, for to represent all aspects at once – in order to entirely resemble the object – would, paradoxically, end up looking nothing like the object at all.

So Goodman has two broad arguments against resemblance: one, there are certain features of the notion of resemblance that render it problematic with respect to depiction; and two, there is an inability to specify what element or feature of an object is to be copied in order to achieve resemblance. Thus we encounter a paradox: on the one hand, we have the intuition that pictures do resemble their subjects and indeed that they must if we are to recognise them as such, but on the other hand, Goodman’s comments are equally intuitive and it seems that resemblance in pictures is just not possible.

The well-known concession Goodman makes here is to realism: a picture is a realistic depiction if it not so much provides a lot of information as if the information issues easily, “and this depends upon how stereotyped the mode of representation is, upon how commonplace the labels and their uses have become” (Goodman 1976:36). So a picture is realistic if we are easily able to identify it as depicting its subject, which is the result of the fact that the symbol system in which we see the picture is sufficiently ‘entrenched’; that is, we regard a picture as realistic only if we are familiar with the system of representation. Resemblance occurs, then, when the picture is realistic in this sense, but it nonetheless is only a *product* of representation and *not* precondition for it. Moreover, Goodman cements his attack on resemblance with the claim that “that a picture looks like nature often means only that it is painted the way nature is usually painted” (1976:39). This, then, entails that even where resemblance occurs in the form of realism, it is only resemblance between the picture and the conventions of the symbol system and not between the picture and the world.

Lopes worries that “the idea that perceived resemblance is a consequence of entrenchment is incomplete at best...and any theory that undercuts our intuitions in this way should offer an account of why we are so mired in error” (1996:69). Indeed, it is true that Goodman does little else to explain why the insufficient notion of resemblance

has become so commonplace. For on its own the entrenchment of realism only tells us that there are different standards for resemblance, but nothing about what those standards might be. It is my contention that Lopes need not worry about this and can still accept Goodman's strictures on similarity because there is something else in his theory that allows for resemblance. That is, I think there is provision for resemblance in Goodman's theory that does not commit him to saying resemblance is a sufficient condition for depiction; rather, he could argue for a weaker view of resemblance without committing himself to the arbitrary view of entrenchment.

The key to building a weaker formulation of resemblance in to Goodman's thesis is to analyse what is entailed by his commitment to repleteness, which is the number of features one would have to enumerate in order to give a full characterisation of the picture. Here I follow Schier's reading of repleteness (1986:31), but Hopkins (1998:13) reads repleteness as the wide range of properties that determine what character a mark inscribes. For example, whether a mark on a canvas inscribes a tree is in part a result of the number and kind of properties the mark has; on both Schier's and Hopkins' reading, then, repleteness can be taken to be a measure of complexity, with the difference that Schier takes it to measure the complexity of the picture as a whole and Hopkins takes it as a measure of the complexity of the marks that comprise the picture. Furthermore, Lopes (1996:68) says repleteness is a measure of the features that have 'representational relevance' in the picture, which seems closest to what Goodman (1976:229-231) actually says. These three readings of Goodman amount to the same thing – namely, that repleteness captures the diversity of features a picture has, and this diversity is intrinsically relevant to discerning what is depicted.

It seems, then, that repleteness is merely the relative complexity of a given picture; so a portrait by Goya is more replete than a caricature by Gerald Scarfe because it has more lines, colours, shades and shapes. Given this, we would be happy to concede that a Goya portrait of the King of Spain resembles the king more than a Scarfe caricature of Tony Blair resembles the Prime Minister, so it seems that there is a sense in which we can say that resemblance runs parallel to repleteness. This is the case, at least, if we agree that a picture can resemble its subject to greater and lesser degrees, just as the picture can be more or less replete. The motivation for this claim is the intuition that resemblance

accounts, in part, for the reason why we recognise pictures as being of their subjects, and how accurate a likeness it is depends upon how replete the picture is because the more differentiated features a picture has, the more features there are to contribute to resemblance.

Sparshott (1982:538) takes Goodman to be saying that because we cannot define resemblance, then there is no such thing. But this is a misunderstanding of Goodman's argument, which is essentially that there is little evidence to suggest that pictures resemble their subjects; moreover, that there is an overwhelming wealth of evidence to suggest that what we understand by the term 'resemblance' is not a sufficient feature of depiction. What we conventionally understand by resemblance is as an exact a match between picture and object as there could be, hence the concession to realism. But it seems to me that 'resemblance' is a less precise term of comparison than 'copy', 'match' or 'replica', and this is captured by the notion I have advanced here. *A* resembles *B* inasmuch as there is *some* likeness between *A* and *B* – a likeness for which there are many varying degrees.

There is, as far as I can see, nothing in this that should trouble Goodman, since it is a consequence of his already existing theoretical commitments. Crucially, it does not commit him to now saying that resemblance is a defining feature of depiction because it is just a by-product of repleteness. Now Goodman does think that repleteness is a defining feature of depiction, which has the unpalatable consequence that a Scarfe is either less of a depiction than a Goya, or is not even a depiction at all. Nonetheless, I think that when we take repleteness to be a measure of relative complexity we can admit that what defines all depictions is a degree of complexity – and it is just a fact about the class of objects called pictures that some members of the class are more complex than others – so I do not think that we need to worry too much about this objection to repleteness.

This formulation of resemblance is weaker than is usually found in aesthetic theory because it admits of many degrees of resemblance, whereby an arrangement of shapes and colours on canvas may *more or less* resemble its purported subject. That is, there is nothing in this view that entails commitment to saying that *A* only resembles *B* if it copies all *B*'s aspects. The major advantage here, of course, is that the inability to copy all the

aspects of a thing and come out with a realistic depiction is precisely one of the reasons Goodman rejects the sufficiency of resemblance in the first place: now he has no such worry because he can simply say the more aspects – or the more detailed the aspects – of *B* that *A* copies, then the more *A* resembles *B*. So repleteness determines resemblance, without saying that a picture must resemble its subject, relying only on the claim that pictures *can* resemble their subjects to greater and lesser degrees; after all, Goodman never said resemblance is impossible, but only that in many cases it is an implausible notion.

Furthermore, this view of resemblance is consistent with another of Goodman's key theoretical commitments, namely density, which relies upon repleteness in the following way: where a system is syntactically dense, there is provision for a new character between any given two, and where it is semantically dense, there is provision for a new referent between any two. Both density and repleteness thus entail that any change in either characters and referents or their orders produces a change in the overall constitution – and therefore identity – of the picture itself. The density of a picture in a symbol system is what produces its repleteness insofar as it will be more or less replete according to whether it is more or less dense – because more characters or more referents makes it more complex. So, in terms of resemblance, syntactic density determines repleteness (as complexity) *and* the degree to which *A* resembles *B*, and semantic density, whilst also determining repleteness, has the deciding role of whether or not *A* does in fact resemble *B* at all. By this I mean that if you wanted to represent 'Tony Blair with a guitar', semantic density dictates that there must be a mark on the canvas that denotes 'guitar', and if there is not, then the picture simply does not denote – and on my reading, therefore, does not resemble – Tony Blair with a guitar.

An example will finally demonstrate this: Velázquez's *Las Meninas* resembles more than Picasso's *Guernica* not because it appears in a more entrenched system but because it is more replete. This can be held independently of Goodman's arguments against resemblance because, remember, what repleteness captures is those features of the depiction that are *relevant* to representation, and what is representationally relevant here is the detail with which the respective subjects are depicted. So the fact that, say, all the features of a person cannot be painted to create a likeness does not matter because we are

only interested in those features that contribute to representing people as whatever the artist intends to represent them as. The difference, then, between the two paintings is this: *Las Meninas* represents people as members of the king's court paying attention to the folds in their clothes, the way the light falls through the window, the dog's fur and even the Rubens on the wall; whereas *Guernica* represents people as victims of war through monotone colour and simple outline shapes. The Velázquez is more detailed – and thus more replete – than the Picasso, which thus gives it a greater degree of resemblance between picture and object. It is tempting to interject here by insisting that the Picasso simply does not resemble at all, but that would be to use the traditional notion of resemblance, which I have already said to be flawed. Sure, *Las Meninas* is a better resemblance, but this does not entail that *Guernica* is not a resemblance, but only that one picture is more replete than the other, which in turn makes it more realistic.

Finally, if Goodman has made any mistake here, it is not so much his overall treatment of the notion of resemblance as it is his conflation of resemblance with realism, where he says realism is the only form of resemblance pictures can achieve. Rather, I argue, realism is only the highest degree of resemblance at one end of the scale, where *A* can resemble *B* to a greater or lesser extent. After all, with this notion of resemblance in place, we should be happy to say that the figures in *Guernica* resemble people in the sense that they are people-shaped, just as we are content to make the broad generalisation that everything resembles everything else to some degree. So, with a weaker definition of resemblance in place, it seems that there is a very real way in which Goodman can hold a positive view of resemblance by saying that pictures can resemble their subjects.

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