

The Nonconceptual Content of Paintings

Andrew Inkpin*

University of Eastern Piedmont

ABSTRACT. This paper argues that paintings have a type of nonconceptual content unlike that of mechanically produced images. The paper's first part outlines an information-theory approach (Lopes, Kulvicki) which is modelled on the camera and based on the thought that pictures convey information about what they depict. Picture structure is conceived of as contentful in virtue of a supposed causal link with what is depicted and as nonconceptual because it is independent of observers' understanding. The second part introduces an embodied depiction approach based on Merleau-Ponty's view of style and the act of painting. It is argued that (i) due to bodily mediation the nonconceptual content of paintings cannot be assimilated to the information-theory approach; (ii) painted configurations are contentful in virtue of being the product of intelligent activity but are nonconceptual because they differ from concepts in their representational function.

The notion of nonconceptual content is sometimes appealed to in philosophy of mind to facilitate the claim that an action or state can have content without the respective agent's being explicitly aware of that content. Behind such claims lie commonplace assumptions about what concepts are. For example, concepts are the 'constituents required to explain [the] inferential relations' between propositional contents (Crane 1992, p. 147); they are paradigmatically linguistic, and can be employed by a subject in active thought. Nonconceptual content clearly fails to involve concepts in some way. So it might be somehow isolated from active thought, typically being assigned to subpersonal states and thought of as belief-independent; or it might have some sub-semantic function or structure, on which the inferential relations between propositions and their constituents depend.

* Email: andrew.inkpin@lett.unipmn.it

There is also a simple phenomenological motivation for attributing nonconceptual content to pictures. Namely, when we talk about pictures there are some features which are adequately captured by the concepts we use, e.g. when we identify objects/people shown or describe their narrative or theoretical relations. Call this the conceptual content of pictures. Equally, there are features which slip through the net of such discourse, not least distinctively pictorial features such as subtle differences in appearance (how the light falls, the nuances of facial expression), the way in which things are depicted (the ‘how’ as opposed to the ‘what’), or details of the fine structure which makes up recognizable patterns (such as people/objects). Features of this latter kind lend some plausibility to the idea that pictures in general, and hence paintings, have content that is nonconceptual. To be sure, this phenomenological fact succeeds more in raising than resolving the issue: How exactly is pictorial content to be thought of so as to sustain this phenomenon? And in what sense, if any, is such content ‘nonconceptual’?

This paper considers these questions specifically in relation to paintings. The aim will be to show that paintings have a type of nonconceptual content differing from that of other kinds of picture, in particular mechanically produced images. The paper has two parts. The first sets out how nonconceptual content is accounted for by general theories of depiction based on the thought that pictures convey information about what they depict. The second part of the paper draws on Merleau-Ponty’s conception of painting as a mode of embodied expression, arguing that the nonconceptual content of paintings cannot be assimilated to the information-based approach described in the first part.

I. The Information-Theory Approach

One way of thinking about the nonconceptual content of paintings is suggested by what I shall call the ‘information-theory’ approach to depiction, of which I shall treat the positions of Dominic Lopes (1996) and John Kulvicki (2006) as paradigmatic. A general strength of these positions is that both aim to accommodate pictorial diversity, rather than taking the case of central perspective to be a privileged paradigm. They are relevant here

because both offer an initially plausible view of nonconceptual pictorial content which, as part of a general theory of depiction, is intended to apply to painting.

A distinctive feature of these theories is that they work with a two-level model. Thus in his *Understanding Pictures* Lopes develops what he calls an “‘aspect-recognition theory’ of depiction” (Lopes 1996, p. 111), modelled on Gareth Evans’s view of the role of information states as the ‘substratum of our cognitive lives’ (Evans 1982, p. 122). In particular Lopes (1996, p. 102) picks up on the idea that subpersonal systems (e.g. low-level parts of our visual system) have properties which are determined by external inputs and which constitute a form of content that is independent of the beliefs held and concepts possessed by the subject. His guiding thought is that pictures can be likened to such subpersonal systems, so that the structure of paintings (or ‘design’ as Lopes terms it) encodes information about what is depicted independently of the beliefs or concepts possessed by observers. Another central feature of Lopes’s view is that pictorial content is selective, involving choice about the kinds of properties it represents objects as having (commitments), while remaining indeterminate about other properties (noncommitments; Lopes 1996, p. 117 ff.). With this in mind he defines a picture’s ‘aspect’ as ‘the totality of [its] commitments and non-commitments’ (Lopes 1996, p. 119). It is the aspect of a picture — its overall selection of properties — which is to enable viewers to recognize what it depicts, or the picture’s ‘subject’ in Lopes’s terms.¹ And while recognizing depicted objects, scenes etc. involves the possession and application of concepts, notably of the things depicted, it does not require concepts of the properties which trigger recognition. For example, it is possible to recognize the shape of a depicted apple without explicitly grasping the textural clues and shading which indicate that shape, or to recognize the three-dimensional arrangement of features in a landscape without understanding the techniques of aerial and linear perspective used to convey this arrangement. In this sense, the ‘aspectual information on which recognition is based is non-conceptual’ (Lopes 1996, p. 141).

A similar two-level model is found in John Kulvicki’s *On Images* (2006).

¹ Lopes 1996, p. 3. In fact Lopes limits the term ‘subject’ to real as opposed to fictive entities, but this limitation can be ignored for my purposes here.

Kulvicki adopts a ‘structural approach’ which takes up and refines Goodman’s suggestions in *Languages of Art* for necessary and sufficient syntactic and semantic conditions of pictorial representation. With regard to picture content Kulvicki distinguishes what he calls ‘bare bones content’ from ‘fleshed out content’.² Bare bones content is a somewhat abstract notion intended to allow for the fact that the properties relevant to the syntactic identity of an image might have been generated by any one of a number of scenes, depending on the projective method of the representational system concerned. In Kulvicki’s (2006, p. 166) words: ‘Bare bones content captures what all the diverse possible sources of a picture have in common’. For example, under linear perspective certain properties (such as relative size and position of constituent parts, and colour) are projection invariant and hence common to a picture and the scene from which it is produced. So in this case the set of projection invariants comprise bare bones content.³ Although the bare bones content is in some sense what we grasp in seeing an image, it is not something in terms of which we could describe what we see. Rather, descriptions of picture content usually involve their ‘fleshed out content’, which ‘results from deploying concepts as a result of seeing the picture surface’ (Kulvicki 2006, p. 173).

The point of thus distinguishing two levels of pictorial content can be illustrated by considering different pictures of the same thing, e.g. two pictures of a certain building photographed from the same position at different times of the day, or two successive frames within a movie scene. The fact that the same concepts would be employed to describe or interpret what is depicted — i.e. seen ‘in’ the picture — corresponds to sameness of such pictures’ subjects (in Lopes’s sense) or fleshed out content. Conversely, purely visual differences — even subtle ones, such as a minor change in lighting conditions or a slight change in the position of elements — correspond to differences in the information embodied by

² This terminology is adopted from Haugeland (1998).

³ Cf. Kulvicki 2006, p. 56. In fact, surprisingly, Kulvicki does not define bare bones content for non-linear-projection cases. Nevertheless, its equation with projection invariants should presumably be general, given Kulvicki’s commitment to the basic thought that pictorial content is preserved when a picture is made of a picture. For this structural feature, which Kulvicki calls ‘transparency’, requires that content-relevant features are invariant over any mode of projection assumed to reproduce a picture.

the respective pictures, i.e. their aspectual information or bare bones content. The distinction of two levels of pictorial content also makes it easy to account for the ‘intuition’ that pictorial content is finer-grained than the descriptions we might offer of pictures (‘a picture is worth a thousand words’) by linking the use of language with the fleshed out conceptual level and the richness of visual detail with the nonconceptual level of aspectual information or bare bones content.

Two more key features of the information-theory approach can be brought into focus by considering what might seem to be a difficulty. For unlike Lopes (1996, p. 7), who is committed to the claim ‘that pictures are at bottom vehicles for the storage, manipulation, and communication of information’, Kulvicki does not present his views in terms of ‘information’. Nonetheless, the presence of two features suggests that the label does no violence to Kulvicki’s views. First, it is important that the notion of information which Lopes adopts from Evans is a technical one with both a genetic and a content aspect. The model for this kind of information is a camera, as a device that reliably produces images with properties determined by a source. The important point is the properties of an information-bearer (e.g. a photograph) count as contentful (rather than just a pattern) because they are thought of in relation to a causal source, a source to which they are due and about which they tell us something.⁴ It is therefore significant that Kulvicki (2006, p. 152, 173) also characterizes bare bones content as being explicable in terms of a systematic projection of properties from a ‘source’ or ‘scene’. Further, insofar as bare bones content is supposed to explain the appearance of a picture projected to any viewing point, its function clearly parallels that of the ‘information’ a photograph contains about its source.

Against this background it is not surprising, second, that Kulvicki’s views also parallel the basic model of pictures as ‘information-transmitting devices’ suggested by Lopes (1996, p. 163). In particular, while acknowledging the possibility of imperfections, Kulvicki continues to conceive of pictorial content in terms of the ideal of a rule-governed projection or mapping (of information).⁵ On this model the representational function

⁴ Cf. Lopes 1996, pp. 102-3 and Evans 1982, pp. 124-5.

⁵ See in particular his discussion of blurred and digital images (Kulvicki 2006, p. 70).

of pictures is simply to provide information about what is depicted. As such it concerns the two-term relation between picture structure and what is depicted.

It should also be noted in passing that Lopes and Kulvicki differ significantly in their conceptions of (nonconceptual) pictorial information. For Lopes pictorial information is *recognition-centred*. He resists the idea that pictorial content simply encodes objective data in syntax (the picture's 'design') and thinks of pictorial information as touched by subjectivity, consisting of recognition-triggering features anchored in pictorial syntax.⁶ By contrast, Kulvicki's notion of bare bones content is *image-centred*, reflecting the thought that particular features of pictorial syntax encode objective information about what is depicted (scenes). We might wonder, however, whether these two apparently different conceptions in fact coincide. Perhaps recognitional abilities could be construed so as to be sensitive (at least in principle) to any changes in pictorial syntax, so that Lopes and Kulvicki simply provide different takes on the same type of nonconceptual content.⁷ For my present purposes, however, it is not important to decide this. Rather, on the basis of the commitments they do share I will be arguing that neither provides a satisfactory account of the nonconceptual content of paintings.

To sum up so far: A two-level model of the type found in Lopes and Kulvicki is valuable because it can explain the phenomenological fact that whereas some aspects of a picture's content involve the application of concepts others seem to require content of a nonconceptual kind. The information-theory approach then provides one conception of the nature of this nonconceptual content. In the following it will be argued that this conception is unsatisfactory in the case of paintings because it is too closely modelled on mechanically produced pictures. To this end, it will be

⁶ Lopes sees investigation of *which* recognition-triggering features aspectual information involves as an empirical task for 'psychological studies of pictorial recognition' (Lopes 1996, p. 150).

⁷ The interesting case would be if they do not coincide. In that case Kulvicki's image-centred conception seems best suited to mechanically generated images, whereas Lopes's aspect-recognition view has the potential to account better for embodied depiction. To realize that potential, however, Lopes's position would need to be freed from the features of the information-theory approach criticized in the following.

helpful to keep in mind the following features of the information-theory approach: (i) The representational function of pictures is thought of in terms of a two-term relationship between the picture structure and what is depicted. (ii) Information constitutes a kind of nonconceptual content: it is contentful in virtue of a supposed causal (i.e. nomological) link with what is depicted; it is nonconceptual because it is independent of being grasped by observers.

II. The Embodied Depiction Approach

I now want to set out how what I shall call the ‘embodied depiction’ approach yields a more adequate understanding of the nonconceptual content of paintings. Although the focus here is specifically on painting, this label is intended to suggest that much of what is said will apply more generally to pictures produced (freehand) by embodied agents. A starting point for this approach is provided by the conception of painting as a mode of embodied expression found in Merleau-Ponty’s essay ‘Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence’ (1952). In particular I want to draw on two aspects of Merleau-Ponty’s views which highlight the effect of bodily mediation on painterly depiction.

The first is Merleau-Ponty’s notion of style, defined as a ‘mode of formulation’ that can be characterized for ‘each painter [as] the system of equivalences that he constitutes for this work of manifestation’ (Merleau-Ponty 1959, p. 67, 68). Defined in this way — as ‘formulation’ — ‘style’ refers not to personal style but to artistic style, characterizing representational technique as such. The importance of Vermeer, for example, is for Merleau-Ponty not as an empirical figure, but as the inaugurator of a distinctive manner of structuring painting which in principle others (such as Van Meegeren) can reproduce: ‘What makes “a Vermeer” for us [...] is that the painting observes the system of equivalences according to which each of its elements, like a hundred hands on a hundred watch faces, marks the same deviation, it is that it speaks the Vermeer language’ (Merleau-Ponty 1959, p. 99). Nonetheless, artistic style is understood to be founded in the artist’s body as ‘a general power of motoric formulation capable of transpositions that effect the constancy of style’ (Merleau-Ponty 1959, p.

82). Thus the style of an artist's work is an individual pattern of regularities - a 'coherent deformation' as Merleau-Ponty often calls it (e.g. Merleau-Ponty 1959, p. 68) - literally shaped by the dispositional complex of his/her own particular body.

The second aspect I want to highlight is Merleau-Ponty's interpretation of the act of applying paint to a canvas. Discussing a slow motion film of Matisse at work, he explains that rather than moving with mechanical or surgical precision, Matisse's hand deftly rehearsed different possibilities, appearing to 'meditate', before applying each single brushstroke (Merleau-Ponty 1959, p. 57). The act of painting thus involves what might be called 'motoric deliberation', a preconceptual weighing up, (literally) going through the motions so as to get the right feel for the stroke required. In addition, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes that rather than negotiating apriori possibilities the 'chosen trait' is particularistic and situated, satisfying conditions 'that were unformulated, in formulable for anyone but Matisse, since they were defined and imposed only by the intention to make *that painting which did not yet exist*' (Merleau-Ponty 1959, p. 58). So the painting operation, on this view, is a type of intelligent action which involves both deliberate choice and compositional intentions particular to the work being produced.

These two aspects of Merleau-Ponty's position make clear how both general and particular features of a painting's form are structured by bodily mediation. Further, in keeping with his general conception of lived/embodied meaning, these formative processes are taken to operate below the conceptual level such that style is a 'pre-conceptual generality', 'that which renders all meaningful signs [*signification*] possible' (Merleau-Ponty 1969, p. 63n, 81). With these features in mind, I now want to suggest several reasons why the nonconceptual content of paintings cannot be properly accounted for by the information-theory approach to depiction.

The basic reason for this, I suggest, is that the information-theory approach conceives of depiction in terms of a two-place relation between the picture plane and what is depicted. Perhaps this is partly due to thinking of 'a mechanism such as a camera' as the 'paradigm of an information system' (Lopes 1996, p. 103). To be sure, it is entirely appropriate to think of such mechanically produced images as a conduit for information transmis-

sion and to characterize them in terms of a two-term relation, with each syntactic feature encoding something determinate about what the image is of. However, as Merleau-Ponty's discussion recognizes, the basic set-up in the case of painting is different: the human body is an additional constitutive element which actively mediates the picture *production*. On the one hand, the body is a barrier to (supposed) information transmission insofar as we cannot — even with great effort and skill — simply reproduce in a rule-governed manner what we see. Whether or not blessed with an 'innocent eye' in Gombrich's (1960) sense, a painter certainly never has an 'innocent hand'. That is to say, even if a painter intends simply to reproduce what he/she sees, this intention is constrained by their executive ability. The latter obviously involves knowledge of representational techniques: how to render objects in space, mimic the effects of light, a mastery of schemata (Gombrich) etc. And even then, the control each of us has over our own body is imperfect, such that there is a dialectic between what we might want our bodies to do and what our current dispositional and motoric state allow us to do (consider the difficulties we have in learning to play a sport or a musical instrument). On the other hand, the body functions as a source of order, as the embodied agent's motoric dispositions and intentions to organize forms guide the actual production of a painting. Hence, in failing to account for the body's active mediation — what it takes away and what it adds — the information-theory approach misrepresents the basic set-up of embodied depiction.

Another way of reaching the same conclusion is to consider the representational function of low-level picture structure, e.g. individual brushstrokes or that due to an individual CCD (charge-coupled device) in a digital camera. A painter must decide the level at which and the way in which potentially referring formal configurations are built up (from individual brushstrokes). By contrast, in a photograph there is no such decision to make, as the imaging is effected by blind and mechanical causation. So whereas in a photograph reference goes all the way down, in a painting composition is pervasive. The fine structure of photographs tracks reality, adheres to the reality it depicts, and hence conveys information.⁸ By contrast, even in so-called realistic painting, the fine structure of paintings

⁸ This fact is exploited by Walton's (1984) view of the transparency of photographs.

is inseparable from compositional intentions and does not in any direct sense convey information.⁹

It might be objected that painting can be thought of as at least approximating to the role of information transmission. After all, traditionally much painting has aspired to depict ‘realistically’; and it might seem that in viewing such works we habitually abstract from any trace of the artist’s ‘hand’ insofar as we (pretend to) see what is depicted rather than merely a flat patterned surface. So why not treat what I have called ‘bodily mediation’ in terms of information, either as ‘noise’ to be filtered out, or such that a painting is thought of as combining information about both the painter and what is depicted? — What prevents this, I suggest, is the fact that bodily mediation involves not just a pattern of regularities, but a pattern of regularities in interaction with particular compositional intentions (the interaction of style with motoric deliberation). This blending of the general and the specific means that for any given painting, even if it is thought somehow to encode information, there would be no way of decoding or ‘filtering’ it — i.e. no principled way of paring apart what is due to bodily mediation and what is attributable to the visual appearance of what is depicted.¹⁰ So for this reason too the information-theory approach breaks down in the case of painting, meaning that the latter cannot be assimilated (even as an approximation) to the information-transmission model.

These considerations imply that paintings should not be thought of having the kind of nonconceptual content assumed by the information-theory approach, and in particular that the fine-structure of paintings is not contentful in virtue of an actual or supposed causal link with what they are information ‘of’. I now want to outline an alternative Merleau-Pontian

⁹ This is not, of course, to deny that design features of paintings can also stand for features of what is depicted. The point is simply that they can do so only via the medium of the embodied painter, such that the primary ‘mechanisms’ of meaning constitution differ in the two cases.

¹⁰ In this perspective what traditional viewing habits really involve is a compromise: Rather than gaining information about the depicted object by filtering or abstracting out subjective ‘noise’ from the artist’s body, we accept indeterminacy — i.e. we accept not knowing what the depicted objects look like independently of the convoluted ‘information’ provided by the painting in question.

view of painterly nonconceptual content in two steps, by considering in what sense painted configurations are contentful, and in what sense their content is nonconceptual.

To begin with, what basis is there for thinking of the painted configurations of paintings as contentful (rather than mere syntax or form)? The basic answer to this is: because of the type of intelligent activity of which paintings are the product. As pointed out previously, this activity involves *deliberation*, i.e. entertaining and choosing between work-specific alternatives. Not, of course, in the sense that every brushstroke is rationally contemplated or planned before being carried out, but in the sense — expressed in the idea of motoric deliberation — that the activity simultaneously involves choice and execution. Further, painting is an activity guided by *compositional intentions*, intentions to produce such-and-such a feature in a certain way. Intentions of this (nonpropositional) kind pervade the production of a painting from the overall design down to the smallest details (including, as previously pointed out, the building up of potentially reference-bearing configurations). Finally, it is an activity characterized by some degree of *normative control*, as each brushstroke is subject both to considerations of appropriateness and, where needed, to correction in the context of the nascent work.

But this cannot suffice, because it fails to distinguish contentfulness from mere decoration. Call this the Wallpaper Objection: After all, wallpaper design is equally the product of deliberate choices, compositional intentions, and is subject to correction. So why should paintings, but not wallpaper, be thought of as having nonconceptual content? The answer, I suggest, is that paintings can have *nonconceptual* content on the condition that they are a vehicle for content *altogether*. Wallpaper hence fails to have nonconceptual content simply because it has no content full stop: there is nothing to understand, it is merely decoration. Conversely, paintings generally do have content, e.g. something to which concepts and/or interpretations are properly applied.¹¹ So the fine-structure of paintings can be thought of as contentful insofar it contributes in an intelligible way to the

¹¹ Note I am not denying that some (e.g. 'abstract') paintings might be merely decorative; nor am I denying that such paintings might count as art or as objects of aesthetic appreciation. Such paintings simply lack content (and hence nonconceptual content), and present no problem for the claim that other paintings are contentful.

painting's overall representational feat. Accordingly, in understanding a painting it is often important to grasp not only *what* it depicts, but *how* it presents the objects or scene in question.

In what sense, then, is the content of paintings nonconceptual in type? After all, so-called nonconceptual content is often thought of as something that can be 'canonically specified by means of concepts that the subject need not have'.¹² This suggests, however, that the term 'nonconceptual content' marks the distinction between an implicit or explicit grasp of content *simpliciter*, rather than picking out a distinctive type of content. Well, to begin with there are phenomenological considerations. For the application of paint to a canvas certainly does not seem to be mediated by an awareness of propositions or their constituent parts, nor to correspond to determinate propositional contents. It would be strange, to say the least, if a painter were to experience herself as entertaining various propositions and their interrelations, rather than concentrating (or immersing herself) in the task at hand! Equally, it is hard to see this as a case of implicit understanding, since the act of painting is a deliberate intentional act of producing a representation - so if conceptual/propositional awareness were involved we might expect it to be phenomenologically salient.

However, it is not just a matter of phenomenology ('how it seems to us'). It is a basic fact that painting is an externally scaffolded activity, i.e. a kind of (mental) activity which is partly constituted by its exploitation of environmental features or objects (cf. Clark 1997, pp. 45-7 and *passim*). For this reason, painterly possibilities are conditioned by both the materials which serve as a medium (the surface to be painted, possible colour and tone combinations, opacity and viscosity of paints, etc.) and the historical situation (the inheritance of representational techniques which the painter is free to adopt or modify). It is such factors which define the degrees of freedom, or the variable space, proper to the activity of painting. The act of painting is both rooted in and directed to the realization of such painterly possibilities. Now recall that concepts are generally supposed to be constituent parts of propositions, to bear inferential properties, and to explain the interrelations between propositional contents. Concepts thus

¹² Cussins 2003, p. 138. The same strategy is endorsed by Peacocke (1992, pp. 61-98) and Crane (1992). As an example of nonconceptual content Cussins (2003, p. 150) cites skilled performances, such as knowing how fast one is riding a motorbike.

inhabit a functional space based on the assumption of distinct components (or elements) which can be combined within the framework of a compositional semantics and characterized through their contributions to semantic truth. In the case of paintings, however, there are no candidate parts that might fulfil these roles.¹³ The traces of intelligent action that make up the composition of a painting thus fail to meet basic conditions to function in the semantic space, such as having (determinate) syntactic identity, or the ability to pick out referents, to serve as bearers of inferential properties, or to function as components of propositions. Consequently, the fine-grained configurational features of paintings should be thought of as having a kind of content that is proper to painting and which is *genuinely nonconceptual* rather than implicitly conceptual.

These claims might seem susceptible to an objection of the type made by John McDowell in response to Evans's (1982, p. 229) suggestion that information states differ from concepts by being finer grained (e.g. colour). McDowell argues that by deploying recognitional abilities and demonstratives — such as 'this' or 'that' (colour) — any feature of 'fine-grained' structure can be exploited in the conceptual realm, or as he often puts it in the 'space of reasons' (cf. McDowell 1996, p. 57). By such means any discernible differences are to be considered 'conceptual in the sense that they are rationally integrated into spontaneity at large' (McDowell 1996, p. 58). Now I do not want to deny that concepts can be applied to any form of material or structure; nor that the procedure McDowell outlines seems a plausible way of doing this. However, the fact that such ad hoc procedures are possible is open to two opposing interpretations.

On the first interpretation, which appears to be McDowell's, it shows that the structure to which (demonstrative) concepts are applied is inherently conceptual. On this interpretation, the application of concepts is a seamless operation, simply making explicit content that was antecedently articulated in the same, conceptual, way. As with the idea of 'canonical specification' of content, the underlying structures or states are simply concepts-in-waiting. The problem with this interpretation is that it involves an unjustified projection, in Wittgenstein's (1995, p. 296 [§104])

¹³ In this respect Gombrich's (1960, cf. p. 75, 143, 247) description of pictorial schemata as a painter's 'vocabulary' is particularly misleading.

words it ‘predicates of the thing what lies in the mode of representation’. Yet the possibility of applying concepts to any given differential manifold no more implies that this is antecedently conceptual than the existence of digital watches or black and white photographs entails that time lacks continuity or that the world lacks colour.

The second interpretation is more compelling. On this interpretation, McDowell’s suggested procedure imposes a specific mode of organization, such that information content is reorganized or modified by a step of ‘conceptualization’. This interpretation is underwritten by the thought that the functional topology of — in this case — painterly articulation differs from that of conceptual/propositional content. Perhaps the best way to appreciate this is to bear in mind that in language (the paradigmatic realm of the conceptual/propositional content) a finite number of signs is used; order is imposed on the world by dividing it up into distinct, manageable units. Hence, the take-up of painterly differences by conceptual means — including demonstratives — involves a qualitative step from representation based on continuous variables to representation based on discrete semantic units.¹⁴ However, once this qualitative step — from one functional space to another — is recognized, the ad hoc procedure McDowell describes provides no reason to deny the existence of nonconceptual content in general, or the nonconceptual content of paintings in particular.

Overall the aim here has been to show that paintings have a kind of non-conceptual content which differs from that suggested by the information-theory approach, due to the latter’s reliance on mechanical depiction (the camera) as a paradigm. The key differences can be summed up as follows: (i) On the embodied depiction approach advocated here painted configurations are contentful in virtue of being the product of a certain kind of intelligent activity (motoric deliberation), rather than in virtue of an actual or supposed causal link with what they are pictures of. (ii) The content of paintings is thought of as nonconceptual because it belongs to a functional space differing from that of conceptual/propositional con-

¹⁴ A nice illustration of this transition is the fact that no matter how many ad hoc concepts we might introduce à la McDowell, the underlying painterly variables would always be ‘finer grained’.

tent, rather than due to its independence from any beliefs agents may form about that content.

References

- Clark, A., 1997. *Being There. Putting Brain, Body and World Together Again*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- Crane, T., 1992. The nonconceptual content of experience. In: T. Crane, ed. 1992. *The Contents of Experience. Essays on Perception*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 136-157.
- Cussins, A., 2003. Content, Conceptual Content, and Nonconceptual Content. In: Y. H. Gunther, ed. 2003. *Essays on Nonconceptual Content*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, pp. 133-163.
- Evans, G., 1982. *Varieties of Reference*. Oxford: Clarendon.
- Gombrich, E., 1960. *Art and Illusion*. Oxford: Phaidon.
- Haugeland, J., 1998. Representational Genera. In: J. Haugeland, 1998. *Having Thought*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, pp. 171-205.
- Kulvicki, J., 2006. *On Images*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lopes, D., 1996. *Understanding Pictures*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- McDowell, J., 1996. *Mind and World*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, M., 1959. *Signes*. Paris: Gallimard.
- 1969. *La prose du monde*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Peacocke, C., 1992. *A Study of Concepts*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- Walton, K., 1984. Transparent Pictures: On the Nature of Photographic Realism. *Critical Inquiry*, 11, pp. 246-277.
- Wittgenstein, L., 1995. *Philosophische Untersuchungen. Werkausgabe*, vol. 1. Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, pp. 225-618.