

# Seeing Double: Assessing Kendall Walton's Views on Painting and Photography

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## Abstract

In this paper I consider Kendall Walton's provocative views on the visual arts, including his approaches to understanding both figurative and non-figurative painting. I introduce his central notion of fictionality, illustrating its advantages in explaining the phenomenon of 'perceptual twofoldness'. I argue that Walton's position treats abstract artwork reductively, and I outline two essential components of our aesthetic encounters with the non-figurative that Walton excludes. I then offer some criticisms of his commitment to photographic realism, emphasising its theoretical inconsistencies with his account of representation. My own proposal is that in our apprehension of non-figurative artworks, our attention is drawn to the underlying structures of both emotive and perceptual experience. In this way, paintings, particularly abstract ones, disclose human cognition in a manner that makes fictionality an inappropriate tool for their analysis.

## 1. Fictionality

Kendall Walton's position on the representational arts—a field encompassing painting, drawing sculpture and collage—is grounded in his theory of fictionality. He proposes that we should understand the experience of such artworks as analogous to engagement in a make-believe game. Just as we assign the status 'knight' and 'queen' to pieces on a chessboard, converting the game of chess into an imagined world of medieval combat, the materials of representational works operate as props in the production of fictional worlds. But these props create a fictional world that is distinct from mere imagining—they *prescribe* certain imaginings and consequently '*generate fictional truths*' that are normative in the sorts of imaginings they prescribe.<sup>1</sup> Just as chess pieces *authorise* a certain kind of imagined battle scenario, props in make-believe games can authorise certain kinds of games. If a painting depicts a horse, then to perceive it as though it were some other animal would be to incorrectly engage in the fictional world the arrangement of paint on the canvas invites us to imagine. Walton says that "what makes it fictional in *La Grande Jatte* that a couple is strolling in a park

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<sup>1</sup> Walton 1990, p. 21.

is the painting itself, the pattern of paint splotches on the surface of the canvas."<sup>2</sup> The paint splotches, brush strokes, textures and colours behave as props, which prescriptively authorise us to imagine a world where the described scene is fictionally true. When I focus on one feature of a painting, such as a horse standing in a field, I may be using this section as a specific prop in a particular make-believe imagining. I may also step back, and view the painting as a whole, in which case the painting in its entirety constitutes a single prop in the fictional imagining of whatever it represents. For the sake of simplicity, I tend to use 'prop' in the latter sense.

One advantage of Walton's view is that 'fictionality' offers a solution to the problem, described by Richard Wollheim, of a depiction's perceptual 'twofoldness'—the fact that when viewing an artwork, we have "two simultaneous perceptions: one of the pictorial surface, the other of what it represents."<sup>3</sup> Looking at a canvas, I am aware of the fact that it is a physical object, a painting, that belongs to the world in front of me. But I am at the same moment having a perceptual experience of the things the painting represents. In Wollheim's language, these are the 'configurational' and 'recognitional' aspects of a given pictorial representation. By 'configurational', we mean the elements of a painting's construction—brush strokes on the canvas, the different pigments used, the volume and thickness of paint. The 'recognitional' aspects are what a viewer sees depicted—a landscape, a tragic scene, or a person strolling in a park. The fact that we are able to simultaneously cognise both aspects of a painting is a perceptual feature central to the success of the visual arts, but explaining how we are able to do this requires an act of cognition that unifies two apparently contradictory attitudes:

1. When viewing a painting, I have a conscious awareness that what I see is not real. Indeed, I may even have an acute awareness of the painting's physicality: its gilded frame or firm brushstrokes, for example.
2. I am aware of what the painting actually represents, so that even when I closely inspect the thickness or texture of the paint I vividly perceive it as a mountainous landscape or person strolling in the park.

Using the concept of fictionality we can describe this duality in terms of the painting's role 'configurationally' as a prescription to imagine what is seen 'recognitionally.' A painting's physical elements, the strokes of paint, pigments and so on, act as props in imaginative games of make-believe, as prescriptions to imagine something that is not actually there. This notion explains how we can have both a recognitional imagining and a configurational awareness of a work in one perceptual act. To imagine is to experience *fictionally*— we are prompted to form a propositional attitude that prescribes an imagining without committing the subject to a belief that what is imagined is *actual*. Through a single cognitive step, such as 'it is fictionally true that this woman, Liberty, is leading the people', the subject acknowledges that Delacroix's painting is a prop, and that what it depicts is not actual, while still recognising the make-believe imagining it prescribes. 'Fictionality' as a concept describes an

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 38.

<sup>3</sup> Wollheim 1998, p. 221.

imaginative encounter that unifies recognitional experience of both what a painting depicts, as well as awareness of its physical makeup, without contradiction.

## 2. Non-Figurative Art

In this section I wish to describe Walton's novel approach to understanding abstract, or non-figurative, artworks. I then elaborate on the limiting nature of this approach, in particular focussing on how it conceives of abstract art in terms that fail to acknowledge the role played by pre-conscious structures of human receptivity to colour, form and space.

'Figurative' artworks, which depict familiar objects such as people, places and things, are ordinarily distinguished from 'non-figurative' artworks, which depict shapes, colours and forms in an abstract, conceptual fashion. The salient difference might appear to be that only figurative artworks are representational—they *represent* existing people, places or things. It is an interesting feature of Walton's theory, then, that he considers both kinds to be representational. Non-figurative artworks 'represent' in the specific sense that although the figures they depict are abstract (they are not worldly objects) they are experienced by the viewer in a manner that is not true of their actual configuration. Walton offers the example of an abstract Malevich work, featuring coloured shapes overlapping on the canvas. Although these elements actually lie on the same plane, we nonetheless perceive a yellow rectangle sitting *in front of* a green one because of its illusory (or fictional) appearance of depth. According to Walton, "this is how we see the painting, not how it actually is. Actually the yellow, green, and black are all on (virtually) the same plane... To see the painting this way is, in part, to imagine [depth]".<sup>4</sup> In short, even a highly abstract piece can produce an imagined appearance of three-dimensionality through careful arrangement of paint on a flat, two-dimensional canvas, making the Malevich painting a 'fiction' since it prompts make-believe imaginings that are not reflective of the work's physical configuration. Fictionality, according to Walton, is therefore central to understanding all kinds of representational artwork, including both figurative and non-figurative kinds.

My principle objection to this account is that it demands interpretation of non-figurative artworks in terms that diminish their artistic value by ignoring their potential to disclose critical elements of human experience. Given Walton's contention that make-believe games "have a profound role in our efforts to cope with our environment" by allowing us to practice social behaviours and improve our self-understanding and capacity for empathy, we can see how Walton might regard figurative artworks as the superior form of creative expression, since only they can allow us to enact games that are grounded in the real world.<sup>5</sup> A figurative neoclassical painting such as David's *The Oath of the Horatii* might enable the viewer to engage in an imagining that provokes a better understanding of honour, duty and sacrifice. On the other hand, a Pollock artwork, which features abstract paint drippings splattered across the canvas, can never produce an imagining rich in the same kind of moral

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<sup>4</sup> Walton 1990, pp. 54-5.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

content. If fictionality is constitutive of our encounters with artworks, then in Walton's view, abstract, non-figurative splotches of paint on a canvas must fail to achieve a level of artistic value comparable to figurative works.

In my view, this definition of the non-figurative ignores abstract artworks' capacity to elicit profound emotional responses and thus prompt self-reflection on our innate receptivity to colour and form. Mark Rothko's abstract expressionist paintings, for example, provoke emotional responses through the use, arrangement and texture of colour, but they do not achieve this because the colours, as props, induce an imagining or create a scene which in turn causes us to feel an emotion. This is the mechanism at work in a painting such as the *Death of Socrates*, where the viewer imagines the depicted tragic scene, and then responds emotionally. While the use of colour will contribute to the tone of the scene, the viewer's response is in large part mediated by empathetic acknowledgement of the portrayal's tragic nature. In Rothko's work, by contrast, the emotional response is *immediate*. A viewer witnesses the painting and is provoked by its sensitive configuration of texture, tone and colour, without any intervening step involving an imagined scenario.

This activity is suggestive of what Heidegger calls the 'primordial' fore-structures of understanding: the implicit understanding of the world, others, and art that precedes all conception in conscious, reflective or logical cognition.<sup>6</sup> The fore-structure most relevant to understanding Rothko is the phenomenon of 'mood'. Heidegger argues that moods, emotional states, emerge from our primordial orientation towards the world as an environment charged by temperament and affect.<sup>7</sup> On this reading, the viewer of a Rothko painting *directly* submits to whatever affective inflection it 'assails' them with—whether it be grief, melancholy or an uplifting sense of elation.<sup>8</sup>



Figure 1. Rothko, Mark. 'No. 14, 1960.' San Francisco: Collection SFMOMA, 1960.

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<sup>6</sup> Gerner 2000, pp. 77-8.

<sup>7</sup> Heidegger 2006, p. 179.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, p. 176.

Walton might respond that this is still explained by the representational nature of the artwork, in its capacity to make it fictionally true that these emotions are being ‘played out’ on the canvas. But by his own admission, whereas a figurative painting “induces and prescribes imaginings about things external to the canvas”, a non-figurative one “calls merely for imaginative rearrangement of the marks on its surface.”<sup>9</sup> The fictionality of an abstract artwork extends only to the recognition of the forms and their orientation suggested by the paint—the appearance of depth or contrasting size, for example. In this respect, “figurative paintings ‘point beyond’ themselves in a way that [non-figurative ones do] not.”<sup>10</sup> Only the former type can represent something external, or beyond, what is contained in the painting such as mountains or people strolling in a park. Non-figurative paintings are necessarily confined to the fictional representation of their own formal elements. Rothko’s own views on the emotive nature of his abstraction articulate what this reductive account fails to capture:

I’m not interested in relationships of color or form or anything else... I’m interested only in expressing basic human emotions—tragedy, ecstasy, doom and so on—and the fact that lots of people break down and cry when confronted with my pictures shows that I communicate those basic human emotions... The people who weep before my pictures are having the same religious experience I had when I painted them. And if you... are moved only by their color relationships, then you miss the point!<sup>11</sup>

The way Rothko’s artworks elicit emotional responses that are ‘beyond’ the canvas suggests there is something more fundamental to the experience of non-figurative artworks than the representational fictions that relate the formal elements of the work. As a mode of aesthetic criticism and interpretation, Walton’s ‘fictionality’ offers no grounds for the evaluation of whether an abstract artwork succeeds or fails aesthetically in its attempt to capture a mood or feeling. For Walton, the role of art criticism is instead functional—it assesses the relationships of the ‘props’ on a canvas and their function in generating worlds: “We are interested, sometimes, in seeing what contributions it is [props’] function to make to games of make-believe, what fictional truths it is their functions to generate, and what sorts of games would accord with their function.”<sup>12</sup> Since there is no intermediate, make-believe game in the emotional experience of a Rothko work, Walton has nothing to offer by way of interpretive explanation. Art criticism, we might object, ought to capture just what elements of a painting like Rothko’s are able to produce such vivid emotional responses, and what this reveals about the temperamental orientations Heidegger claims enable them.

It may be replied that Walton simply offers an explanation for how artworks are perceived and recognised as such, in order to tackle problems like Wollheim’s. Aesthetic judgement is a *hermeneutical* question, a matter of literary and critical interpretation; he is concerned merely with perceptual ones. However, if he thinks fictionality is constitutive of our imaginative encounters with artworks and the

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<sup>9</sup> Walton 1990, p. 55.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.

<sup>11</sup> Doss 2011, p. 1.

<sup>12</sup> Walton 1990, p. 53.

primary feature operative in our cognition of them, then the emotional responses prompted by abstract artworks must be in some way determined by their fictional characteristics. Walton's theory fails to account for this, and this shortcoming exposes the extent to which fictionality as a theoretical proposal is unable to grasp those responses to artworks that are most revealing of our emotive compoment to the world.

A further shortcoming of Walton's view is that by so rigidly distinguishing figurative and non-figurative art, he is forced to categorise a given work as either one kind or the other. For this reason, he is unable to make sense of artworks that blur this distinction. Consider Mondrian's *Pier and Ocean*, which is considered one of his intermediate works: while anticipating his later phase of total abstraction, it is still, in an important way, figurative. Although the work is dominated by abstract, non-figurative features, the concentration of longer lines at the bottom of the canvas, which gradually shorten towards the middle, create an impression of depth. Using Walton's theory, we might say these lines 'point beyond themselves' to prompt an imagining of a pier extending into the ocean—it is *fictionally* true that there is a pier, so, given the rigid distinction, the painting must be categorised as figurative.

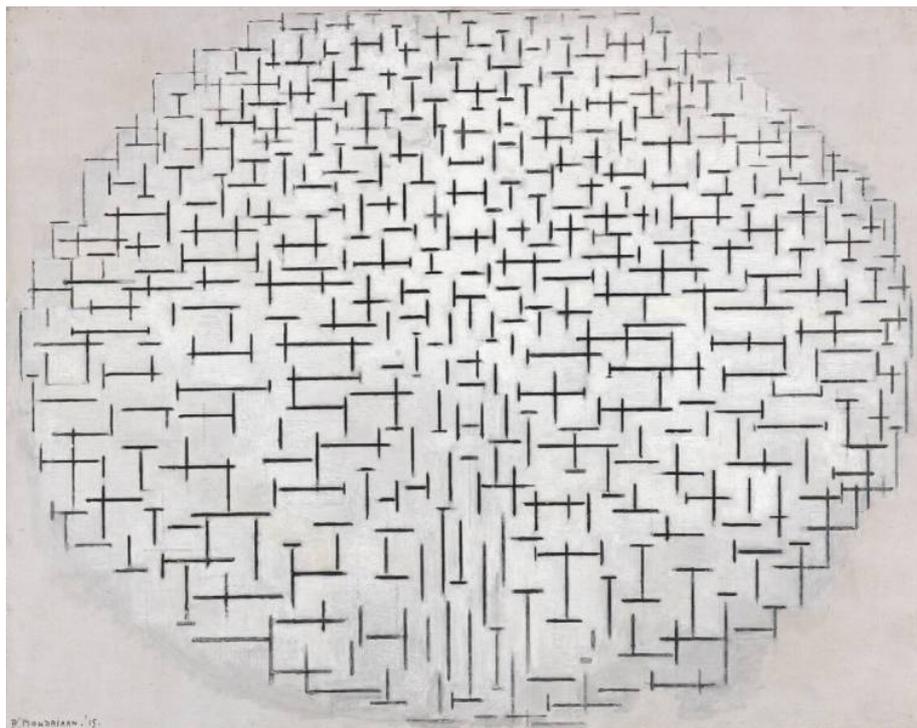


Figure 2. Piet Mondrian, *Composition No. 10: Pier and Ocean*, 1915. Kröller-Müller Museum.

However, conceiving of the painting as fictional in this way fails to recognise the effect produced by its gestures towards abstraction. By portraying a seascape using a network of lines arranged horizontally and vertically, Mondrian prompts the viewer to reflect on the spatial geometry that underpins our perceptions. The painting does not prompt us to simply imagine what it represents—a pier extending into the ocean—but to realise through its unusual manner of representation a new way of seeing and

understanding the subject. The spatial determinations that orient and enable perception are made explicit by this artwork in a manner that would be obscured by filling in its geometrical structure with the textures of an ordinary seascape.

Walton's sharp differentiation between figurative and non-figurative works simply reduces artworks like this to an imagining of what they represent figuratively. And since the use of abstraction impairs the viewer's engagement in a make-believe game, Walton would consider the work less artistically valuable than a more conventional, realist representation. When viewing the Mondrian, we are prompted to imagine the ordinary blue sky, horizon, and waves that a figurative painting of the same subject would also contain. Both the figurative and non-figurative depictions fictionally portray the same scene, and thus prompt the same kind of imagining. So, Walton might ask, why not enrich this imagining by filling in the canvas with the appropriate colour and texture? He does not manage to explain how the use of non-figurative techniques to abstractly conceptualise this scene makes explicit the preconscious structures of spatial orientation, represented by Mondrian as criss-crossing lines, that enable cognition of distance and depth.

These examples from Rothko and Mondrian show two distinct features of non-figurative artworks that remain unaccounted for by Walton's theory:

1. Non-figurative artworks have emotional resonances that expose our own receptivity to abstract colour, texture and form.
2. Non-figurative artworks draw attention to underlying structures of perceptual experience—geometrical, spatial or otherwise—through abstraction of familiar shapes and scenes.

In both cases, our responses to such artworks have a reflexive component, where what is understood is not simply what is *in* the artwork (the associations it produces, or imaginings it prescribes), but in our own activity of apprehension. Non-figurative artworks make features of our own cognition visible—its affective compartments to colour, for example, or its dependence on horizontal lines to orient perception.

### 3. Photographic Transparency

In this section, I explore Walton's commitment to a realist understanding of photography. I argue that Walton's emphasis on the reality of photographs is dependent on a notion of representability that is in tension with his above theory of fictionality. Given that we might expect of a theorist a consistent approach to interpreting the visual arts, encompassing painting as well as photography, I consider this tension an important feature of his work deserving of critical appraisal.

I wish to problematise the relationship between photography and painting in Walton's theory by way of comparison with another philosopher of perception and aesthetics, Maurice Merleau-Ponty. In the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty posits that the structures unique to human perception grasp the world in ways that are distorted by photography, but captured by painting. He points out that the

perspective of a photograph is fundamentally artificial, and has little in common with ordinary human perception. Painters, on the other hand, are able to reproduce the peculiarities of ordinary vision, as Cézanne does with his subtly warped representations of bowls and plates that do not correspond to the photographic perspective, but do reflect their actual appearance to human eyes. The fact that our visual apprehension of the world does not correspond to the geometrical perspective, he argues, is reflected in the way my subjective perceptions of an approaching object change more quickly than the change in size of the physical image projected onto my retina would suggest:

This is why the train that approaches us in a film gets larger much more quickly than it would in reality. This is why a hill that seemed quite elevated becomes insignificant in a photograph. Finally, this is why a disc placed diagonally in relation to our face resists the geometrical perspective as Cézanne and other painters have shown in representing a soup plate in profile with the inside remaining visible.<sup>13</sup>

This is the precise opposite of what Walton defends. Whereas Merleau-Ponty's position, consistent with my own, is that painting captures pre-conscious structures of cognition, Walton claims that paintings are best understood as fictions, and require interpretation in terms of how they elicit unreal imaginings. Moreover, Merleau-Ponty sets up painting in opposition to photography, which he believes *distorts* human perceptual experience. Walton, by contrast, defends the provocative claim that 'photographs are transparent', since when looking at one the viewer 'sees, literally, the scene that was photographed'. Whereas "photographs are counterfactually dependent on the photographed scene", paintings are also dependent on the psychological states of the person producing them, meaning a painter necessarily misrepresents their subject.<sup>14</sup>

The basis for this claim is the direct causality involved in the production of a photograph: "to see something is to have visual experiences which are caused, in a certain manner, by what is seen" and photographs meet this criterion—something has produced an image via mechanical means, whether on film or digitally, without the mediation of a fallible human subject.<sup>15</sup> Unlike the subject of a painting, which must be interpreted and thus distorted by a painter, the subject of a photograph is involved in a causal relationship that can be equated with ordinary perception. The crucial point here is that photographs, according to Walton, are 'transparent' and offer direct perception of their subjects, with the result that they are not *representations*—they do not admit of interpretation using the language of fictionality.

There is an interesting resemblance between Walton's formulation of photographic realism and Locke's defence of realism in the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Here, Locke argues that an object has primary 'powers' to produce *secondary* sensations which represent it: although we do not see the primary qualities of a

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<sup>13</sup> Merleau-Ponty 2013, p. 271.

<sup>14</sup> Walton 2008, p. 86.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 97-100.

snowball, for example, it has ‘powers’ to produce secondary sensations of whiteness and coldness which give us the perceptual experience of seeing one.<sup>16</sup> True, says Walton, in looking at a photograph we are not experiencing the depicted object as it is in itself, but what we do see, the photograph, is caused by it in a manner that is enough to say the visual experience we have *is* of the object itself.

As Berkeley explains in his critique of Lockean realism, such a distinction between an object’s real qualities, and how they are perceived, is ultimately untenable if we want to claim that the resulting perception is *directly of that object*.<sup>17</sup> While the ‘secondary’, qualities of a snowball (coldness, and whiteness) may give us good reason to infer the constitution of a real, external object with certain ‘primary’ qualities (physical ones such as low temperature and high reflectivity), there is still a logical gap connecting the one to the other—they are not the same thing. The snowball is ultimately only known through its representation, which cannot be directly identified with the object it represents. In much the same way, Walton admits that there is a difference between a photograph and what it depicts, but insists that when viewing the photograph, we really ‘see’ the subject in the depiction. This distinction relies on an unacceptable identification of *representation* with the *represented* that is inconsistent with his claim that photographs are “transparent” and enable *direct* perception of their subjects.

More problematically for Walton’s theory, the representative nature of photographs means ‘twofoldness’ is inherent to the viewing of them. Recall that twofoldness refers to the fact that a composition is not literally its physical elements (brushstrokes, pigments and so on), but also what it depicts (a person, a mountain). Like paintings, photographs have ‘configurational’ elements—the ink on the photograph, or pixels on a screen—which provoke ‘recognitional’ experiences of what they represent—people, animals, and so on. By representing their subjects in this way, photographs behave more like props which prompt us to imagine what they depict. As Walton himself says, when viewing photographs, “fictionally, one is in the presence of what one sees.”<sup>18</sup> The problem for Walton is that when the experience of a work is principally representational, his theory of fictionality ought to be deployed to explain it. When I look at a photograph from the American Civil War, I imagine or *fictionally experience* seeing Lincoln. But if photographs are better explained like this, in *fictional* terms, then we are no longer committed to a theory of photographic ‘realism’, since the interpretive emphasis moves from the photograph’s authentic reproduction to the manner in which it prescribes an imagining of its subject. If Walton’s theory of the visual arts is to be internally coherent, then photographs must be subject to the same method of interpretation as paintings, where fictionality in representation takes priority. Photographic realism is therefore an anomalous and contradictory position for Walton to defend in light of his commitment to the value of fictionality as a theory of representation.

According to Walton, photography accurately captures the world in a way that is perfectly analogous to seeing, while the role of painting is only to direct imagination

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<sup>16</sup> Locke 1979, sec. 2.8.8.

<sup>17</sup> See Berkeley 2012, pp. 168-70.

<sup>18</sup> Walton 2008, p. 89.

through fictional games. This prioritises photography as the aesthetic medium with the best claim to faithful communication of perceptual experience. What I have shown, however, is that both painting and photography are ultimately representational, and thus deserving of criticism according to a single aesthetic theory of representation. Merleau-Ponty's example of the way photography misrepresents the human perspective on the world, while impressionist painting accurately reproduces it, suggests that whatever that theory may be, it must be prepared to acknowledge what insights painting offers for our understanding of perception.

#### 4. Conclusion

In this essay I have attempted to examine the overall strength of Walton's views on the visual arts. While his theory is an attractive tool for examining figurative artworks, and offers a compelling answer to the problem of perceptual twofoldness, it fails to adequately describe aesthetic encounters with non-figurative works. I have also argued that Walton's account of photographic realism collapses into a representational theory, which theoretical consistency requires him to explain in terms that contradict his realism.

Through painting, whether figurative or not, artworks communicate truths about human experience and perception. Photographs, by contrast, distort them. We might say that the artworks Walton supposes most exhibit fictionality (paintings) disclose the affective and spatial elements of perceptual apprehension *better* than the artworks he claims most explicitly communicate vision (photographs). A crucial function of paintings is therefore to expose the mechanisms of perception unique to the human perspective. In appreciating art, particularly non-figurative art, the cognitive activities undertaken by the viewer make themselves visible; abstract works are aesthetic provocations to reflect on our own subjectivity. Walton's mistake is to conceive of artworks in terms that emphasise their unreality—their *fictionality*—ignoring how non-figurative works direct our experiences towards a better understanding of our emotive and perceptual faculties.

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