FIDELITY WITHOUT MIMESIS: MENTAL IMAGERY FROM VISUAL DESCRIPTION

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ABSTRACT: In this paper, I oppose the common assumption that visual descriptions in prose fiction are imageable by virtue of perceptual mimesis. Based on introspection as well as convergent support from cognitive science and other disciplines, I argue that visual description (and the mental imagery it elicits), unlike narrative (and the mental imagery it elicits), often stands in no positive relation to perceptual mimesis because it lacks a structural counterpart in perceptual experience. I present an alternative way of defining the kind of mental imagery elicited by visual descriptions, and propose a number of text variables underlying the imageability or non-imageability of any such description.

What does one really gain from the critically acclaimed visual descriptions in the novels of Dickens, Franzen, McEwan and hundreds of others? What do they add to mimesis?

When we read prose fiction, many kinds of mimesis are at stake. There is mimesis of conceptual thought generation, mimesis of emotions portrayed and aroused, mimesis of historical or scientific fact, mimesis of speech and so forth. One kind of mimesis particularly relevant to the non-scholarly reader, and particularly neglected by literary scholars in spite of the current cognitive boom, consists in emulated experience (e.g., Halliwell 2002: 22) of the world as apprehended pre-verbally, by the sensorimotor apparatus alone. For instance, if a narrative rendition of bright midday sunshine in high summer elicits the near-experience of needing to squint, then the

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passage in question is likely mimetic in the sense relevant for this paper. For lack of a better word, I will further refer to this kind of mimesis as *perceptual mimesis* (see also Scarry 1999: 6ff). It should be pointed out, however, that I assume perceptual mimesis to involve the entire sensorimotor array, including the proprioceptive and kinaesthetic modalities (e.g. the senses of limb and organ position, velocity, effort, acceleration and so forth) that are less frequently associated with perception proper.

It is generally assumed that the reader's mental imagery is a prime vehicle of perceptual mimesis. Insofar as a piece of fiction succeeds in eliciting sensorimotor (especially visual) images of its content, it is regarded as perceptually mimetic. In the common parlance of book reviewers, essayists and literary scholars, a particularly strong mimetic effect of the perceptual kind is usually attributed to visual description (Wolf 2004: 339; Nünning 2007: 113). To my knowledge, nobody has put this near-automatic association between perceptual mimesis, mental imagery, and visual description to closer scrutiny. Several authors (Esrock 1994: 38; Scarry 1999: 55; Grünbaum 2007: 311) have briefly countered the widespread assumption that there is a straightforwardly direct relationship between the amount of visual detail provided through description on the one hand and the imageability of a text on the other. A few attempts have been made to account for the mechanics of visual (Scarry 1999; Burke 2011: 56–85) or multimodal (Kuzmičová, forthcoming) imagery elicited by fiction at large and by narrative in particular, but there is no systematic account of the imagery elicited by visual description (when elicited at all). This paper aims at filling the gap.

In section 1, I will briefly specify what I mean by visual description and present a further rationale for describing the

visual imagery it elicits. In section 2, I will proceed to the main body of my argument and make the following point: Unlike instances of narrative proper, visual descriptions and the mental imagery they elicit are not perceptually mimetic, because they lack an experiential correlate in the world as apprehended pre-verbally. In this stage of the argument, special emphasis will be put on the pre-requisite of experientiality and, to a somewhat lesser degree, on the closely related pre-requisite of suspending the verbal. In section 3, I will argue that even though these specific points of contrast preclude perceptual mimesis, they allow for a fruitful analogy between images from visual description and another kind of visual mental imagery, namely images from voluntary visualization (e.g., one's purposeful image of what a particular bike model looks like). This analogy will be based on the following: images from visual descriptions, just like images from voluntary visualization (and in contrast to those images that are perceptually mimetic), are always expected, feeble, and essentially finite. Finally, in section 4, I will further elaborate on the analogy in order to infer a tentative set of rules of imageability generally applicable to visual description. The proposed rules will be supported by introspective analysis, aided by extant analyses of voluntary visual imagery and by research on reading and language processing at large. References to other cognitive-scientific research, as well as to literary scholarship on the general topic of description, will be made throughout the paper when appropriate.

Reduced to the most basic questions and answers, the main argument of the paper can be summarized as follows: Is imagery from visual description perceptually mimetic? (No.) If it has no correlate in perceptual experience, what other sort of experience does it resemble, if any? (The experience of voluntary visual imagery.) What makes visual descriptions

difficult to image in the first place, and what makes the imageable ones imageable? (Visual descriptions in general tend to run athwart the experiential makeup of visual mental imagery, exceeding the limits of what can be accommodated in a visual mental image. Visual descriptions only become imageable when they operate within these limits.)

1/ Why visual description?

One could go on forever trying to formulate a comprehensive definition of visual description. For the sake of brevity, I will instead refer to a prototypical example:

> An oval splayed out with whale-bone, [the cap] started off with three pompons; these were followed by lozenges of velvet and rabbit's fur alternately, separated by a red band, and after that came a kind of bag ending in a polygon of cardboard with intricate braiding on it; and from this there hung down like a tassel, at the end of a long, too slender cord, a little sheaf of gold threads. It was a new cap, with a shiny peak. (Flaubert 1995: 16)

This description of Charles Bovary's cap is by far the most frequently quoted one among literary theorists of description (see Bal 1982). Here are a few suggestions as to why this may be so: Firstly, the passage ascribes "properties to entities within a mental model of the world" (Herman 2009: 90). Secondly, the entities and their properties are represented "in stasis, in simultaneous relation, and (they) are organized by spatial markers like adverbs of place.[1] Verbs in the present, past, or past-progressive tenses depict states" (Mosher 1991: 442). Thirdly, references to the properties are post-posited with regard to the central entity, which thus constitutes the "global *introductory*

[1] Or, in this particular example, by temporal adverbs acting as spatial markers.

theme" of the description (Hamon 1982: 159; emphasis mine). Having recognized these generic features of literary description, let us now turn to the features that in my view are prototypical for visual descriptions in particular.

Firstly, the passage isolates an inanimate object rather than a person, animal, landscape or other kind of complex spatial configuration. Inanimate objects tend to be comparably insignificant in fiction insofar as they are the least likely to have direct impact on the story (see also Barthes 1989). An inanimate object cannot be readily imaged (like landscapes or other spatial configurations) or identified with (like people or animals) inwardly, by projecting one's body inside it, and with it one's mind. An inanimate object is as close as one gets to objectivity, and therefore also to a description that is purely sensory, visual. Secondly, the inanimate object described in the passage is a manufactured rather than a natural one, and like most manufactured objects described in modern prose, it is an object of daily use. Unlike natural objects, manufactured objects are fully dependent for their identity on how they happen to be instantaneously used (Atran 1990: 63). Thus lacking an objective essence, manufactured objects are little more than what they appear to be in a given situation. This makes them the perfect content for visual descriptions, the descriptions of appearance. All examples in this paper will consist in visual descriptions bearing significant family resemblance to the above prototype. Yet I believe that part of what I have to say about mental imagery from visual description may apply to descriptions quite remote in kind, visual or non-visual.

However, description is not only a type of text, but also, by virtue of its intuitive noticeability, an autonomous mode of text processing. That is to say, there is more to descriptions than their typical features encoded in text. There is also something it

is typically *like* to be reading a description. This experience in turn, albeit subject to many variables in its final quality, may be correlated with specific cognitive processes prior to consciousness. Description can only exist against the background of other types of text and processing. In most cases, its other is narrative, the dominant text-type of prose fiction. As far as prose fiction is concerned, it is by contrast to narrative that description is usually defined, and rightly so; it is the contrast to narrative that makes it pre-reflectively noticeable in the first place. Description processing entails, first and foremost, a marked pause in a chain of events. More specifically, once narrative processing has given way to visual description processing, the reader temporarily loses track of, and any connection whatsoever with, the preceding story. An eclipse of awareness takes place as it were; the reader focuses on one type of content only, the basic content of visual description: "that something is there and like that" (Wolf 2007: 34). In real time, this could last a fraction of a second or several minutes.

What visual description processing entails apart from a clean-cut contrast to narrative temporality, and what is meant by narrative, will be explored throughout the rest of this paper. Importantly, it should be noted at this point that I do not assume my notion of visual description processing to cover all possible visual description experiences. Depending on context and the instantaneous focus of the reader, visual descriptions as a text-type can be experienced in a number of different ways. What I rather assume is a continuum of possible description experiences where my notion of visual description processing constitutes one of two extremes. The opposite extreme consists in description experiences indistinguishable, in terms of mental imagery and perceptual mimesis, from experiences of narrative. As for my examples of visual description as text-type, certain

types of visual descriptions, such as descriptions of human characters, landscapes or other spatial settings, are disregarded exactly inasmuch they seem more likely to prompt experiences of a less distinctly descriptive, i.e. more narrative, kind.

For any account of perceptual mimesis of the visual kind, descriptions in general and visual descriptions in particular would seem the natural place to begin. While narrative proper may be equally, or in fact more, efficient in prompting visual mental images, visual descriptions alone (when imageable at all) secure the highest possible fidelity of mental image with respect to the text. For instance, upon reading about a "broom" with no further description, my mind may image whatever it pleases. Most often, it will image by default the kind of broom I am most familiar with from my firsthand experience of the world. Most often, this will be unproblematic. But what if the broom, or the story as a whole, turns out to be set in a foreign or otherwise distant context? In such a case my mental image may be proved incorrect anytime by a subsequent passage suggesting that the broom is to be ridden on by a medieval-style witch, or that it sweeps aboard a spaceship in zero gravity. Although my initial image is then by no means disqualified as mental experience, it fails to pertain to the story-world in question. On the other hand, should my "broom" be described when first mentioned, its visual description may perhaps delimit my freedom of imaging but it prevents me from conjuring incorrect images.

Although some of the mechanics of readers' visual mental imagery have previously been accounted for by literary scholars (Scarry 1999; Burke 2011: 56–85), none of the accounts has exposed or even acknowledged visual description's unique potential to stipulate bottom-up rather than top-down processing. Drawing implicitly on a romantic notion of

imagination as essentially a free activity, these scholars have treated imagery without properly considering its prosaic debt to the specific wording of a text. Michael Burke, for instance, suggests that readers tend to furnish fictional interiors with visual images based on their childhood homes and that they often do so regardless of textual counter-evidence. Such "whimsical" top-down imaging may possibly be considered truly experiential in ways largely outreaching the domain of vision (e.g., in terms of its affective impact on the reader), but from the viewpoint of content fidelity, it could just as well be regarded as mere mind-wandering. To restate one of my opening formulations with a little more precision, a piece of fiction is perceptually mimetic insofar as it triggers mental images of the world as we pre-verbally apprehend it. But the images must also be images of certain fidelity with respect to the text. Otherwise there would be no way of determining that they really arose as an effect of a specific passage in a specific piece of fiction, rather than as an effect of fiction reading in general, or language use in general, or for no particular reason at all. This is why visual description would appear to be highly relevant to the study of perceptual mimesis.

An intuitive grasp of this unique ability to specify the visual is probably what makes the common association of perceptual mimesis with visual description so appealing. When checked against random intuitions about actual practices of reading, however, much of its appeal vanishes. Indeed, visual description might make us image far less frequently and far less vividly than suggested by the rhetoric of book reviews and book promotion materials. For instance, there must be a reason why non-scholarly readers, so notoriously keen on vicarious experiencing, show a tendency to skim, or even skip (Allington 2011), particularly lengthy descriptions. Furthermore, when I ask

fellow literary scholars for book recommendations featuring vivid visual descriptions of, say, manufactured objects, they invariably cite passages in which manufactured objects are simply mentioned without being described. This may well arise from the fact that visual descriptions of manufactured objects occur less frequently than simple mentions do, but only to a certain point. I have established elsewhere (Kuzmičová 2012) that simple mentions often conjure imagery more reliably and more vividly than visual descriptions. My objective then was to account for the fundamental processes underlying the most multimodally saturated kind of perceptual mimesis, the one resulting in the reader's instantaneous sense of *presence* in the three-dimensional world of a story. Now is the time to explain wherein the main difference between descriptions and simple mentions lies, and to finally analyze the mental images prompted by visual description in their own right.

I now turn to the main difference between imagery from visual descriptions and imagery from simple mentions, which, I would like to argue, is not one of degree, but one of kind. That is to say, whenever my mind conjures up a visual image of an object based on my processing of its visual description, the resulting experience does not amount to some weak variety of my presence in the story-world, or a weak variety of perceptual mimesis for that matter. In fact, the resulting experience is not at all perceptually mimetic. Images prompted by visual descriptions are essentially different from other readerly visual imagery because they are generated differently. *While simple mentions and other narrative instances of fiction generate images by virtue of their experientiality, visual descriptions can only generate images by virtue of their imageability.*[2] The former part of this

[2] When aesthetician Elaine Scarry (1999) subsumes all fiction-induced imagery under the (further undefined) notion of perceptual mimesis, she

assertion will be elaborated in the next section. The latter part will be elaborated subsequently.

2/ Why not perceptual mimesis?

Why is experientiality proper not at work in the processing of visual descriptions? A definition of perceptual experience is needed here. Underlying my assertion is an understanding of perception as preconditioned by bodily interaction. Continuous interaction with our immediate environment, be it overt (action, i.e. bodily movement) or covert (psychophysiological processes related to pre-conscious or conscious action simulation), has lately been identified at various levels of inquiry to be the basis of our sensorimotor apprehension of the world. A textbook example of the inextricable link between interaction and perceptual experience are the clinical cases of so called experiential blindness. Congenitally blind patients whose vision has been restored by surgery tend to take physical objects for blurs in their visual field as long as they remain unable to couple their visual sensations with relevant sensorimotor patterns of interaction. (Noë 2006: 5ff) At a pre-experiential level, there are indications that visual attention for objects involves neurophysiological processes inherent to action preparation (Rizzolatti and Gallese 1988). There are countless convergent sources like these, spanning vast areas and methodologies of inquiry from isolated brain imaging studies of visual and linguistic processing (see e.g. Martin 2007; Fischer and Zwaan 2008) to comprehensive enactivist phenomenologies of the self (Gallagher and Zahavi 2007). The growing body of interdisciplinary research pointing toward a centrality of

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fails to isolate description as a distinctive text-type and mode of processing. Also, her examples of imageable prose are predominantly narrative rather than (visual) descriptive.

interaction in experience is commonly subsumed under the aggregate label of embodied (or grounded or situated) cognition. Given the strong definition of experience proposed by the framework of embodied cognition, visual description construed as stasis and as subsequent temporary detachment from the object described (see also Grünbaum 2007) has no purely experiential correlate in the actual world. For in visual description, interaction has come to a temporary halt.

That is not the case with simple mentions. Simple mentions of object names, unless we are dealing with a catalogue rather than with narrative, tend to be part of interaction insofar as they stand for grammatical subjects or objects attached to non-copular verbs, e.g.:

> In the kitchen closet I found a practically new broom[.] (Baker 1998: 20)

This is a matter of syntactic fact rather than necessity. In not-very-elegant prose, the broom in this sentence could be minutely visually qualified, e.g.:

> In the kitchen closet I found a practically new bright red ridged plastic broom.

The point is that simple mentions happen to adhere more closely to their referents as pre-verbally experienced. Upon the reading of the above sentences, the reader's embodied mind has no problem identifying an interaction to emulate (the firsthand act of opening a door and finding a broom in the penumbra of a closet), forming thus a multimodal sensorimotor image, an instance of presence, a mediated experience proper of a world out there.

One could argue that all descriptions, along with the objects described, are likewise embedded in interactive situations because they belong to larger narrative wholes that always feature such situations. However, as suggested by the introductory definition of visual description as a mode of processing (section 1), the surrounding story is relegated to outside the reader's consciousness as soon as a visual description is encountered and pre-reflectively identified as such. Visual description means per definition an instantaneously experienced lack of continuity with any narrative (and interactive) embedding, and consequently with any emulated firsthand experience.

One could further object that by token of the theories of embodied cognition, even the seemingly most passive observation of the world entails covert interaction, and that visual descriptions are in this respect no different from the firsthand experience of such observation. One could say, in other words, that visual description emulates in the reader an act of firsthand yet passive visual experience and that it is experiential in the same way as narrative renditions of overt interaction are, only less perspicuously. It may be particularly tempting to say so with regard to descriptive passages that are framed by explicit or very strongly implied references to acts of perceiving. For instance, the context of the visual description of Charles Bovary's cap strongly suggests that the cap is in fact being scrutinized by the boy's contemptuous classmates. Yet again, as long as the reader's mind remains aware of such framing, which seems particularly unlikely in a description of such flamboyance, we are not dealing with visual description processing proper. Should the same objection be raised so as to encompass all visual descriptions regardless of framing, it must be countered by the following clarification:

In the instant of switching, for a second or a fraction of a second, from narrative to the mode of visual description processing, the linguistic nature of reading robustly emerges toward the threshold of the reader's consciousness. The reader thus assumes, if barely reflectively, the cognitive stance of someone who is being informed that a certain object has certain visual properties. In line with this argument, several literary theorists (Hamon 1981: 21; Cobley 1986: 397) have noted that description in general entails an increased presence of the narrator. Importantly, the reader has no way of simultaneously maintaining the cognitive stance of someone who is approaching an object of certain properties pre-verbally, the stance of a perceiving experiencer. Instead, the properties are taken in as foregrounded information in a framework of communication.[3] Whatever the actual syntax of the description in writing, the mental propositional "syntax" (if there was such a thing) of visual description processing would follow roughly this pattern:

> There is a broom. It is practically new and made of bright red ridged plastic.

rather than:

> There is a practically new bright red ridged plastic broom.

Unlike in the processing of (certain instances of) narrative proper, it becomes impossible under such circumstances to

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[3] This part of my argument seems to dovetail with Michael Riffaterre's. Speaking of description in general, literary theorist Riffaterre maintains that description's "primary purpose is not to offer a representation, but to dictate an interpretation" (Riffaterre 1981: 125).

bracket off this quasi-communicative dimension of visual description and achieve as it were a full, pre-verbal sense of presence. This results in the immediate noticeability of visual description in the course of reading, its autonomy as a receptive mode, as well as in the skimming or skipping of descriptions by impatient readers, which goes hand in hand with another typical attribute of visual description as text-type: its low memorability. Unless the wording or subject of a visual description is perceived as particularly striking, the reader is often left with a sense of amnesia as soon as the description is over, not to speak of one's minuscule chances of retaining the rough contents of a description beyond an immediately subsequent stretch of text.

In cognitive psychology, a pronounced tradeoff has been found to operate in the (English) lexicon and its processing between imageability on the one hand and phonological and orthographic uniqueness on the other (Westbury and Moroschan 2009). Words with the lowest number of direct phonological neighbors, i.e. words that differ the most in their structure from the rest of the lexicon, happen to denote referents with low or no imageability (e.g., "thought"). Conversely, words with highly imageable referents are the least conspicuous as to their structure (e.g., "broom") and thereby also the most easily confused with other words ("room", "boom", "brook" etc.). Suggesting that marked "verbality" somehow interferes with imagery, these findings can be taken in support of the above assumption that a sense of being verbally informed of perceptual facts is necessarily discontinuous with a sense of direct perception. Overall, they further disclose how treacherous visual description is by nature. It is intuitively known by the reader to denote something quite familiar and easy to image, yet in the end it is

always found to consist in a unique, unfamiliar[4] concatenation of qualifiers.

Besides, unless the qualifiers in question situate the object in uncommon context, e.g. by suggesting the kind of twig broom used by witches and others in the Middle Ages, they also happen to be more or less tangential to any sort of interaction. In most visual descriptions they will be tangential by necessity, because those properties that really pertain to interaction are already encapsulated in the central object name itself. Empirical studies have shown that in the cognitive processing (and thereby also in the linguistic labeling) of manufactured objects, each object category—broom, cup or flower pot—is delimited exactly by the particular subset of its properties that are immediately relevant to interaction (Rosch et al. 1976). For instance, any container that can be used for planting flowers, qualifies as a flower pot. Thus it would make little sense to describe a flower pot by recounting the properties of being hollow and closed at the bottom. Indeed, few straightforwardly prosaic descriptions take such course.[5] In general, visual descriptions tend rather to exploit the countless accidental properties, those having no direct relation to how objects are essentially interacted with.

The above mentioned impossibility to bracket off the linguistic medium lies also in the very nature of isolated objects and their visual properties. In firsthand visual experience, as long as objects are principally apprehended as objects of interaction, visual properties are those that are self-evidently

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4 An interesting exception being visual descriptions by way of *epitheton constans*, which are always standardized within a corpus and thus largely familiar.

5 The opposite cases generally signal an anti-representationalist authorial agenda, resulting in estrangement.

given. This may be why visual description seems to occur rarely in mundane oral narrative and conversation in general,[6] and when they do, they may mostly be meant to foreclose baseline misconception, rather than help the interlocutor walk in another perceiver's shoes. Unless I am describing an object for its purely aesthetic qualities, e.g. a work of art or a piece of clothing, the pragmatics of my infrequent spontaneous descriptions tends to be other than that of prompting imagery: I want the interlocutor to help me find my purse in the mess of my office, or to pick up the right kind of baby food at the grocery store. I want the interlocutor to know what these things look like, not necessarily to see them with the mind's eye.

Lastly, apart from being self-evident, the visual properties of an object given in firsthand experience are in most cases all simultaneous and one with the object itself. In comparison to narrative renditions of interactive situations, this puts visual description at a disadvantage vis-à-vis the inherent temporality of language and turns it once more into a gross abstraction from perceptual experience. Looking at the ancient broom in my childhood home kitchen, I can certainly conceive of its visual properties in a linear sequence, one by one. But I cannot do so without recourse to inner speech, without hearing my mind briskly articulate at least some of the sounds in "brown", "wooden", "shabby", "orthogonal".

To sum up, the aim of this section was to isolate two fundamental characteristics of visual description. The two characteristics taken together disqualify visual description from

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6 As discourse theorist William Labov (1972: 370) would put it, visual properties of static objects are seldom reportable, i.e., they tend to lack the quality of being inherently worth telling. Labov (1972: 389) also expressly notes the rarity of qualifying syntactic structures in his own material, the African American Vernacular.

perceptual mimesis. Ultimately, the two characteristics taken together bear a significant deal of responsibility for visual description's lower overall imageability when compared to narrative. Firstly, I have shown that visual description, unlike narrative, defies firsthand perceptual experience. Secondly, I have shown that mental imagery from visual description, when prompted at all, is significantly less pre-verbal in nature than mental imagery from narrative. While the latter characteristic is a matter of degree (at a certain level of awareness, the reader always knows that he or she is dealing with a piece of verbal fiction), the former is a question of imagery from visual description either bluntly being or bluntly not being experiential and perceptually mimetic. But to say that imagery prompted by visual description in a very particular sense is not experiential is not to say that it does not amount to experience. What sort of experience it amounts to will be suggested in the following section.

3/What other sort of experience?

What do I mean by stating, at the end of section 1, that visual descriptions can only generate imagery by virtue of their imageability? In part I am referring to their dissociation from firsthand perceptual experience. There is no experience *in* them; there is only the experience *of* them. But I am also hinting at the one sort of experience to which imagery from visual description bears resemblance: the experience of (unseen) objects as visualized in a voluntary mental act of imaging. Voluntary mental imaging is the kind of imaging engaged in when one tries to image what an object (e.g., a particular bike model)

looks like based on one's memory or declarative knowledge, or when one fantasizes about a perfect something.[7]

It is not my intention to suggest that imagery from visual description is mimetic with regard to the above mental acts. Once again, unless the above mental acts are explicitly rendered in the text and retained as such in the reader's focus, i.e., unless the mode of processing inclines toward narrativity and fails to be one of visual description proper, the reader's experience is clearly dissimilar from voluntary visualizing or indulging in fantasies. For instance, the acts of voluntary imaging are temporally open-ended, the imager possessing the ultimate power to extend their duration endlessly. Imaging in visual description processing, on the other hand, is always framed by the reader's assumption that strict temporal constraints have been set beforehand. A visual descriptive stretch of text can easily turn out to feel somewhat lengthy to a reader, but a voluntary imager never continues imaging beyond what feels right for the moment. Furthermore, while in the act of voluntary imagery it is the imager alone who is the originator of the experience and who thus largely exerts control over its content, imagery from visual description arises upon external instruction, with all the rigor and lack of control this entails. Given these and other discrepancies, an important clarification must be made at this point: I am going to consider similarities between voluntary mental imagery and imagery from visual

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7 Unlike philosopher Evan Thompson (2007), I assume that it is *possible*, although not necessary, to image an object by an act of will without simultaneously enacting, on the level of consciousness, a firsthand perceptual experience of that object. Voluntary visual images involving emulated perceptual experience (e.g., images of what it is like to be looking at a particular object), perfectly common as they are, will be excluded from the present discussion for lack of analogy to imagery from visual description.

description pertaining only to how the *product* (the image), not the act of production (the imaging), is experienced. Separating the two phases of experience conforms with established phenomenological practice (Casey 2000: 38).

The following questions may arise: Why voluntary visual images in the first place? Why not consider other sorts of visual images, such as the far more frequent products of compulsive imaging, the fleeting yet intense mental images that can take us by surprise whenever we happen to think of, or talk or hear about, something highly imageable? One could even wonder whether these latter images really are not closer to images from visual descriptions after all, given their uncontrolled character. But they are not. They differ from voluntary visual images and from images prompted by visual descriptions in several respects. Firstly, they differ in that they can, and do, take us by surprise. Voluntary visual images, on the other hand, are always *expected*, and the same is true of images from visual description. As soon as a visual description has been encountered in a text and identified as such, the (modern) reader automatically assumes that visual imagery will somehow be addressed. This is not to say that one is never surprised by the specific contents of an image prompted by a visual description, just like one can sometimes be surprised by the specific turns one's voluntary imagery has taken. But one is never surprised that an image has arisen.

Apart from always being expected, voluntary visual images as well as images from visual description tend to be experienced as markedly *feeble* (see also Scarry 1999: 4; Casey 2000: 3). Their feebleness distinguishes them further from involuntary visual images. Surprise alone could be the reason why images of the involuntary, fleeting kind appear as much more saturated. However, the sheer possibility of surprise lies

at the heart of a yet deeper difference, one that comes down to the question of perceptual mimesis.[8] For instance, why am I surprised by the compelling image of the handlebar of my bike suddenly emerging in my consciousness as I let my mind wander freely on a tired afternoon? Why do I experience the image as strikingly vivid? I am surprised because initially I was thinking of something else than my bike and the visual details of its handlebar. Otherwise the image would have been expected. And I experience the image as strikingly vivid because this something else that I was initially thinking about was in fact an instance of interactive perceptual experience: dropping off my son at daycare this morning, then biking to the station to catch the bus for the University. Consequently the involuntary image of my bike has experiential qualities comparable to the perceptually mimetic imagery prompted by certain instances of narrative. These qualities are absent in any visual image resulting from a voluntary attempt to visualize a static (see also Jajdelska et al. 2010) isolated object. At the same time, these qualities seem to be constantly in demand, visual imagery being reflexively assessed by the standards of perceptual experience. Hence the sense of enfeeblement inherent to images from visual description.

The third and last feature to be recounted in this section is *finitude*. This feature too is best conceptualized upon comparison with involuntary visual images and images from narrative. It too derives indirectly from the lack of perceptual mimesis, in the following respect: bearing traces of perceptual experience, involuntary visual images and images from

8 By contrast, Elaine Scarry (1999: 104) contends that all fiction-induced imagery supersedes the feebleness of voluntary visual imaging. By way of explanation, she emphasizes that imagery in reading is involuntary inasmuch as it is constrained by external instruction.

narrative are residually dynamic. This is not the case for voluntary visual images or images from visual description, which are static through and through. Mental images of all kinds may be considered temporal insofar as they have a certain if minimal duration, yet only the dynamic ones contain a promise of something more than what is immediately presented. For instance, when I as a reader have experienced a visual image of a broom while emulating the experience of retrieving it from a closet, my broom image tends to recur for a little while before it fades away completely. Sometimes it changes slightly between the various stages of recurrence and then it is no longer, strictly speaking, the same image as before. Nevertheless, an image of a broom does recur without a broom being mentioned anymore. It echoes throughout the dynamic extension of my covert enactment of the bodily movements involved when stretching my arm, grasping the broomstick, retrieving the broom. When such enactment is particularly strong, perhaps outright noticeable in the muscles of my arm and hand (see also Kuzmičová 2012), the image can keep recurring for a considerable period of reading time.

Alas, images from visual description, similarly to voluntary visual images of isolated objects, do not have the same tendency to deliver promises of surplus visual experience, or to promise anything in the first place. They must be cued anew if they are to recur. In their static nature, they are destined to yield to other, dynamic and interactive experiences at the very next intersection with narrative. Here are a few examples of how this can happen:

> [The camera] was mounted on an altazimuth bracket above the back door. Its casing was of brushed aluminum. It had a purplish gleam in its eye. ¶ [1] Gary returned the bottle to the liquor cabinet, moved to the sink, and ran water in a bucket. (Franzen 2001: 230)

> By a pile of magazines was a coffee cup—tall, in thin white porcelain, one of a set of six [2] bought by Patrice at Henri Bendel's in New York. [3] Aldous raised it to his lips. (McEwan 2011: 97)

In cases where the immediately subsequent narrative refers to a direct interaction with the central object, the initial image may be transformed into a perceptually mimetic one, continuing its life in a new format. While segment [2] in the latter passage bears but a vague resemblance to this scenario (suggesting a hypothetically direct interaction that involves, but is not limited to, the central object), segment [3] provides a more clear-cut example of how mental images from visual description can live a narrative afterlife. In all other cases where visual description is interrupted by narrative, i.e. in the cases represented by segment [1] above, images from visual description appear once and then vanish without extension and the reader's image experience is readily informed by this. The reader thus experiences that, apart from being expected and feeble, images from visual description are essentially finite, in ways that images from narrative are not.

Needed or not as my above observations may have been in themselves, the ultimate aim of this paper is to valorize them for more practical, predictive purposes. They are meant to help determine what it might be that makes a visual description elicit mental imagery, in spite of the lack of perceptual mimesis. However, defined as expectedness, feebleness and finitude, the principal experiential features of images from visual description are still too broad to instruct a text-oriented analysis. In the next section, while I revisit visual description as text-type, a number of sub-features and further observations will be grouped with the two of the above features that are

directly relevant to image content, in the following order: finitude (subsection 4.1), feebleness (subsection 4.2).

4/ More on the image and when it arises

In assessing the readerly experience of narrative, it is possible and natural to explain imageability by reference to structural analogies between text and firsthand perceptual experience (Kuzmičová 2012), with a vast body of empirical perception research at one's disposal. In the absence of perceptual mimesis, functional analogies (or functional discrepancies) can only be charted between text on the one hand and visual mental image on the other. Given the general elusiveness of mental imagery, there is by contrast little empirical evidence to rely on, and introspection becomes as indispensable as ever.

Based on introspection, the idea that fiction can be made imageable by emulating the inherent characteristics of voluntary imagery has previously been suggested by aesthetician Elaine Scarry. In Scarry's (1999) valuable account, fiction becomes imageable by virtue of analogy when the predicaments of voluntary imaging are made explicit (e.g., when a character is struggling to visualize a cherished face), or alternatively, when objects of certain qualities (e.g., translucence, floral supposition) are represented. Even if Scarry did take notice of the idiosyncratic mode of visual description, there would still be significant differences between her approach and mine. Most notably, Scarry singles out imageable particulars such as the visual properties of being translucent or flower-like. Meanwhile, my subsections 4.1 and 4.2 aim at distinguishing between markedly imageable and non-imageable classes of visual properties, or parameters (e.g., color, shape), regardless of value (e.g., blue or yellow, rectangular or circular). The respective presence or absence of

each and one of the selected parameters in an instance of visual description will be set against the default parameters and limitations of the visual mental image (voluntary or prompted by visual description), and its effect on description imageability will be predicted.

4.1/ Default parameters (finitude)

The experienced finitude of imagery from visual description is closely related to its experienced feebleness. The former will now serve as a background for positive characterization. The latter will subsequently frame an account of what properties a mental image from visual description does not, and in some cases even cannot have.

The kind of image finitude discussed here may be further conceptualized by comparison to a picture. Having no intention to take sides with either the descriptivist or pictorialist camp of the age-old imagery debate in cognitive neuroscience,[9] my suggestion is that mental images from visual description are *picture-like* at least in two relevant respects: Firstly, because of their static nature, they are experienced as two-dimensional (see also Casey 2000: 92). It may be by virtue of this resemblance that one of the most prominent types of so called *ekphrasis* (i.e., the ancient rhetorical device of visual rendition) was the verbal representation of (more or less) two-dimensional visual artworks. As objects, such artworks are largely defined by their complex pictorial surface, while they tend to be uniform in overall contour shape. Interestingly, the mundane objects visually described by modern fiction that are presently

[9] Arguing about the pre-experiential cognitive format of mental imagery, the descriptivists posit that mental imagery comes down to propositional structures, while the pictorialists reject the possibility of such a reduction. (See e.g. Thompson 2007 for a review.)

in focus—brooms, cups, flower pots—depend more heavily on contour shape for their identity than on surface. This fact is reflected in the makeup of the correspondent mental image. When I read about a flower pot or simply fancy to image one out of the blue, I may or may not be able to tell afterwards how porous the earthenware was, but I will always roughly know the slope of its wall. The contour of the flower pot may be incomplete (there may be no way of telling whether or not there was a rim at the upper edge), but it will always be there and it will always be perceived as final because the flower pot will be given to me in two dimensions. By contrast, the contour shape of a flower pot imaged in the processing of narrative will be perceived as open to modification due to the possibility of interaction, by means of which a virtual third dimension is brought into existence.

Secondly, mental images from visual description tend to be oriented in a way resembling of certain canonical types of pictorial representation. If their contour is to adhere to the object they represent, they cannot be, and obviously are not, multiperspectival in the manner cubist paintings are. In their feebleness, they can hardly be said to comply with the standards of realist perspectival painting. They are imaged under a perspective nevertheless, and most often a markedly pictorial perspective at that, namely the one optimally revealing the distinctive contour shape of the object in question. When imaging a broom decoupled from perceptual experience, i.e., when processing its visual description, the broom as an entity is given to me in the most perspicuous way: vertically, perhaps in a slight angle to the orthogonal axis, its bristles facing the bottom of my mental visual field (see Figure 1). This is how a broom is normally depicted when immediate comprehension is at stake, e.g., in pictograms or illustrated dictionaries.

Object orientation in involuntary images or in images prompted by narrative, by contrast, is always situated. For instance, should I image the same broom as part of a perceptual experience, e.g. in emulating the act of sweeping, the broomstick would become, in a rather compelling manner, disproportionately short and thick in my mental image and the overall contour of the broom would alter.[10] Moreover, the image as a whole would no longer symmetrically occupy the center of my mental visual field, but rather gravitate toward its lower right hand side (I am right-handed). Albeit compelling in the mental, such a broom image would seem highly indefinite and ambiguous as to its content if transposed into an actual two-dimensional picture (see Figure 2). There are of course instances of perceptual mimesis in which brooms appear under the same perspective as depicted in pictograms or as imaged during visual description processing. The difference is that in mental imagery from visual description, brooms are rarely oriented otherwise.

An approximate contour filled with a sketchy surface as afforded by an initial orientation is all there is to visual mental images of isolated objects such as brooms, cups or flower pots. That is to say, they are all there is by default, at the very instant a reader has pre-reflectively understood that an object description is about to begin unfolding, but before any post-posited visual attributes have been taken in. This particular stage of imagery is what I call the *default mental image*. It arises, for instance, with the underlined portions of the following examples:

---

10 The perspective thus assumed would coincide with what cognitive psychologists call "canonical perspective", i.e., a perspective by which typical interaction is facilitated (Palmer, Rosch, and Chase 1981).

> [T]hree dirty mattresses, each rolled up in a blanket: which occupied one corner of the room during the day, and formed a kind of slab, on which were placed an old cracked basin, ewer, and soap-dish, of common yellow earthenware, with a blue flower[.] (Dickens 1998: 551)

> My Austrian sniper's rifle with its blued octagon barrel and the lovely dark walnut, cheek-fitted, *schutzen* stock, hung over the two beds. (Hemingway 1962: 11)

> The tablecloth was thick, smooth and blue. Heavy Indian cotton, a thin turquoise line through blue checks. Small frayed holes here and there. (Roberts 1993: 14)

Whatever parameters the reader brings in on top of contour shape and orientation pertain less to the image as such (but see below, section 4.2) than to the reader's preconceived notion of the object in question. If the reader lives in a world where most brooms are brown, or if the reader assumes that most brooms are brown in the particular world of the particular piece of fiction, then it is sheer conceptual knowledge that makes the reader tacitly believe that a fictional broom is brown. Obviously, the particular contour and orientation imposed on one's default mental image of a broom are mediated by conceptual knowledge as well. They happen to coincide with what one's culture knows as prototypical. The main difference from other visual parameters, e.g. color, is that contour shape and orientation alone are necessary for manufactured objects such as brooms to appear as what they are. As far as mental images of manufactured objects are considered, the other parameters are accidental. A purple emerald will no longer be an emerald, but a broom made of purple china will still appear as a broom unless its practical function is considered, which anyway never happens in visual description proper, where appearance is the only thing at stake (see also section 2).

A strawberry turned upside down will lose nothing of its essence, but a flower pot turned upside down will suddenly appear somewhat less like a flower pot. This, along with a fair deal of introspection, is what lies behind the above suggestion that contour shape and orientation is all one really sees in, rather than reads into, the default mental image.

But what does the particular status of the two closely interconnected parameters of contour shape and orientation imply for imageability in cases when contour shape or orientation are explicitly mentioned in a visual description? Paradoxically, nothing much. Their centrality to the definition of each object category (and the relatively low variability of shape within each object category) seems to make the two parameters relatively useless, and perhaps even relatively little used, in visual descriptions.

That a particular contour shape or orientation is mentioned at all, usually implies that several different contour shapes or orientations are afforded by the object category in question. While less typical contour shapes (rectangular flower pots) need not cause difficulty for imagery, less typical orientations (chairs lying on their backrests) tend to be more treacherous but mostly viable thanks to our ability to perform mental rotation (Shepard and Metzler 1971). Importantly, unless the object in the specific contour shape and orientation is highly unexpected (spheric brooms, banana shaped coffee cups), it is accommodated by the initial mental image without resistance, but also without the reader taking particular notice.

It has been noted by Michael Burke (2011: 145), and partly also by the proponents of the classical theory of literary estrangement (Shklovsky 1990: 1–14), that mental contents really become noticeable only when a mismatch takes place between the reader's top-down preconceptions on the one hand

and bottom-up textual input on the other. Once we adopt the same idea for visual mental imagery, the following conclusion avails: if contour shape and orientation are the only two default parameters in mental images of isolated objects, then explicit references to these parameters should represent the only kind of textual input that can induce a match or mismatch proper, i.e. a match or mismatch concerning the image as such. Yet paradoxically, match or mismatch seems to make little difference to contour shape and orientation. Mentioned or unmentioned, matching or mismatching, it is as if the two parameters were rarely noticed in their own right exactly because their presence in the mental image is inevitable anyway. Compare for instance the following passages:

> She carried the Quimper dish on her upturned hands. … A big dish~~, roughly oblong in shape,~~ with rounded shoulders. Its thickness and heaviness were emphasized by the bold strokes of its painted decoration, dark orange, dark pink, and navy blue. (Roberts 1993: 91)

> Gary … took the last of the six signs that a Neverest representative had sold to him. Considering the cost of a Neverest home-security system, the signs were unbelievably shoddy. The placards, roughly oblong in shape, were unevenly painted and attached by fragile aluminum rivets to posts of rolled sheet metal[.] (Franzen 2001: 225)

Above, a contour shape qualifier ("roughly oblong in shape") was removed from the former passage and planted in the latter passage. Neither one of the two mental images (of the dish, of the home-security sign) lost or gained any of its initial power, in spite of the fact that home-security signs are more likely than dishes to be roughly oblong in shape, and in spite of "roughly oblong" suggesting slightly different shapes for the two objects: an oval one for the dish, a rectangular one for the home-security sign. This is not to say that certain contour shapes or

(especially) orientations are not more likely to be imaged than others. The point is simply that there is nothing about visual descriptions referring to contour shape or orientation *per se* that makes them either imageable or non-imageable. This is not the case for those parameters for which any possible match or mismatch pertains not to the level of the image, but to the level of invested conceptual knowledge. Those are the non-default parameters. Among them, I will argue, some truly have the power to make a visual description imageable, while others are for various reasons detrimental to description imageability. Tapping firmly into the conceptual, the non-default parameters overall seem more likely to become noticed, to capture one's attention in the course of reading. The ones listed in the following subsection tend also to make a noticeable difference for one's mental imagery.

Figure 1
Broom contour prompted by visual description

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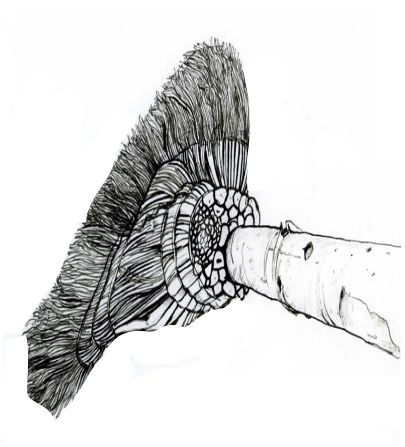
Figure 2
Broom contour prompted by narrative



© Schünnin

4.2/ Other parameters, limitations (feebleness)

The absence of each one of the below visual parameters adds to the perceived feebleness of the default mental image from visual description. By recounting these parameters, I will thus continue recounting the many ways in which mental images from visual descriptions, especially in the default, are experienced as feeble. However, there are countless aspects to what meets the eye in perception and I have no ambition to offer a comprehensive overview of all conceivable visual parameters. Rather, my intention is to propose a general way of classifying visual parameters according to their imageability, while identifying salient representatives of each category. Throughout the proposal, new distinctions will need to be drawn between the various levels of the notion of imageability that are at play. A diagrammatic summary will finally be provided in Figure 3, where further examples of each category will also be proposed.

My ultimate aim is to pinpoint visual parameters that have a pronounced impact, be it positive or negative, on the imageability of a visual description of an object as encountered in a piece of fiction. In this respect, the only thing I have been able to establish thus far is that the parameters of contour shape and orientation do not seem to have much impact. On the other hand, the parameters of contour shape and orientation obviously are imageable, even more so than any others, given their privileged status in mental imagery. The ubiquitous notion of imageability thus begins to bifurcate: First, there is the *basic imageability of a particular parameter* in itself. In this sense, a parameter either is or is not imageable depending on whether it can be readily represented in a mental image. Then, there is the impact the same parameter may or may not have on the *imageability of a visual description*. Unlike contour shape and

orientation, all the below parameters have a pronounced impact. It is assumed in what follows that a negative score on basic imageability automatically entails a negative impact on description imageability. Meanwhile, a positive score on basic imageability does not, interestingly enough, guarantee a positive impact. But let us begin with the easy cases.

Some visual parameters simply cannot be represented in an image from visual description. Their presence in a visual description is then necessarily a hindrance to mental imagery. Rather than contributing to a visual presentation, the words referring to these parameters leave other sorts of imprints on the reader's consciousness, thus disturbing the mental image; they are reflected upon *qua* higher-order concepts or *qua* verbal expressions, or simply skimmed or skipped. Size is a salient example of this class of parameters. In explaining why size cannot be imaged, I will once more revisit Elaine Scarry. In her treatise, Scarry argues that blossoms are amongst the most easily imageable of all possible contents. For explanation, Scarry (1999: 47) refers to the typical size of a blossom, which she says is commensurable with the size of the physical space occupied by mental images, i.e. with the size of one's forehead.

Even though I do not share Scarry's passion for flowers, and even though I do not posit that the mental visual field is experienced to span a stretch of physical space, my assumption about the non-imageability of size is grounded in a similar premise, namely, that the spatial magnitude of visual mental images is invariable across contents. That is to say, no matter how small or big an object in reality, its visual mental image is readily enlarged or diminished as if to nicely fill the blank of the mental visual field, leaving a perfectly proportionate margin (see also Casey 2000: 54). Evidence from empirical studies on experimenter guided mental imagery concurs with

this intuition. People have been found to consistently image smaller objects as if they were closer and vice versa (Kosslyn 1978). Because the blank to be filled is not physical in any respect, I am more inclined to view mental images as sizeless rather than uniformly sized. Either way, explicit reference to size, especially when absolute (e.g., "one foot long") as opposed to relative (e.g., "long"), seems ostentatiously useless and distractive in visual description as far as the content of mental imagery is concerned. In the following examples, for instance, any hitherto conceived mental image may recede or even disperse as soon as the reference to size is processed:

> He showed me one of [the guns], a smoothly jagged piece of metal over a foot long. It looked like babbitting metal. (Hemingway 1962: 182)

> Beyond stands the lamp, in the right corner of the table: a square base six inches on each side, a disk tangent with its sides, of the same diameter, a fluted column supporting a dark, slightly conical lampshade. (Robbe-Grillet 1965a: 144)

Yet other visual parameters are imaged with great ease and tend to have a positive impact on the imageability of a visual description. Color is a salient example of this class of parameters. That visual mental images prompted by names of manufactured objects are generally experienced to appear in shades of white and achromatic grey unless a color is explicitly mentioned, is an insight based on introspection (see also Scarry 1999: 22). There are, however, empirical indications toward such a view of the default mental image. For instance, a brain imaging study of embodied cognition (Simmons et al. 2007) has identified a neural substrate common to the processing of object-color word pairs (e.g., "eggplant-purple") and actual color processing. Interestingly, the same study has shown that

object words decoupled from explicit color attributes do not activate the cortical areas in question. Pre-consciously, objects seem to be processed as colorless. Nevertheless, while the stimuli in the above study consisted in both natural and manufactured object words, my own introspective hypothesis regarding conscious and near-conscious imagery does not extend beyond the latter. Rather, I am inclined to describe mental images prompted by names of natural objects—"eggplant", "strawberry", "emerald"—as tinted by the color typically associated with the object (see also section 4.1). To be more precise, I am inclined to thus describe mental images prompted by the names of any objects which are very strongly associated with one particular color. These objects (and the specific colors they are associated with) vary in part across cultures and individuals. The group happens to coincide largely, but far from entirely, with the category of natural objects. It probably includes bricks, but not bell peppers.

Whether default mental images of manufactured objects really are entirely achromatic or just extremely feeble in hue, the parameter of color is essentially different from the parameter of size in that its experienced absence from the visual mental image is no necessity. Not only can color be easily accommodated by a visual mental image. It is often accommodated with benefit, boosting the image beyond the threshold of the reader's attention. The rare potential of externally induced color to inform visual imagery is further confirmed, as it were, by empirical research into the so called Perky effect. In the initial Perky (1910) experiment, participants were asked to produce mental images of diverse objects (e.g., a banana, a book) while unknowingly facing a white screen on which dim pictures of the same kinds of objects were being projected. The original data suggests that exposure to pictures,

generally speaking, affects the content of concurrent mental imagery. Further research (Reeves 1981) has shown, however, that the Perky effect is up to six times stronger when the target picture is colored compared to when it is achromatic.

Finally, the basic imageability of color being beyond doubt, its positive impact on description imageability is perhaps most easily avowed by recourse to practical examples. In my view, any mental image produced by these randomly chosen visual descriptions fades drastically when references to color are thought away:

> Right at the back would be a narrow bed covered in ~~ultramarine~~ velvet and stacked with cushions ~~of all colours~~. (Perec 1990: 24)
>
> The sofa was upholstered in ~~yellow and blue~~ satin, shiny and tight, finished with rolled ~~gold~~ cord and tassels. A hard little matching satin bolster tucked in at either end. ~~Gold~~ claws at the end of twisted wooden legs. (Roberts 1993: 54)
>
> To encourage him, Baxter at last takes the knife from his pocket. As far as Perowne can tell, it's an old-fashioned French kitchen knife, with ~~an orange~~ wooden handle and curved blade with no sheen. (McEwan 2006: 215)

The third and final category of parameters is those that may be perfectly imageable in themselves, but have a negative impact on the perceived imageability of a visual description. The fact that such discordance is possible at all suggests that the notion of imageability, bifurcated as it already was for the purpose of the preceding analysis, in fact trifurcates. In between the basic imageability of each individual parameter and its impact on overall description imageability, there is the mediating variable of a parameter's respective *possibility or non-possibility to be accommodated in the general object image*. This possibility or non-

possibility comes down to the inherent makeup of the mental image as described above. Namely, it derives from the prominence of contour shape in object imagery, and from the feebleness of the surface filling the space delineated by a mentally imaged contour. More specifically, the category encompasses whatever can be imaged in its own right but cannot meet the mind's eye when an object is imaged *as a whole*. The parameters belonging to this third category all reduce, in one way or another, to surface detail and to non-contour shape, i.e. to aspects of shape that do not inform the general object contour (as projected into the two dimensions of a mental image). One salient representative of this category is what I will henceforth call, for lack of a better expression, the parameter of visual complexity. The underlined portions of the following descriptions all roughly amount to visual complexity:

> The table is a metal disc pierced with innumerable holes, the largest of which form a complicated rosette: a series of S's all starting at the center, like double-curved spokes of a wheel, and each spiraling at the outer end, at the periphery of the disk. ¶ The base supporting the table consists of a slender triple stem whose strands separate to converge again, coiling (in three vertical planes through the axis of the system) into three similar volutes whose lower whorls rest on the ground and are bound together by a ring placed a little higher on the curve. (Robbe-Grillet 1965b: 94–95)

> A local craftsman had made the buffet for Thérèse's grandparents. … A solid piece in worn pine, darkened with age, satin-smooth. Its top pair of doors was carved with reliefs of oakleaf garlands. Two fat swags that hung down, one on each door. (Roberts 1993: 11)

> The placards were unevenly painted and attached by fragile aluminum rivets to posts of rolled sheet metal[.] (Franzen 2001: 225)

It is fair to say that reference to visual complexity, the verbal rendition of the detailed architecture of things, is over-represented in literary visual descriptions. Visual complexity thus adds to why visual descriptions, in aggregate, end up appearing so surprisingly non-imageable, given the reader's intuitive readiness to see with the mind's eye. It has previously been suggested by literary scholars and cognitive psychologists alike that in order to be imageable, visual descriptions of various kinds (descriptions of faces; descriptions of complex spatial settings) need to preserve a holistic (Jajdelska et al. 2010) and unitary (Lopes 1995: 23) view of what is being described. Visual complexity obviously flouts these principles, breaking objects into details of structure (such as fragile aluminum rivets) and details of surface (such as perforations forming complicated rosettes). Any initial object image is then broken down accordingly.

Although the reader may not cease to experience visual imagery while processing references to visual complexity, the images experienced are no longer experienced as images of the central object proper. A sense of discontinuity obtains (see also Casey 2000: 91), with negative consequences for the imageability of the visual description overall. Mental imagery from visual description, at least when discrete objects are considered, thus differs from perceptual experience and from perceptually mimetic (e.g., narrative) mental imagery in that nothing can be represented in it without simultaneously being represented as being in focus. And if whatever is in focus optimally fills the visual mental field, then each mental image consists only and exclusively in whatever is in focus. Hence the necessary lack of continuity between mental images of objects and mental images of object parts.

Figure 3

Parameter					
Is imaged	By default	Optionally	Separately		Never
Imageability I: Is imageable	Yes	Yes	Yes		No
Imageability II: Can be accommodated in object image	Yes	Yes	No		No
Imageability III: Has impact on description imageability	Neutral	Positive	Negative		Negative
Salient example	Contour shape	Color	Visual complexity		Size
Further example	Orientation	Luminance/ Texture	Occluded features		Volume

5/ Conclusion

"Fidelity without mimesis," reads the title of this paper. Let us once more recount its main implications. Firstly, visual description as well as the mental imagery it sometimes elicits is non-mimetic with respect to perceptual experience. Secondly, if visual description is to elicit mental imagery in the first place, it depends for its imageability on a different, non-perceptual kind of fidelity than imageable narrative, namely on its fidelity to the experiential makeup of voluntary visual images. When it deviates from this makeup, visual description decreases in imageability. But when mental imagery is elicited after all, it is further distinguished from other forms of fiction-induced imagery by its level of fidelity to what is actually encoded in the text. Hence a second way of reading "fidelity".

There is of course much more to visual descriptions than visual parameters. Not only are there parameters relevant to vision that have a strong potential to engage embodied, interactive processing (e.g., weight, surface texture). Attached to the third fundamental feature of mental imagery from visual description, i.e. to its inherent expectedness, there are also the countless issues of visual descriptive style. It would be untenable to posit that description imageability is unaffected by stylistic variation. But a detailed inquiry into imageable and non-imageable descriptive lexicon and syntax remains to be carried out. Moreover, a call for a yet larger enterprise lurks in the conceptual network of the above argument, namely the call for a systematic, positive analysis of all the other attentional foci that can piggyback on visual description processing. For instance, when is a visual description more likely to address conceptual reflection or draw one's attention to its linguistic structure rather than elicit visual imagery? What are the mutual relationships between the three? What are their respective

relationships to mimesis, and what kind of mimesis are we talking about? Such a systematic analysis, should it be viable, would significantly contribute to the charting out of the regularities of prose fiction reading overall. Literary theorist Philippe Hamon's aphoristic remark about description "being the crucial point at which the readability (of fiction) is organized" (Hamon 1982: 167) would thus acquire new, clearer significance.[11]

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