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On the very idea of a "language of art": aesthetics and common sense

Abstract
In a number of writings that were only narrowly circulated, Richard Wollheim took a stand against two pivotal theses at the centre of aesthetic reflection and, above all, of critical and historical-artistic practices: i) that art is a language (and thus artistic meaning is produced and understood in the same way as linguistic meaning); ii) that art inherently is a form of communication. In Wollheim's view, such theses are the mainstream conceptions shared by disciplines and approaches as diverse as semiotics, hermeneutics, structuralism, post-structuralism, deconstructionism, and a significant portion of cognitive science. In this paper, I mainly concentrate on (i) and I reconstruct, discuss and defend Wollheim's arguments against a recent interpretive misunderstanding that deems them inadequate vis à vis *Donald Davidson's philosophy. My contention is instead that, at a closer analysis, the latter works in fact as a pivot to Wollheim's aesthetics, especially against the arguments put forth by Nelson Goodman, the most rigorous defendant of (i) and (ii).*

Keywords
Richard Wollheim, Language of art, Donald Davidson

In loving memory of Eva Picardi, maestra e amica

1. *Aesthetics and common sense*

The (largely unwritten) history of analytic aesthetics[2] should certainly include the long-lasting dialogue between Nelson Goodman and Rich-

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[2] This is not to say that there are no good historical surveys, handbooks or encyclopedia entries on Anglo-American aesthetics and philosophy of art, as well as on individual thinkers; indeed, some of them are excellent, like e.g. Guyer 2014, whose volume 3 is particularly helpful for the topics of this article. However, apart from some significant exceptions (Shusterman 1987, Lopes 2016), what is missing to date is a specific treatment of the methodological approach that char-

ard Wollheim, which spanned over more than two decades. Interesting parallels link these two thinkers, who are, to an extent, mirror images of one another: both had an in-depth knowledge of art and its history (Goodman worked as a gallery director in Boston from 1929 to 1941, Wollheim was an art connoisseur with close acquaintances with a number of high-profile critics and experts in attribution such as Adrian Stokes and Denis Mahon); both considered their aesthetic reflection as part of a broader philosophical enterprise (epistemology in Goodman's case, philosophy of mind for Wollheim); both had a systematic and bidirectional approach to this enterprise (they did not concern themselves with single, self-standing questions, but inquired into the problem as a whole; not only did they apply tools from other areas of inquiry to aesthetics but also the other way round). Finally, they were both keen to explore usually neglected research areas (such as art pedagogy and its philosophical role) and were artists themselves (Goodman was a multimedia performer, and Wollheim was a novelist and memorialist)[3].

Curiously enough, also their major contributions in aesthetics (both published in 1968) seemed to lead parallel critical lives: as soon as they were published, they immediately took centre stage in the debate as they came to be considered foundational and paradigmatic of the analytic approach in the field – dispelling the misunderstanding that this was merely an epiphenomenon or stylistic reflection of the "analytic turn"; and subsequently, once they were both historically

acterizes such reflections as essentially analytic. It is also meaningful that even the most credited critical surveys on the genesis and the evolution of analytic philosophy (see Soames 2003, Glock 2008) tend to ignore the Anglophone contributions to aesthetics (with the partial exception of Wittgenstein and Goodman), while still granting a significant place to other of their axiological reflections, such as moral and political philosophy. This confirms Gardner's (2014: 251) scepticism and suspicions that "in aesthetics and in the philosophy of art the practice of conceptual elucidation is not adequate to its object".

[3] Goodman designed and realized three multimedia works: *Hockey seen* (choreography by Martha Armastrong Gray, score by John Adams), which was recorded in Harvard in 1984; *Rabbit, run*, based on John Updike's novel (1960, choreography by Martha Armastrong Gray, score by Joel Kabakov); *Variations: an illustrated lecture concert* in which the joint showing of twenty-one variations by Picasso on Velazquez's *Las meninas* is accompanied by a musical score and twenty-one variations composed by David Alpher. *Variations* has been frequently executed until recent years (see Cohnitz, Rossberg 2006: 9). Wollheim wrote the novel *A family romance* (1969) and the autobiography *Germs: a memoir of childhood* (2004).

situated, they still remained among the most enthusiastically received part of their work (in fact, it must be mentioned here that Wollheim's philosophy of mind, deeply influenced by Kleinian psychoanalysis, has been entirely ignored; and that Goodman's irrealism and worldmaking, with their radically relativistic and nihilistic outcomes, were publicly rejected by his colleague and friend W.V.O. Quine in a review published on a widely distributed journal). According to some, Goodman has not become the key figure of an influential philosophical school in the Anglophone world as Quine, Davidson and Dummett did because of the versatility of his production (it is this eclecticism that led Quine to talk about *Ways of worldmaking* as "a congeries"), and its fragmentary reception; indeed, only a few have studied his main works, and even fewer have been able to grasp the internal connections in content and method (Scholz 2009: 21). This is perhaps even truer of Wollheim, whose contributions to political theory, philosophy of mind, aesthetics and ethics, despite their coherence and mutual implications, have not been received as a unit – so much so that a comprehensive and introductory assessment of Wollheim's thought is still sorely lacking[4]. So much for the similarities, which are non-negligible; when we come to the differences, however, the gap is enormous: Goodman's strict nominalism stands *versus* Wollheim's realist bent; Wollheim's robust notion of the mental is opposed to Goodman's phenomenalism/physicalism; Goodman's radical constructivism contrasts with the cautious, yet not biased, Wollheim's naturalism. Such foundational differences in approach naturally had a profound impact on their aesthetic reflections: indeed, the semio-symbolic functionalism of Goodman and the contrasting praxiological essentialism of Wollheim yield deep ontological and epistemological disagreements on the status of the work of art (this comes to bear also on very specific aspects, such as the theory of reference in painting or the metaphorical meaning in visual arts or the status of style). It would be tempting to reduce the whole debate to what Rorty (1967: 15) calls the *locus classicus* of the long-standing confrontation between American and British philosophers, i.e. "Strawson's criticism of Carnap and his followers". According to this criticism, if the declared goal is "philosophical clarification", then "it is not a matter of prescribing the model conduct of model words, but describing the

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[4] However, two collections of essays discuss his thought in detail: Hopkins, Savile 1992 and van Gerwen 2001.

actual conduct of actual words", not a matter of "making rules, but of noting customs" (Strawson 1963: 502) – an indication that Strawson, as the descriptivist he is, respects also when it comes to outlining his own metaphysics, in opposition to Quine, the revisionist, whom Strawson considers one of Carnap's main "followers". It is well known, however, that Carnap himself was actually a propounder of the notion of "explication", whose aim is to replace "the imprecise explicandum by a more precise explicatum", which usually belongs to "a systematic conceptual framework", as it is likely to find in the most strictly scientific portions of our language (Carnap 1963: 934-5).

Whether Goodman's philosophy is to be understood as in opposition to (Elgin 2001) or in continuity with (Cohnitz 2009) Carnap's project – especially as the latter is expressed in the *Aufbau* –, there is little doubt that its principal tool is based on the notion of explication. This procedure leads Goodman to replace the problematic concepts found in ordinary language and in philosophical tradition with others that are capable of solving the philosophical problems arising in that context, even if this means that it becomes necessary to change their extension, whether partially or fully. One of the best known examples of such a change in perspective is precisely in the aesthetic field, that is in the abandonment of the wrong question "What is art?" in favour of the correct question "*When* is art?" – a shift that paves the way for a fresh approach to aesthetics. Goodman appears therefore as the perfect continuator of that school of ideal language that, even before Carnap, dates back to Frege and Russell.

Is it therefore legitimate to simply place the British Wollheim, educated in Austin's and Ryle's Oxford, within the rank of the philosophers of ordinary language, so as to reduce the divergences with Goodman to the broader divergences of different philosophical schools? It does not seem so. And it is not legitimate even if we take into account those works that seem more promising in this sense, i.e. Wollheim's very first writings in philosophy of mind and political theory. Here, Wollheim appears to be completely aware of the terms of the debate and of the options offered by the two analytic approaches; moreover, he occasionally employs techniques from the ordinary language philosophy (description of the use, discussion of examples in specific tenses and modes, paraphrases). Wollheim's method immediately appears as very nuanced and characterised by flexible boundaries: the first phase of his philosophy indifferently employs Wisdom's researches, Ayer's works and Chomsky's early findings, in

open contrast with Ryle; his political philosophy is closer to Berlin's history of ideas.

How shall we then frame the differences between these two philosophers and, accordingly, between their approaches to aesthetics? An option is that of relating such differences to the position each of these thinkers assumed towards Wittgenstein, who was central for both philosophical schools. It is to Wittgenstein that we owe the image of "philosophy as a therapy", which Rorty used to mark the difference between those who try to formulate an ideal language from those who rely on ordinary language: as an instance of the former, Carnap was committed to replace degenerate tissues with healthy ones; as an instance of the latter, Strawson aimed at understanding whence and how the neurosis arose. This is a promising approach, especially given the huge influence Wittgenstein exercised on Wollheim's philosophy, particularly through the mediation of Waissmann and George Paul – one of Wittgenstein's pupils in Cambridge – and his friendship with Wittgenstein scholars such as David Pears. There is little doubt that Wollheim's aesthetics owes a great deal to Wittgenstein[5], and certainly more so than Goodman's. However, though promising, this solution is not conclusive: partly because Wittgenstein himself never got rid, in any phase of his thought, of his ambivalent attitude towards the revisionist alternative (see Glock 2002: 88-91), partly because Goodman too was influenced by Wittgenstein's "great mind" (Goodman 1978b: 504)[6], to an extent. Moreover, while Wittgenstein's relevance for Wollheim's thought (and particularly his aesthetics) was certainly durable, it also tapered off with time, and some differences appear more clearly over time.

We need, then, an additional and more decisive criterion, and the role common sense had in the aesthetics of both thinkers might be an adequate candidate. Exposing the common sense's lack of "sharp

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[5] Giovanni Matteucci brought into focus the main connections between Wollheim and Wittgenstein in a number of contributions: see e.g. Matteucci 2013, 2015: 81-104, and his introduction to the Italian edition of *Art & its objects*. A recent volume (Kemp, Mras 2016) collets papers of several brilliant scholars (to be sure, most of them, Wittgenstein scholars) devoted (mainly) to difficulties and benefits of Wollheim's borrowing from Wittgenstein.

[6] Marchetti (2006: 15) emphasises that "notwithstanding the almost entire absence of direct references, Wittgenstein's later thought deeply permeates Goodman's reflection – starting with the relationship between explanation of symbolic functioning and exhibition of its inexplicitable conditions".

or stable boundaries" and its being "often at odds with itself" (see Cohnitz, Rossberg 2006: 242) was almost a part of Goodman's manifesto; he even got to the point of warning the reader of his *Languages of art* to be "prepared to find his convictions and his common sense – *that repository of ancient error* – often outraged" (Goodman 1968: xii, emphasis mine). Wollheim was, on the other hand, always faithful to the British tradition: common sense's beliefs are central and not in need of justification as much as of analysis. In this sense, Wollheim's reviews of two publications by G.E. Moore are particularly significant: namely, the reviews of Moore's *Lectures 1911-12* (1953), and of the posthumous *Philosophical papers* (1959). In particular, Wollheim (1953: 646) stresses the crucial passage about common sense becoming "the criterion, the yardstick of philosophical criticism" and not one of the possible solutions that may be assigned to a philosophical dilemma (in a slogan: "What isn't Common sense is, in philosophy as elsewhere, no sense").

A continuity between the standards and criteria of rationality of the philosophical and extra-philosophical domain follows from this, and philosophy of ordinary language itself originates from this approach. As it is well known, the later Wittgenstein – the other forefather of this tradition – gave this theme a personal bend: while he treated it in the most "systematic" and developed way in *On certainty* (see Coliva 2010), a prelude to this can already be found in the *Blue book*, which, together with the *Brown book*, exercised as much influence on Wollheim's aesthetics as did the *Philosophical investigations*: "One can defend common sense against the attacks of philosophers – we read there – only by solving their puzzles, i.e., by curing them of the temptation to attack common sense; not by restating the views of common sense" (Wittgenstein 1958: 58-9). Such a defence of the role of common sense in aesthetics plays an important part in a decisive passage of one Wollheim's very first contributions, namely his review of Gombrich's *Art and illusion* – a work that had a huge impact on Wollheim, Goodman, and analytic aesthetics in general. The gist of Wollheim's criticism of Gombrich – true incubator of the notion of "seeing-in" – is that by positing the dichotomy between canvas and nature, according to which it is only possible to see either the painting's subject or its pictorial surface (like in Wittgenstein's duck-rabbit illusion), Gombrich fails to provide a criterion to discriminate between conflicting and merely different interpretations; and "in the absence of such criterion he has no right to insist, *against common*

sense, that seeing something as a picture of an object *must be* sometimes to see it as a picture and sometimes to see it as that object" (Wollheim 1963: 29, first italics mine).

Quite apart from the correctness of this remark (see Bantinaki 2007, Caldarola 2011)[7] what matters here is that Wollheim embraces a common sense observation that includes a purely phenomenological and experiential trait in the actual encounter with the work of art. Wollheim's philosophical project stands out, therefore, as a descriptive report of the properly artistic experience – which is *the* "central case" in aesthetics. For, as it was openly established ever since *Art and its objects*, "we can regard objects that have not been made as works of art, or for that matter pieces of nature that have not been made at all, as though they had been: we can treat them as works of art. For once the aesthetic attitude has been established on the basis of objects produced under the concept of art, we can then extend it beyond this base" (Wollheim 2015, 64-5). However, this priority – which has been criticized (Budd 2007: 181) – has a shift in an evolutionistic key in Wollheim's later phase, when he clearly states that "*nature is a nursery in which we learn to respond to the quality of art*" (Wollheim 2005: 3, emphasis mine).

In *Art and its objects*, the opening conundrum ("What is art?") is overcome with a Wittgensteinian move: the answer is pursued not by seeking "a thing that corresponds to a substantive", but by bringing the question "down to earth" (see Wittgenstein 1958: 1) and connecting it to the individual arts and the individual artistic media, in view, one might say, of a synoptic presentation capable of perspicuously exhibiting possible similarities and clearing the way for a definition.

In order to carry out this Wittgensteinian strategy, however, Wollheim turns precisely to the common experience of art and of the arts: "[W]e all do have in effect, already inside us, the requisite evidence. Requisite, that is, for the purpose, for the comparatively limited purpose [of individuating perfunctorily what is common to the arts], to hand: we all do have such experience of poetry, painting, music, etc. that, if we cannot (as I am sure we cannot) say on the basis of it what these things are, we can at least recognize when we are being told that they are something which in point of fact they are

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[7] Thanks to Elisa Caldarola for discussion on this subject.

not" (Wollheim 2015: 2)[8]. His philosophical enterprise may thus reasonably and *pour cause* be dubbed "descriptive phenomenology"[9]. This label fits Wollheim's first-hand knowledge of the French phenomenologists (particularly Dufrenne and Merleau-Ponty, but also early Sartre as we know him from *L'immaginaire*), which he often quotes in *Art and its objects*, as well as his proximity with other contemporary descriptive strategies, such as that of Strawson's and Hampshire's (all of which originated, in a way or another, and with different emphases, from Wittgenstein). Considering the most influential, i.e. Strawson's descriptive metaphysics – according to which *grosso modo* it is necessary to refer to the overall structure of thought as it manifests itself in language in order to investigate the world's overall structure (see Berto, Plebani 2015) – an affinity with Wollheim's approach emerges rather clearly. In those passages of *Art and its objects*, for example, where it is discussed the ontological status of those arts that admit of multiple instances and which Wollheim suggests treating as multiple tokens of a single type, he states clearly that "the characteristic circumstances in which we postulate a type" is a "*question, we must appreciate,* […] *entirely conceptual: it is a question about the structure of our language*" (Wollheim 2015: 52, emphasis mine).

2. *Two dogmas (also) of aesthetics*

It is against this complex backdrop, therefore, that it is possible to better appreciate the differences between Goodman and Wollheim, especially for what concerns a key issue in aesthetics: indeed, we owe Goodman the most rigorous and worked out analysis of the artistic experience as a symbolic function, which is effectively encapsulated in the title *The languages of art*. If the phrase had not been overused,

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[8] It is worth noting that, curiously enough, also Benedetto Croce, the main critical target of *Art and its objects*, said something very similar in the celebrated opening lines of his *Breviario*: "To the question – What is art? – we might respond in jest (but it would not be such a foolish jest) that art is what everyone knows it to be. And in truth, if in some way we were not to know what it is, we could not even ask the question, because every question implies a certain knowledge of what is being asked, designated by the question, and therefore qualified and known" (Croce 2007: 5).

[9] Thus Eldridge in his Foreword to *Art and its objects* (Wollheim 2015: ix); Matteucci makes the same point in his introduction to the Italian edition.

one would be tempted to say that Wollheim, from *Art and its objects* on and with increasing awareness, has argued against "two dogmas" of art theory and, especially, of critical and art history practice, which have become more and more central over time: (i) that art is a language, that is, that artworks are symbols in a symbolic system, and their meaning is conveyed exactly as a linguistic meaning, and, which is strictly connected, (ii) that art inherently is a form of communication. It was Goodman who developed these two dogmas in the most philosophically robust manner, although the critical and art history practices preferred other versions of them. These are precisely the polemical targets that appear in the last writings of Wollheim's career when he presents his proposal as opposite to conditions (i) and (ii) as including indeed a much broader spectrum: "structuralism, post-structuralism, deconstruction, hermeneutics, what might be thought as 'mainstream' semiotics, and certain versions of cognitive science". (Wollheim 1993: 185).

It is legitimate to place, following Wollheim, under the umbrella-term "semiotic theories" a whole spectrum of conceptions, which include the structuralist and post-structuralist theories based on Saussure and Barthes propounded by Yves-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss (perhaps the most influential), and those inspired by Peirce, such as Eco's semiotics and Goodman's theory of symbols[10]. Among these, Goodman's proposal possibly stands out by virtue of its ability to individuate, for each art, the typical syntactic and semantic peculiar traits, which is also what allows distinguishing them from the symbolic system of language. In this sense, the confrontation with Goodman simply becomes the most advanced front of Wollheim's battle against the identification art-language, for his true focus is actually the structuralist and post-structuralist version of this identification (in some of its specific incarnations).

It is therefore useful to restrict the whole debate to a single art form, closer to Wollheim's main interests: painting. Certainly, Wollheim addressed the theme also in more general terms, as he masterfully did in *Art and its objects*, where the analogy between art and

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[10] Goodman too, in a manner that is surprisingly similar to his French colleagues, asserts that "any notion of a reality consisting of objects and events and kinds established independently of discourse and unaffected by how they are described or otherwise presented must give way to the recognition that these, too, are parts of the story" (Goodman 1984: 67, quoted in Robinson 2013: 179).

form of life[11] is explored in its explanatory potentials and varied ramifications (not just the relation art-language, but also the connected analogy between art and information theory/code, §§45-58). Similarities and differences are here investigated in depth to show that, ultimately, the analogy fails to hold (also in the case of those arts that employ verbal language, since it is true that "we can't understand the poem unless we understand the constituent words and sentences", but it still remains – as Wollheim maintains – that "understanding what is to understand language could still leave us totally in the dark about what is to understand poetry", see also Wollheim 2015: §§57-8). *Painting as an art* (Wollheim 1987) also contains precise polemical references to its rival theories: however, within this enormously ambitious and erudite work, a true masterpiece in which Wolllheim's philosophy of art interweaves with his philosophy of mind, action theory and ontology, the explicit goal is that of outlining a positive definition/description of the experience of painting.

It seems more fruitful, therefore, to turn to a group of "minor" contributions that were explicitly devoted to this topic: *Pictures and language*, *On formalism and pictorial organization* and *On the assimilation of pictorial art to language*. A couple of preliminary remarks are on order: firstly, it is worth noting that none of these three essays was targeted to an audience of philosophers, but rather of art critics and art historians. Wollheim used to write regularly for a number of journals and cultural inserts of different reviews – which partly accounts for the fragmentary reception of his work already mentioned. Not only were his interests extremely broad and manifold, aimed at the most diverse subjects (from the theory of democracy to the structure of the primary unconscious process); his investigations were also haphazardly disseminated in a number of publications that did not have a wide circulation and were collected in a single volume only at a later stage, roughly at intervals of twenty years (if it even happened, as it was the case for *Pictures and language*)[12].

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[11] See Wollheim 2015: 69: "Art is, in Wittgenstein's sense, a form of life". See again Matteucci 2013.

[12] *Pictures and language* appeared in 1989 on "Art Issue" and is now collected in Wollheim 1993, to which page numbering I refer in what follows; *On formalism and pictorial organization* (*Formalism*) was originally delivered at a conference at the Fondació Antoni Tàpies on September 29, 1994 and published in 1995; a new revised edition is now in Wollheim 2001; *On the assimilation of pictorial art to*

Secondly, this is certainly not the appropriate context to attempt a survey of the vicissitudes of the problem of *iconicity* (both internal and external to semiotics), nor to provide an assessment of the complex relationships between aesthetics and semiotics[13] – even if the latter were confined within the boundaries of Wollheim's thought. In fact, ever since *Art and its objects*, Wollheim examines iconicity, which he ultimately analyses in terms of an "ever-increasing or deepening attention" to the multiple aspects of the examined sign. More specifically, he claims to have "no particular dispute" with those scholars that give citizenship to iconic signs (*à la* Peirce), but to be in disagreement "with those radical semioticians, who hold that all signs, including pictures, are conventional" (Wollheim 1987: 361). However, he also acknowledges his debt to the art historian Meyer Schapiro and to his much-quoted article *On some problems in the semiotics of visual art. Field and vehicle in image-signs* (1969), which is often considered one of the most important antecedents of the Greimasian structural-generative approach to visual arts[14]. In what follows, my primary aim is rather that of sketching a positive contour of Wollheim's philosophy of art and its assumptions, while remaining faithful both to the tradition he belongs to (i.e. analytic philosophy) and to his peculiar style of philosophy.

3. *Wollheim's philosophy of language: with Davidson or against Davidson?*

The three essays elaborate the same arguments (in some cases, *literally*), but *Assimilation*, the last one in chronological order and the least known, is particularly noteworthy for the detailed account of the relationship art-language[15].

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language 1996 (*Assimilation*) is a contribution to a multidisciplinary seminar on the status of image, which reprises certain key points from earlier contributions.

[13] This was a lively debate until the 1980's, when it started to taper off; for an accurate overview, see Calabrese 1985.

[14] It remains to be seen to which extent such a derivation is legitimate, since Schapiro seems to resist the idea of reducing completely the artwork's subject to an intracultural and intersemiotic affair.

[15] In what follows, I stick to the line of argument developed in *Assimilation*, and refer to the other two works only when more explicit or complete on the same points.

In the opening section, Wollheim notes that, from the half of the Twentieth century onward, the understanding of language has made an impressive leap forward; he complains, however, that these findings have been too often associated with phenomena that have *prima facie* very little to do with language, namely mythology, the unconscious, family ties, fashion, music, advertisements, comics, architecture and, indeed, painting. Wollheim further claims that his examination of art and language does not amount to an assessment of the parallels between the two activities – the linguistic and the artistic[16] – but between their two products: on the one hand paintings, etchings, drawings; on the other, whatever is considered a product of the linguistic dimension.

We find here the first difficulty: should the painting be assimilated to a sentence, or to some of its parts? In the latter case, should it be assimilated to the subject or to the predicate? The first alternative, that is, assimilating it to a sentence, seems more promising, since, as Frege ("to his great credit") pointed out, neither a subject ("noun phrase") nor a predicate ("verb phrase"), mean anything if taken by themselves. The reference here is to the fundamental and well known "context principle" or "Frege principle": "it is only in the context of a proposition that words have any meaning" (Frege 1953: §62). We should remind that elsewhere, Wollheim explicitly declares his programme to belong in the Fregean tradition; he claims to have been "influenced by an idea that I take to be ultimately traceable to Frege. The idea is that […] we cannot separate the issue of what it is for something to have meaning from the issue of what it is that has meaning. An account of meaning will have something to say about both issues" (1991: 40)[17]. Moreover, if we choose to associate a painting with a part of the statement, there seems to be no available criterion to decide between subject and predicate. For example, it is not clear if the outstanding portrait of Madame Moitessier by Ingres should be paired to the subject "the woman sitting with a flowery dress" or the predicate "it is a woman sitting with a flowery dress"; in other words, it is impossible to decide whether the painting individu-

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[16] Their asymmetries are already outlined in in *Art and its objects*, §55, and in *The art lesson*, in Wollheim 1974: 130-51.

[17] Frege's notion of meaning is carefully explored by Eva Picardi in many of her work; see in particular Picardi 1981, 2010.

ates something about which it has nothing to say, or whether it does say something, though we cannot know about who or about what.

Such indeterminacy, on the other hand, would apply also if we were to compare a painting with a sentence, since there is no criterion that allows deciding which one among sentences with the same truth-value is the correct counterpart of the painting (e.g. "the woman who is sitting wears a flowery dress" or "there is at least one person who is sitting and wears a flowery dress" or many others). Wollheim concludes that there is something "inherently unstructured" (Wollheim 1996: 27) in what pictorial representations say, which explains the difficulty in choosing one of these sentences as appropriate by virtue of its possessing the appropriate structure.

How is it possible, therefore, to liken the way paintings acquire meaning to the way sentences do? Wollheim exhorts to narrow the scope and focus exclusively on the representational meaning (Wollheim 1996: 29). It should be reminded that this condition, in Wollheim's view, obtains not only in the case of "ordinary" representational paintings but whenever it is possible to see something tridimensional on a bidimensional surface, as it happens in much abstract art (Wollheim 1987: 62).

Such a restriction is of the outmost importance since the way a painting acquires the meaning it has depends, for a crucial part, on the fact that the subject represented can be *seen in* the pictorial surface. Such a visual report of the depiction does not pertain to anything but ordinary perceptual experience, that is, precisely what is given to common sense.

It is equally true, however, as Goodman maintains, that common sense is subject to oscillations, has blurry contours and is contradictory: as a matter of fact, it has been recently argued that artistic and linguistic meaning may be assimilated precisely on the basis of a "common sense intuition" (Bermejo Salar 2013: 103-5). In the end, it is entirely natural, both for any art criticism and for the man on the street, to speak of the meaning of artworks as the result of an interpretation, something that has a certain counterpart in daily linguistic practice. Wollheim is well aware of this, and it is from here that the analysis of common sense, that is, an accurate examination of these two intuitions, starts off.

Wollheim insists in the first place on the eminently perceptual character of the pictorial experience, against the idea – endorsed by Goodman, but common to much of the "radical semiotics" character-

izing György Kepes 1946, Louis Marin 1971, Eco's *Treatise* 1976, Krauss 1981, 1985 and 1992 – that may be roughly encapsulated in slogans like "almost anything may stand for almost anything else" in the sense that "almost any picture may represent almost anything" (Goodman 1968: 5, 38). Wollheim underlines that the relationship between a horse and the word "horse" is entirely arbitrary – "a point famously emphasized by Saussure" – so as to stress that the matter stands differently when it comes to the relationship between the picture of a horse and its equine counterpart: the non-arbitrariness of the latter seems "quite indisputable", regardless of the countless varieties of styles and methods of projection the representational endeavour allows. Actually, Wollheim rehearses in *Assimilation* a criticism to Goodman at the time of the first review (now in Wollheim 1974: 290-314): treating paintings with null denotation as "indivisible one-place predicates, or class terms" entails that, for instance, in a "horse-representing picture" the phoneme "horse" appears exclusively as a syllable, and not as a constitutive part endowed with meaning, which in turn entails the highly counterintuitive idea that "when we recognize something as a horse-representing picture, we do not, perhaps we cannot see a horse in the painting" (Wollheim 1996: 31). A final consideration stressed by Wollheim concerns the notion of competence: recognizing the representation of a horse, allows those who know how cats, dogs or elephants look to recognise their images, and those who do not know to learn through them, since "*a picture-book is not only a mirror of, it is also a guide to, the world*" (Wollheim 1974: 298, emphasis mine).

Such a phenomenon – "transfer" in Wollheim's phrase (1987: 77, 1996: 187)[18] – certainly does not occur in language: knowing that the French word *cheval* means horse, and knowing how cats, dogs or elephants look, does not allow understanding the words *chat, chien, éléphant* upon hearing them. In Wollheim's view, when we assign a representational meaning to a picture, we are typically facing a one-step process – in which we use our eyes to see how the pictorial surface is painted and also to see what is represented; when we grasp a linguistic meaning, by contrast, we typically go through a two-steps process – in which we use eyes or ears to grasp the written or verbal state-

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[18] The phenomenon was first noted by Schier 1986, chap. III; see also Lopes 1996: 70-4, Voltolini 2015: 207-8. Thanks to Alberto Voltolini for a clarifying exchange on this subject.

ment and then refer to our knowledge of language (if we possess it) to understand what was written or said.

Wollheim deems such findings conclusive and "fatal to the semiological view", though he admits that one may be sceptical of purely epistemological arguments and thus turns to elucidating and contrasting the nature of pictorial and linguistic meaning. "The fundamental fact – he claims (Wollheim 1996: 35) – about linguistic meaning is that it rests upon a certain division of labour. Part of the work is done by syntax, which tells us which strings of linguistic units are well-formed. The rest is then done by semantics, which assigns meaning to well-formed strings". Wollheim goes on to stress the conventional nature of language, and the inherently stratified and highly hierarchical character of rules of language, coming to the following claim: "it is the presence within language of this hierarchy of rules that ensures that linguistic meaning is essentially combinatory, and it is the combinatory nature of linguistic meaning that permits us to learn a language, and places the grasp of an infinite number of sentences within the capacity of a finite mind" (Wollheim 1989: 186).

The picture of language and linguistic competence that emerges from this account has been charged with being entirely regulative and (strictly) combinatory, almost a mathematical exercise that leaves no room for "any innovation, invention, creativity or imagination in our usage of language" (Bermejo Salar 2013: 106) that are in fact so frequent in our interpretation of others, and even in the possible *experience* of meaning – indeed, it is precisely this experiential trait that would allow likening language and art while preserving their peculiarities. The aim of this critique is thus to counter this too restrictive and misleading conception of language, and accordingly to harmonise the demands of aesthetic experiences with a more open and flexible understanding of language. In doing so, reference is made not only to the notion of "interpretation" and to the "principle of charity" developed by Donald Davidson, but also to the general anti-conventional bent of his philosophy of language. In *Moods and performances*, for example, the conventional aspect of linguistic acts is recognized, yet considered by itself insufficient to turn an utterance at the indicative mode into an assertion, or an imperative into a command; in *Communication and convention* and *What metaphors mean*, Davidson "rejects the idea that it is part of the essence of language to be governed by rules of meaning and by conventions of various kind, to which speakers feel bound in their behavior" (Picardi

1994: 25), and gets (more recently) to the so-called *no-language thesis*, which he provocatively (and notoriously) expresses as follows: "there is no such a thing as a language, not if a language is anything like what many philosophers and linguists have supposed" (Davidson 2005: 107). In this perspective, Wollheim (the portrait previously done of his thought, at least) would undoubtedly feature among the philosophers critically mentioned by Davidson. Yet, it remains to be seen how a "Wittgenstein scholar", who certainly did not neglect nor ignore the central and the so-called "second" part of the *Investigations* (as it is clear since the first edition of *Art and its objects*), may hold such a mechanical view of the rules of language, and one that is so deprived of the experience of meaning.

Indeed, thinking of Wollheim's relationship to Davidson in terms of contraposition or ignorance is entirely off the mark, for a number of reasons. In the first place, because Davidson is explicitly mentioned in the line that follows the conclusion of the preceding quote from *Pictures and language* (indeed it is precisely this mention that corroborates Wollheim's line of argument): "if sentences had to be mastered like words, each time from scratch, language would lie outside our reach" (Wollheim 1989: 186).

The explicit reference in the corresponding note is to *Theory of meaning and learnable languages*, in which Davidson rejects "the building-block theory of language learning" as an obsolete ("dusty") legacy of the empiricist epistemology, to make way for the idea of "a learnable language [with] a finite number of semantical primitives", that is, of semantic units that cannot be reduced to others – a theory that accounts for the fact that "an infinite aptitude can be encompassed by finite accomplishments" (Davidson 1984: 7-8)[19]. It is noteworthy that, in his review of *Languages of art*, Wollheim advanced this line of criticism against Goodman even before using it against the theories that generically liken art to language. In that context, Wollheim used Davidson to reinforce and make explicit his objections against Goodman's thesis of the unbreakability of predicates, noting how "by permitting what is in fact the introduction of an infinite number of prime locutions into the language the thesis offends against the basic requirement of teachability" (Wollheim 1974: 299). It is perhaps in response to these remarks, that Goodman later (1972:

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[19] See also *Truth and meaning*, pp. 17-36. For an introduction to Davidson's programme, see Picardi 1992b.

122-3) abandoned the idea of an unbreakable predicate, keeping only the notion of one-place predicate, meaning that, even for a "radical" symbol theorist, pictorial representations depict something only if this "something" can be recognised in them (see Lopes 1996: 44, 68-70, Marchetti 2005: 50). Indeed, in his criticism of the building-block theory Davidson explicitly claims that "for example, a child learns the general terms 'cat', 'camel', 'mastodon', and 'unicorn' in what may be, to all telling, a uniform way (*perhaps by paging through a picture book*), though the child's relation to the extensions of these terms altogether different" (Davidson 1984: 4, emphasis mine), an idea which was perhaps at the root of the criticism we saw earlier. The conception of language endorsed by Davidson in the first part of his career thus emerges as Wollheim's main weapon against Goodman's approach, that is, the most robust version of the view that art is like language.

Now, even if we take for granted that conventions and rules play an inessential role in communicating meanings – i.e. the *no-language thesis* (which is, however, disputable, since it seems reasonable to keep separate "the issue of understanding what a sentence says […] from that of understanding the content of the specific belief which a speaker may want to convey to a specific hearer by uttering it under certain circumstances" (Picardi 1997: 119-20)[20] – and even if we take for granted that "later" Davidson's results *might* undermine the ("early" Davidsonian) considerations pointed out by Wollheim, it would still be reasonable to ask what Wollheim does of the crucial notion of Davidson's later programme: "the intention to be taken to mean what one wants to be taken to mean" (Davidson 2005: 120). It comes as no surprise that the notion of "intention" plays an essential role in Wollheim's explanation of pictorial meaning, namely, by functioning as the other fundamental part in such an explanation (the first being that of having a visual experience of the painting – in which one can in effect see a horse, as opposed to read it or decode it from the marks on the painting).

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[20] Clearly, such a discrepancy becomes even more evident in special linguistic domains, such as the legal one, or the literary one, which is more relevant to our case. Many pieces by Picardi are critically dedicated to the philosophy of Davidson: see Picardi 1989, 1993 among others. On the *no-language thesis*, see the fundamental essays by Dummett and Hacking, collected in Lepore 1986.

Pictures and language goes back to the definition advanced earlier (Wollheim 1989: 19), according to which it is the artist's intentions (or rather, the intentions the artist was capable of actually "fulfilling") that establish the criterion of what can be seen in the painting: in other words, the parameter of correctness, against which one can measure what is legitimate or not legitimate to see in the artwork, derives from "the desires, beliefs, whishes, phantasies of the artist in so far as these guided the artist's hand and are retrievable from the work" (Wollheim 1989: 189). While Wollheim does not find the term "intention" entirely adequate, he owes much of the plausibility of this conception to his Department colleague. Davidson's findings in the field of action theory show indeed that "the reasons for which an action is performed may be said to be its causes, and that employing teleological notions to describe behaviour is not in antithesis with, or an alternative to, employing causal notion" as summed up by Picardi (1992c: 19) and, as Wollheim notes (1993: 94), "the significance of this now obvious-seeming point is due to the work of Donald Davidson". It is worth recalling here that, contrary to ordinary desires and beliefs, "the mental states that are central in psychoanalytic explanations […] are governed by specific laws (which in turn respond to the laws concerning impulses and instinctual needs) and are considered from the point of view of a conception of mental activity that acts oblivious to the 'reality principle'" (Pagnini 2003: 268). In this theoretical framework, therefore, unconscious motives are accepted and (*pace* Wittgenstein) treated as *both* reasons *and* causes: one can therefore have a reason – an efficient reason, if described from the causal point of view – to act in a certain way, without this reason having to be connected with the overall system of ideas, beliefs, wishes of the artist/agent in a logically appropriate manner – a fact of great significance in Wollheim's aesthetics (and philosophy in general) imbued of psychoanalysis.

4. *(Partial) conclusion*

The point that Wollheim develops in the writings here examined (but that dates back to the first review of Goodman 1968) is the idea that the natural competence with pictures (which is one the main *explicanda* for those that reject any kind of perceptual correlations) must, *sub specie semiotica*, find a justification in something analogous, that

is, something structured and recursive, a sort of *semantic-pictorial primitive*. Wollheim makes it explicit through a slogan ("Semantics rests on syntax") encapsulating the compositional and functional principles of linguistic meaning, which – in his view – do not find a counterpart in the pictorial-artistic sphere. This aspect too certainly may be ascribed to the Fregean legacy previously underlined since, in point of fact, Frege "theorises and prescribes the harmony between syntax and semantics […]. The guiding principle of Frege's semantics (1893) is that semantic interpretation, that is, the pairing of extra-linguistic entities to signs, must go hand in hand with the syntactic construction of statements, so that, given a complex statement, its semantic interpretation is a function of the semantic value of its components" (Picardi 1992a: 118-9). If linguistic meaning presupposes that a sentence should be analysed into components and structures, how could this apply to something (like the Ingres' painting), that is so radically unstructured from the syntactic point of view, so dependent on perception and on the perspective from which the artwork is seen – something, in other words, that is so unlike language? This – purely philosophical and "negative" – line of argument is the lesson Wollheim has chiefly learnt from Davidson, whose influence on Wollheim (very far, then, from ignorance or contraposition) is equal, or perhaps even superior, to that exercised by Wittgenstein. Moreover, Davidson's guiding principle of inquiry (1984: 199, see Berto, Plebani 2015: 35), as it is famously stated – i.e. "one way of pursuing metaphysics is therefore to study the general structure of our language" since "in sharing a language […] we share a picture of the world that must, in its large features, be true" –, seems definitively consonant to the descriptive analysis, corroborating thus common sense intuitions, favored by Wollheim. However, there are some deeper, more "positive", reasons for Wollheim to reject the assimilation of art to language and communication which will be object of a future examination (Maistrello 2018).

The point *here* is not that much (or not only) whether language actually functions in the way Wollheim describes; the point is that *this* is the way the upholders of the semiotic view must assume in order to be consistent with their own premises. And with Davidson (1984: 8-9), we might put it as follows: for something to be a language, it must be learnable; and for something to be a learnable language, certain "empirical assumptions" must be respected: "for example, that we do not at some point suddenly acquire an ability to in-

tuit the meanings of sentences on no rule at all; that each new item of vocabulary, or new grammatical rule, takes some finite time to be learned; that man is mortal".

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