

PICTURE THIS!  
WORDS VERSUS IMAGES IN WITTENSTEIN'S *NACHLASS*

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*Summary*

According to received opinion Ludwig Wittgenstein's involvement with pictures was largely confined to the "picture theory" of the *Tractatus*. Kristóf Nyíri, in a series of articles, has considerably increased our awareness of the scope and subtlety of Wittgenstein's treatment of this issue. Stepping outside the Platonist tradition and casting doubt upon writing's privileged place in our intellectual history, Nyíri's Wittgenstein can be seen as turning to pictorial representation as an alternative to literal culture. Nyíri has raised a point of utmost importance. A close inspection of the context of the Wittgenstein quote, supplemented by cross-references to earlier stages of the argument, will serve to focus upon the methodological importance of the issue under consideration. However, in spite of the appeal of Nyíri's reading, it has to be set into balance. According to my understanding of the relevant remarks they do not support a pronounced opposition between verbal and pictorial representation.

I.

According to received opinion Ludwig Wittgenstein's involvement with pictures was largely confined to the "picture theory" of the *Tractatus*, even though it is recognized that there is a recurring argument against "inner pictures" in his later philosophy. Kristóf Nyíri, in a series of articles, has considerably increased our awareness of the scope and subtlety of Wittgenstein's treatment of this issue. Stepping outside the Platonist tradition and casting doubt upon writing's privileged place in our intellectual history, Nyíri's Wittgenstein can be seen as turning to pictorial representation as an alternative to literal culture. (Nyíri, 2001a, 2001b, 2003) Nyíri repeatedly draws attention to a remark that first appears in MS 114, p.228, PhG IX, 114 (1932): "Denn das Bild sollte doch die direktere

Sprache sein.” This remark, challenging verbalization as a prerequisite to understanding, deviates significantly from the Tractarian view. Sentential expressions, in order to carry information, have to *depict* the world. This much is standard *Tractatus* doctrine. But Wittgenstein seems to be proposing a more fundamental role for pictures here.

How can we make sense of this? MS 114 is among the material underlying Rush Rhees’ edition of *Philosophical Grammar* and, as Nyíri correctly points out, Wittgenstein’s views on pictures according to the *Nachlass* evidence remain inconclusive. Wittgenstein, in particular, seems to switch between the advocacy of pictures as carriers of immediate knowledge and a more traditional approach:

Pictures, or at least an important class of pictures, depend on *words* to designate univocally”. (Nyíri, 2001b)

Nyíri has raised a point of utmost importance. A close inspection of the context of the Wittgenstein quote, supplemented by cross-references to earlier stages of the argument, will serve to focus upon the methodological importance of the issue under consideration. Pictures are crucial to an understanding of Wittgenstein’s philosophy early and late. Nyíri adds a strong claim:

And he attempted to overcome the barriers of verbal language by working towards a philosophy of pictures.” (Nyíri, 2001b)

I recognize the appeal of this reading, but want to set it into balance. According to my understanding of the relevant remarks they do not support such pronounced an opposition between verbal and pictorial representation. Rather than trying to “overcome barriers” Wittgenstein ended up with a view that closely parallels visual and verbal modes of knowledge. He was not intent to address the concerns of multimedia society. I proceed in first discussing the MS 114 quote and — in a second step — relate it to a series of remarks in MS 111. Wittgenstein’s considerations establish, as the final section will show, a bridge directly linking the *Tractatus* to the *Philosophical Investigations*.

## II.

“Denn das Bild sollte doch eine direktere Sprache sein.” Wittgenstein is suggesting that articulating sentences is not the most immediate relationship towards the environment. “Für die Realität ist es doch ein Umweg, sich über die Sprache zu erklären.” (MS 114, p.228; PhG IX, 114) Wittgenstein is discussing the example of a picture showing two men drinking wine in a tavern.<sup>1</sup> He does not deny that we may utter an appropriate description when dealing with such a picture. The crucial question, however, is this: “Aber wie erklärt es sich in diesen Worten?” (*loc.cit.*) How does a picture manage to convey its meaning so that we can describe its content in a suitable way? This is a highly complicated matter which Wittgenstein (inconclusively) considers in some detail in the following pages of his manuscript. The issue resolves around his (tentative) claim: “Das Bild sagt mir also sich selbst.” (MS 115, p.1; PhG IX, 115) The picture tells me itself. I cannot discuss this matter in the present context,<sup>2</sup> and would rather like to turn attention to the remarks *preceding* the question just raised. Interestingly, Wittgenstein is (1932) reappraising his Tractarian stance on pictures by revising a sequence of earlier remarks, initially put down in MS 111, p. 9ff (1931). Those remarks, at first glance, do not seem particularly noticeable among the paragraphs recording the results of Wittgenstein’s daily labor. Yet, there is something very special to the context of MS 111. The remarks dated from 8.6.1931 to 15.6.1931 contain an argument linking Wittgenstein’s auto-criticism of the early *Abbildtheorie* to the initial pages of the *Philosophical Investigations*. It is an impressive proof of the unity of Wittgenstein’s thought, turning on the treatment of pictures in cognitive pursuits.

I’ll work my way back to this juncture starting with the setting in MS 114. Wittgenstein’s example, two men drinking wine in a tavern,

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<sup>1</sup> There is an amusing miss-transcription in the *Bergen Electronic Edition* here. Wittgenstein’s *Dorfschenke* is rendered as *Dorfschule*. Rush Rhees gets the word right, but spoils the quote by inserting a wrong preposition: “dieses Bild stellt Leute *auf* einer Dorfschenke dar”. (PhG IX, 114)

<sup>2</sup> I am writing a commentary on Wittgenstein’s MS 115, which starts dealing with precisely this question. This text is available within the framework of APE (Assistant for Philological Explorations), developed by Dieter Köhler. For further information see <http://wittgenstein.philo.at>.

is introduced with a particular purpose. It is stipulated to be a specific *kind* of picture, namely a *genre* piece. One might be tempted to consider this a minor details, but this would miss the crucial point, which is, in fact, of remarkable systematic importance, revealing — as I will show — the insufficiency of the *Tractatus* theory and hinting at the later Wittgenstein’s remedy. Remember, to get the hint, that the *Tractatus* did not take genre pictures (or any other non-literal modes of depiction) into account. The very idea of distinguishing between *types* of pictures is an elegant criticism of the earlier theory.

Wenn wir den Satz mit einem Bild vergleichen, so müssen wir bedenken, ob mit einem Porträt (einer historischen Darstellung), oder mit einem Genrebild. Und beide Vergleiche haben Sinn. (MS 114, p. 154; PhG IX, 114)

The picture of the tavern exemplifies the second option, whereas the first one is illustrated thus: “dieses Bild stellt die Krönung Napoleons dar”. (MS 114, p. 155; PhG IX, 114) An historical portrait (or a photograph) refers to some specific situation, whereas a genre piece lacks this kind of designation. It does not indicate particulars actually conjoined in some configuration. Pictures may work either way. The next step in reconstructing Wittgenstein’s 1932 revision of his *Tractatus* tenets is to examine the features underlying *both* types of depiction.

Thoughts are like pictures. Does this mean that pictures are essentially *corresponding* to something? “In der *Abhandlung* hatte ich so etwas gesagt wie: sie ist eine Übereinstimmung der Form. Das ist aber irreführend. —” (MS 114, p. 153) Mere isomorphism is insufficient to capture our understanding of pictures since this is a formal construction applicable to arbitrary sets of items:

Alles kann ein Bild von allem sein: wenn wir den Begriff des Bildes entsprechend ausdehnen. (*loc.cit.*)

We tend to respond to certain prominent traits of (common) pictures as if it were obvious that these particular traits constitute a distinct pictorial form. But this is jumping to conclusions. Such traits do not depict *per se*. They are in need of a method of projection which mere surface patterns lack. Now, according to the *Tractatus* a picture *includes* its projective relation (“die abbildende Beziehung”, *Tractatus*

2.1513). Wittgenstein likens this to feelers extended towards reality (*Tractatus* 2.1515). In 1932 he reaffirms that the general concept of projection implies some common denominator between its *relata* but he is more careful to distinguish a given determinate structure from its *actual use according to some pictorial projection*. A quick way to see the difference is to examine his comparison of a picture to a measuring rod. “Es ist wie ein Maßstab an die Wirklichkeit angelegt.” (*Tractatus* 2.1512) A superficial reading of this remark might suggest that we help ourselves to a standard of measurement by employing an artefact, e.g. a particular rod. (We certainly talk that way about measuring devices.) This reading is explicitly rejected by Wittgenstein in 1932. *We use* a measuring rod to determine an item’s length.

Wenn ich den Satz mit einem Maßstab verglichen habe, so habe ich, streng genommen, eine Längenangabe mit Hilfe eines Maßstabs als Beispiel für alle Sätze gebraucht. (MS 114, p.154; PhG IX, 113)”

There are many ways to use a wooden stick, even if one regards it as a measuring device. How does this insight affect the picture theory?

Wittgenstein’s doctrine of atomic propositions was built upon the suggestion that we could name ultimately simple things and depict their configuration. But we cannot, as it turns out, fix the state of affairs an image represents by just employing pictorial form. (Cf. Hrachovec, 1978) If there are alternative methods of projection, no sentence, taken in isolation, can be put forward as atomic proposition. It cannot determine its correlate in reality outside, as it were, a projective process. Now, this is precisely the point of Wittgenstein’s remarks on the different grammar of a historical likeness (or photograph) as against a genre picture. If the method of projection is a generic one the pictorial form *is not supposed* to pick out one particular situation. It represents, in Tractarian terms, an “Urbild”, i.e. some logical form which is not (yet) fully instantiated. (Cf. Hrachovec, 2000) Wittgenstein’s remark “Das Denken ist ganz dem Zeichnen von Bildern zu vergleichen.” (MS 114, 154; PhG IX, 113), several times quoted by Nyíri, has to be read against this background. Thinking, according to this suggestion, is putting together forms which do not *per se* fix reference. This is no shortcoming, but simply a grammatical observation. If one recognizes that the physical measuring rod does not auto-magically determine the custom of

measuring (of which it is a necessary feature), one can see that the reality depicted by an image cannot simply be read off its internal structure. It is obvious that Wittgenstein's discussion here is moving towards a theory of picture use. There is an interesting retrospective issue, though. How, precisely, were Tractarian pictures supposed to capture elementary facts? Can there be some projective method to achieve this aim? In order to clarify this point one has to turn to the context of MS 111, where Wittgenstein's example of a picture taken literally — i.e. Napoleon's coronation — first turns up.

### III.

The date is June 8th, 1931 and Wittgenstein is considering the difference (if any) between thoughts and pictures. His handle to get a grip onto the problem is the case of Napoleon's coronation depicted.<sup>3</sup> Wittgenstein poses the following question: Does an image like Napoleon's not, after all, lack some capacity a thought presumably possesses, namely an unequivocal relationship to some state of affairs?

Wenn das Bild die Krönung Napoleons darstellen soll, so müßte man das nicht darunter schreiben, wenn es in dem Bild enthalten wäre. (MS 111, p.9; WA 4, 7.1)

Wittgenstein tentatively assumes that (verbally articulated) thoughts are somehow "closer" to reality, but then objects: "Aber hier liegt ein Fehler" We are at the core of Nyíri's puzzlement concerning Wittgenstein's account of pictures. Nyíri clearly sympathizes with the notion of a picture being "the more direct language", yet he has to concede that numerous remarks in the *Nachlass* point into a different direction. To repeat: pictures seem to depend on words to designate. According to the Wittgenstein remark just quoted there is something wrong with this account. Nyíri will certainly be interested to learn more about this mistake. The short answer is that *neither words nor pictures* quite work as envisaged in the *Tractatus*. The intricate

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<sup>3</sup> Via TS 211 and TS 213 ("The Big Typescript") this motive is subsequently carried over to Wittgenstein's revision of TS 213 in MS 114 where we initially picked it up.

argument has to be reconstructed from a loosely associated series of remarks running through several pages of MS 111. Wittgenstein's associative discourse lacks explicit structure, but I will show that his discussion of thought versus pictures naturally leads towards (what was to become) the opening sequence of the *Philosophical Investigations*.

So, what is wrong in holding that pictures lack a certain determinacy available only to verbal articulation? Wittgenstein does not — in 1931 — distinguish (historically) accurate representations from genre pieces, but we can put the issue in those terms: How to distinguish an image showing the coronation of *some* king from this very image showing *Napoleon* taking part in the ritual? The picture, taken out of context, cannot help. (Remember the measuring rod.) Obviously, the picture's application has to be taken into account. At this point Wittgenstein seems to lose sight of the issue and sets up a surprising challenge to pictures in general, invoking a basic Tractarian intuition: "Das Charakteristische an der Sprache ist, daß alle Erklärungen zum voraus gegeben werden können." (MS 111, p.10, WA 4, 7.2) This is because Logic provides us with a regime to capture all possible content within the space of cognitively admissible possibility once and for all. Pictures are clearly unsuited to fulfil this requirement, even though Wittgenstein toys with the idea to regard a sequence of drawings as a language. Images cannot be joined by logical connectives and cannot be forced into closure as *Tractatus* 6 proposes for sentences. The result of this "digression" on part of Wittgenstein actually seems to strengthen the case for verbalism. Yet, we are but one step away from a momentous switch.

Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* is well known for his vision of Logic as a meta-epistemological force gluing together language and reality by determining admissible forms of depiction. Logic is operative in meaningful language which is articulated in sentences that are likened to pictures. Now, whereas only *verbal* units can be used to build the hermetic universe of admissible rationality, governed by judgments that follow truth-functional rules, there is an opposite end to this story. We have, in fact, already encountered the relevant motive. *Neither sentences nor pictures*, taken in isolation, are sufficient to determine their correlate states of affairs. Dealing with sentences we might be inclined to think that the logic of language provides the necessary link, quasi hooking an expression onto the world in naming and judgment. This view is certainly strongly suggested in the *Tractatus*.

But the later Wittgenstein is not persuaded by this and his point is precisely that (i) this link-up does not work for pictures and (ii) because of the pictorial nature of sentences it does not work for verbal expressions either.

Ideal language encompasses all possible explanations.

Das Charakteristische an der Sprache ist, daß alle Erklärungen von vornherein/zum voraus/ gegeben werden können. D.h. daß man sie alle mußte voraussehen können und keine erst ad hoc gegeben werden muß. (Und das ist es, was die Bildhaftigkeit auszumachen scheint.) (MS 111, p.10, WA 4, 7.3)

A presumed genre piece — on the contrary — might very well turn into an accurate description *ad hoc*, i.e. by its structural features being projected upon a definite state of affairs. Logic provides a categorical tool-set to undertake this projection (“name”, “concept”), but it *cannot* achieve the basic fit. This has to be (re)done in every single case. General logic does not encompass picture use. Wittgenstein has become aware of the fact that his picture theory lacks an account of how pictorial forms are actually projected onto the world. His argument is by no means clear-cut but here is an interim summary: People tend to assume that thoughts and sentences are *per se* directed towards their intentional correlates, whereas pictures seem to be less “direct”. Verbal language, comprising sentences and judgments seems to be prefixed onto a world, while pictures lack this conceptual feature. They have to be fitted *ad hoc*. We have now assembled the prerequisites to explain why Wittgenstein finds fault in those assumptions. Closer examination of pictures reveals a (largely) hidden side of the *Tractatus*. The whole edifice rests upon a barely acknowledged pragmatic scenario.

In Wittgenstein’s reassessment of the picture theory in 1931-32 Logic is no longer governing the *application* of syntactic tokens to semantic entities.

Denn, was ich sagte, kommt eigentlich darauf hinaus: daß jede Projektion, nach welcher Methode immer, etwas mit dem Projizierten gemeinsam haben muß. (MS 114, p.153, PhG IX, 113)

This idea is already present in MS 111

Oder soll ich sagen: Solange man das Bild mit nichts vergleicht, *kann* man es mit *Allem* vergleichen. (MS 111, p.11, WA 4, 7.6)

Clearly, the grammar of literal depiction has to include a sensitivity to particular situations. “Das hängt mit dem Problem von *hier* und *jetzt* zusammen.” (MS 111, p.11, WA 4, 7.7) Names and predicates (and their semantic *relata*) depend upon the employment of certain syntactic givens within the framework of some projection. And Wittgenstein is quite clear about the tension between the *ad hoc* element introduced by indexicals and his postulate of logical ubiquity:

In gewissem Sinn ist die Bedeutung der Wörter ‘hier’, ‘jetzt’ (etc) die einzige, die ich nicht von vornherein festlegen kann. (MS 111, p. 11, WA 4, 8.1)

The use of pictorial forms is irreducibly sensitive to context and this sensitivity is essential in determining what it is we think and speak *about*. We have, finally, arrived at the source of the mistaken impression of an “inferiority” of pictures. Proceeding top down it seemed that verbal expressions have no need for any additional projective machinery, since Logic takes care of language-world-contact. But if one looks at the issue from bottom up it becomes obvious that correspondence according to the *Tractatus* model can only work if verbal and/or pictorial structures are put to use in single cases. The difference between a man in a king’s gown and Napoleon is how a certain semiotic input is employed *in addition* to its pictorial *or verbal* features. Words on their own do not provide what pictures lack. What seemed to be a deficit of pictures turns out to be a foundational problem of Tractarian semantics. This concludes the reconstruction of a Wittgensteinian argument in line with Nyíri’s intuitions. There are some open ends, though. Wittgenstein’s ensuing remarks in MS 111 impressively demonstrate how crucial this problem is to his philosophy in general. And there is a flip side. It looks like we have just suspended one of the main reasons to distinguish verbal and pictorial means of communication and this does not square well with Nyíri’s tendency to paint Wittgenstein as an, albeit hesitant, pictorialist.

## IV.

I have quoted Wittgenstein to the effect that indexicals are unique among verbal expressions insofar as their meaning cannot be fixed in advance. But this is only the beginning of a more extensive argument. Wittgenstein qualifies his claim by adding:

Die Bedeutung *ist* festzulegen und festgelegt, wenn die Regeln bezüglich dieser Worte festgelegt sind, und das kann geschehen, ehe sie in einem bestimmten Fall angewandt werden; [...] (MS 111, p 12, WA 4, 8.1)

The pendulum swings back. We have observed Wittgenstein's move towards the *ad hoc* constitution of meaning which is systematically linked to his analysis of the projective method. He now turns back to his initial demand for language to be semantically determinate *a priori*. His discussion in MS 111 deviates from the *Tractatus* doctrine by explicitly acknowledging the contingency of the employment of language — but he is still holding on to his exacting ideal of logical closure before any facts are taken into account. It is not obvious how he is going to resolve this tension. But notice: Wittgenstein comes up with one of the most important maxims of his later philosophy at this very point.

So-called “original contexts” are often charged with surplus (ideological) importance and it is important to remember that many of Wittgenstein's *Nachlass*-remarks are transformed by re-contextualization again and again. Yet, it seems difficult *not* to put considerable emphasis on the precise location at which the slogan “meaning is use” makes his first appearance. “Die Bedeutung eines Wortes verstehen, heißt, seinen Gebrauch kennen, verstehen.” (MS 111, p. 12, WA 4, 8.3). This remark is echoed in MS 114, p.25:

Das Verständnis der Sprache — quasi des Spiels — scheint wie ein Hintergrund, auf dem der einzelne Satz erst Bedeutung gewinnt. Wenn “Die Bedeutung eines Wortes verstehen” heißt, die Möglichkeiten seiner grammatischen Anwendung kennen [...]

The canonical form of this note is to be found in *Philosophical Investigations* § 43: “Die Bedeutung eines Wortes ist sein Gebrauch in der Sprache.” Wittgenstein's philosophical style is austere and he does

often not care to spell out how adjacent remarks are discursively connected. In view of the prominence of the remark under consideration it seems legitimate to attempt a step-to-step construction of the underlying rationale. We have *a priori* Logic to start with, challenged by the insight into *ad hoc* application of syntactic items. How is this tension to be reconciled? The crucial concept is *language games*. Words are meaningful insofar as they are embedded within linguistic practice. One prominent dilemma of Tractarian thinking resolves directly into this notion introduced at the beginning of the *Investigations*.

Here is how the shift from quasi-transcendental Logic towards language games answers the particular problem we have been discussing. The *a priori* demand is covered by a game's rules, which have (in principle) to be set out independently of a game's instances. Yet, such rules are, by a feedback mechanism, linked to the game's actually being played. Wittgenstein's views on rule following replace the earlier tension between Logic and contingency. He started off with a doctrine of the pictorial nature of thought which included a correspondence theory of truth. Now we can see that the Tractarian claim, resting on a traditional notion of Logic, is just one of numerous possible constraints we might impose upon a language game. Wittgenstein's emphasis switches from the patterns of isomorphism towards semiotic contexts of expressive use. His suggestions in MS 111 contain what was to become the initial thrust of the *Investigations*. "Verbindung von Wort und Sache durch die Erklärung [das Lehren der Sprache] hergestellt" he notes on June 14th, 1931 (MS 111, p. 13, WA 4, 8.7). This day's last entry reads: "Augustinus über das Lernen der Sprache." And June 15th, 1931 continues with the very first extended discussion of language learning according to Augustinus.

Diese Auffassung des Fundaments der Sprache ist offenbar äquivalent mit der, die die Erklärungsform 'das ist [...]' als fundamental auffaßt. (MS 111, p. 16, WA 4, 10.1)

The initial dependence on logical form is revealed as the consequence of an impoverished approach to language as Wittgenstein rejects his own former theory under the guise of a quote from the medieval philosopher.

In an important sense this is the demise of Wittgensteinian picture theory as early as 1931. It is, of course, true that Wittgenstein remained interested in the working of pictures and that he kept exploring the issues of representation mediated by images in his notes on the philosophy of psychology. Nyíri has helpfully put together the evidence from the *Nachlass*. Yet, with the change from language-world-correspondence (by means of pictorial form) to language games the very distinction on which Nyíri's explorations are built seem to rest on shaky grounds. Here is Nyíri's description of the orthodoxy:

The later Wittgenstein is interpreted as holding a *use theory of pictures*, according to which pictures themselves do not carry any meaning; they acquire meaning by being put to specific uses and by being applied in specific contexts. Those uses and contexts are defined by *language*; pictures are subservient to words [...] (Nyíri, 2001b)

As we have seen, this view is correct as far as the *ad hoc* character of pictorial projection is concerned, but incorrect in inferring a subservience of pictures. The problem of projection is perfectly general: *any* representation presupposes the employment of some tokens within a practice guided by some interests. The distinction between words and images does not carry any weight here. Wittgenstein's *Nachlass* should not be scrutinized to find out his possible position in the imagery debate or whether he takes sides pro or contra literal (versus pictorial) meaning. The material *does* contain quite a number of helpful remarks on pictures and Nyíri is perfectly right in drawing our attention to Wittgenstein's persistent interest in this subject. But Nyíri over-plays his hand with claims like "Written language as a source of philosophical confusion was Wittgenstein's real foe." (Nyíri, 2001b) The main line to be drawn is not between words and pictures, but between language games (encompassing a whole number of possible signifying features). One of Wittgenstein's most famous advices is, after all, both a piece of criticism of language and an iconoclastic intervention: "Ein Bild hielt uns gefangen. Und heraus konnten wir nicht, denn es lag in unserer Sprache". (PI 115).

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