

Jan Gerrit Schuurman, visiting scientist Max Planck Institute for Human Development in Berlin and artist

jgs@mpib-berlin.mpg.de

Herbert Simon (1971) famously stated that solving a problem simply means finding a transparent representation such that a solution becomes obvious. In 17th century Dutch painting two genres peaked that became so thought-provoking that to this day they draw our attention not merely art historically, but because they concern the representation and perception of depth per se. The two genres are the still life and the trompe l'oeil. The way the vision of the onlooker is roused remains somewhat puzzling to this day. What representational strategies did the Dutch masters use to make recipients so captivated by the realism of the paintings?

In a remarkable book Hanneke Grootenboer (2005) investigates the craft of the 17th century painters and how they achieved realism in the eye of the recipient. She employs *close reading* as the means to disclose the representational techniques that painters such as Claesz., Heda, Peeters, Gijsbrechts and others used to such effect. Grootenboer reads the paintings as theories of visuality and of representation. She does not approach representation as (part of) a search problem.

I will attempt to align Grootenboer's *close reading* approach with a *heuristic* approach to representation and seeing depth in a painting. The account will be followed by the heuristic approach to understanding fact boxes and the close reading of fact boxes in the style of Grootenboer. Fact boxes are a recent invention. Fact Boxes communicate the best available evidence about a specific topic in an easily understandable manner. The most important pros and cons are contrasted with each other in a table, thus allowing people with no medical or statistical background to make competent decisions. My conceptual case study interrogates the representational strategies for representing pictorial depth and representational strategies for representing statistical facts, and aims to elucidate unexpected consequences for the recipients. Subsequently I will discuss the beginnings of the theoretical integration that is achieved. Furthermore I will elaborate on the consequences for what the Guardian journalist Mark Thompson recently called the "crisis of public language", in which fact free communication dominates the political discourse.

Simon is also noted for making the following statement (1971): “An artifact can be thought of as a meeting point—an “interface” in today’s terms—between an “inner” environment, the substance and organization of the artifact itself, and an “outer” environment, the surroundings in which it operates. If the inner environment is appropriate to the outer environment, or vice versa, the artifact will serve its intended purpose.” In the light of our analysis and theory integration we will formulate a number of suggestions regarding the design of meeting points for communicating facts in the public sphere. The (hypothetical) upshot of the account is that particular transparent and correct representational forms fail to achieve the intended purpose because the representational strategies are primarily focused on transparency. The integrated theory emphasizes (strategies for) transparent representation *and* (strategies for) realism in the eye of the recipient.

As Edgar Allen Poe’s short story “The Purloined Letter” has shown imaginatively, the intended message can remain hidden in plain sight, solely because the recipients do not expect the message in the selected representational form, despite the apparent transparency. Based on the theory integration I will speculate that not including a well-argued account of the recipients’ *persona* with his or her relevant psychological state could unwantedly result in a failed public communication. To paraphrase Simon: Consumption of the attention of the recipient is everything in the public sphere.

References and used sources:

Hanneke Grootenboer (2005), *The Rhetoric of Perspective*.

Edgar Allen Poe (1992), *The Complete Stories*.

Herbert Simon (1971), *Sciences of the Artificial*.

Mark Thompson (2016), *The Guardian*.

Harding Center for Risk Literacy, <https://www.harding-center.mpg.de>