

COMMENTARY ON THOMAS WARTENBERG'S *THOUGHTFUL IMAGES*

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In *Thoughtful Images*, Thomas Wartenberg presents the first systematic study of the role of illustration in philosophy. Wartenberg begins his enquiry by posing the question of whether the visual arts produce works that function as illustrations of philosophical texts. In what follows, Wartenberg not only affirmatively answers this question, but, more ambitiously, also makes the case that visual artworks can make innovative contributions to philosophy. This is a welcome line of enquiry and receptive to the rich tradition of interaction between visual arts and philosophy, which I have the privilege of seeing daily in my capacities as a Lecturer in Fine Art, practicing visual artist and philosopher. In this commentary then, I shall seek not to critique but to expand on some of Wartenberg's ideas and provide more solid foundations upon which to support his more ambitious claim (and my own predilections) about the contributions to philosophy that visual artworks can make.

Wartenberg develops his account by means of an impressive historical survey. He starts with images of philosophy and philosophers in ancient mosaics and medieval manuscripts, moving then to 17th century broadsides and frontispieces, before arriving at Modernism in the visual arts and conceptual developments in contemporary art, finally ending at what he terms ‘graphic philosophy’ (that is, the use of the form of a comic to present important issues in philosophy). Through this vast survey, Wartenberg distinguishes between four different kinds of illustration: *text-based*, *concept-based*, *theory-based*, and *quotation-based*.

Text-based illustrations present pictures whose central features are specified by the text (2023, 5). For example, a 14th century French manuscript translation of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics* features images that illustrate aspects of Aristotle’s philosophical theories, such as his account of friendship (Wartenberg 2023, 58-60). Concept-based illustrations, by contrast, do not attempt to illustrate segments of text but, rather, an abstract philosophical concept or idea (Wartenberg 2023, 5). Such ideas may pertain to the nature of art itself as is the case in Modernist paintings, like Jackson Pollock’s *White Light* which, Wartenberg remarks, illustrates what Clement Greenberg claimed to be painting’s essential nature, flatness (2023, 159). Wartenberg also identifies another type of concept-based illustration: *analogical illustration*. Works that fall within this category illustrate philosophical ideas by way of analogy. For instance, Wartenberg proposes that Mel Bochner’s *Fourth Range* consists of a ‘numbers game’, analogous to what Wittgenstein termed a ‘language-game’ (2023, 292).

Theory-based illustrations, however, are images that are appropriated by philosophers to illustrate significant ideas from philosophy in a manner that makes those ideas more easily accessible than they generally are taken to be in the philosophers’ texts (2023, 14-15). For example, Foucault uses Velasquez’s *Las Meninas*, emphasising *representation* as the subject of the painting, to illustrate the nature of the Classical *episteme*

(Wartenberg 2023, 124). In the final category, quotation-based illustrations, contemporary artists illustrate philosopher's ideas by including the philosopher's actual words in the work, such as Joseph Kosuth's 276. (*On Color Blue*), which renders the following words from paragraph 276 of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* in blue neon tubing: "But don't we at least *mean* something quite definite when we look at a color and name our color impression?" It is virtually as if we detached the color *impression* from the object like a membrane. (This ought to arouse our suspicions)".

Within these kinds of illustration, Wartenberg enumerates two strategies that have long been used for illustrating philosophy to make it more accessible and memorable: analogical illustration of an abstract theory and personification of it. In addition to the example cited earlier, an example of analogical illustration is given through a 17th century engraving – which Wartenberg refers to as the *Descriptio* print – where Aristotle's logic is interpreted to present the creation of a proposition through two palm trees shown with their branches entwined, producing "a new type of entity, a piece of fruit, which is the *analogue* of a proposition formed from two parts of speech" (2023, 70; my emphasis) By contrast, in the 14th century French manuscript translation of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics*, Aristotle's concepts of friendship are *personified*. For example, as Wartenberg writes:

two priests shown on the right exemplify a complete friendship. Since this type of friendship exists only between two good people, according to Aristotle, it makes sense to use priests to illustrate it, since it was widely assumed that priests were ethical people. They are shown engaged in conversation, each with their right arm raised and both wearing identical outfits, a simple white gown with a black robe over the gown. (2023, 60)

What is interesting about this passage is the use of the word 'exemplify'.

In fact, as Wartenberg's language reveals, this illustration is one where a philosophical theory is both personified and exemplified.

Considering the wide range of cases Wartenberg surveys in the book, it is surprising to see that he enumerates only analogy and personification as strategies for illustrating philosophy, particularly as he uses the term 'exemplify' later to discuss how Kosuth's quotation-based illustration 276. (*On The Color Blue*) works:

Looking at 276. (*On The Color Blue*), we see three sentences from the *Investigations* executed in neon tubing. The tubes give off a blue light. The blue forms a sort of penumbra that surrounds the quotation and exemplifies the topic of the quotation, namely, the nature of color. The light also casts a shadow on the wall in which most of the words from the quotation are legible. (Wartenberg 2023, 177)

As this passage indicates, exemplification appears to be doing a lot of heavy lifting in conveying the cognitive content of this work. So, while Wartenberg uses the notion of exemplification sparingly in the book, I think there is a clear case to be made that this should be elevated as a distinctive strategy to explain the philosophical aspirations and contributions that Wartenberg claims many of the works he examines have achieved.

To better understand why exemplification is an important resource for Wartenberg's account, we can look to Catherine Elgin's theory of exemplification. Like scientific experiments and models, Elgin argues that epistemically rewarding artworks function via exemplification. This "is the referential relation by means of which a sample, example, or other exemplar refers to some of its properties [...] An exemplar highlights, displays, or makes manifest some of its properties by both instantiating and referring to those properties" (Elgin 2018, 29). A fabric swatch, to use Elgin's example, of herringbone tweed is an instance of the pattern

that refers to the pattern (2018, 29). Likewise, in Kosuth's 276. (*On Color Blue*), the blue, penumbral properties of the piece are an instance of, and reference to, a display of colour that is clearly visible but not as an aspect of an object's surface.

Exemplars, if properly interpreted, afford epistemic access to those properties in virtue of referring to some of their properties so that by attending to an appropriate exemplar we can learn, for instance, to recognize herringbone tweed or the ubiquity of unresolved tensions in human lives (Elgin 2018, 31). An exemplar of the latter may be Haydn's *Symphony No. 45*, which is in the difficult key F[#] minor, and can be interpreted as exemplifying the difficulties surrounding the extended stay Haydn and the musicians were obliged to take at the remote summer palace of their employer, Count Esterhazy, in 1772 (Elgin 2018, 30).

Elgin argues that the arts and sciences use these same symbolic resources to achieve much the same symbolic ends: to embody, convey, and often constitute understanding (2018, 27). Indeed, by exemplifying the content of Wittgenstein's ideas through his chosen visual means, Kosuth provides viewers "with the experience of seeing a colour that is not identifiable as existing on the surface of any object" (Wartenberg 2023, 178), and so embodies and conveys Wittgenstein's understanding of this topic. Importantly, the experience of Kosuth's 276. (*On Color Blue*) also problematizes viewers' understanding of colours (Wartenberg 2023, 178), which chimes with Elgin's suggestion that the effect of exemplification can be Socratic – a work of art can unseat our complacency by exemplifying that we do not know what we thought we knew (2018, 36).

While both artworks and philosophical texts can convey propositional knowledge – something we readily see in quotation-based illustrations – the former are extremely well-placed to convey non-propositional knowledge, which, as Michael Newall highlights, may inhere in their visual or sensory character (2018, 174). This experiential element can,

then, help us to further account for the distinctive contributions that visual artworks can make to philosophy. Based on Wartenberg's discussion of works like Bochner's *Fourth Range*, we could go further still and make the case that working out or recreating the artist's creative decisions while beholding the visual manifestations of these can serve as a means to convey experiential knowledge that is cognitive in content. In this case, by working out the rules of the 'numbers game', which exemplifies Wittgenstein's claims about language and knowledge, viewers can come to understand the basis for Wittgenstein's claim that mistakes require the presence of a rule, the basis for his undermining of scepticism (Wartenberg 2023, 292-293).

The quotation-based illustration 276. (*On Color Blue*) and analogical illustration *Fourth Range* are certainly not the only cases or kinds of illustration that Wartenberg examines where exemplification seems to be playing a key role. As we saw earlier, the text-based illustration for Aristotle's concept of complete friendship personifies and exemplifies this idea, while concept-based illustrations that employ this strategy include Pollock's *White Light*, which exemplifies the flatness and all-over effect of Greenberg's Modernist vision. However, it is perhaps theory-based illustrations that benefit most from being considered through the lens of Elgin's account of exemplification.

As we have seen, not all properties are exemplified at once. Some, for example, can be highlighted only by diminishing others. Exemplification is thus selective, such that in different contexts the same object can exemplify different properties (Elgin 2018, 29). Moreover, anything can be turned into an example simply by being treated as one. Properties can be pointed out or stage-setting may be needed to bring usually overshadowed or subtle features to the fore, and so exemplification "lends itself to intellectual opportunism." (Elgin 2018, 29) Such intellectual opportunism is amply demonstrated in Wartenberg's category of theory-based illustrations.

For instance, to illustrate his philosophy and contrast between the Apolline and the Dionysiac cultural tendencies that he saw as fundamental to the historical development of Western civilisation, Nietzsche used Raphael's *Transfiguration* (Wartenberg 2023, 107-114). The painting depicts a unified vision of Jesus' transfiguration in the top half of the painting and a boy healed from demonic possession through the miraculous intercession of Jesus in the bottom half. In his use of the painting, Nietzsche downplayed the Christian content and foregrounded the relationship between the scenes of agony and transcendence presented in the two parts of the picture. By focusing on these properties, Nietzsche used the painting to exemplify the Dionysiac and Apolline, or the truth of the inevitability of suffering and the illusory optimism of human rationality, and the relationship between them.

Such acts of appropriation make theory-based illustration perhaps the most contentious of Wartenberg's categories because these are works that were not intended to be illustrations by their creators. Nowhere does this come out more clearly than in the case of Wartenberg's second example of theory-based illustration, where Heidegger referred to 'a well-known painting by van Gogh who painted such shoes several times' (1964) to illustrate his claim that art is *the setting-into-work of truth* (Wartenberg 2023, 115). As Heidegger does not specify in his text which painting he is actually referring to, we might question whether this is really an instance of illustration in Wartenberg's sense. However, what this case perhaps makes salient about this kind of illustration is that the viewer need not necessarily have direct access to a visual work for it to illustrate some significant ideas from philosophy. In this case, it is phenomenological sketches of encounters with paradigmatic artworks like one of van Gogh's paintings (Thomson 2019), that are doing much of the work for Heidegger as he attempts to demonstrate their

disclosure of how art itself works:¹

...as long as we only imagine a pair of shoes in general, or simply look at the empty, unused shoes as they merely stand there in the picture, we shall never discover what the equipmental being of equipment in truth is. In Van Gogh's painting we cannot even tell where these shoes stand. There is nothing surrounding this pair of peasant shoes in or to which they might belong, only an undefined space. There are not even clods from the soil of the field or the path through it sticking to them, which might at least hint at their employment. A pair of peasant shoes and nothing more. And yet. From the dark opening of the worn insides of the shoes the toilsome tread of the worker stares forth. In the stiffly rugged heaviness of the shoes there is the accumulated tenacity of her slow trudge through the far-spreading and ever-uniform furrows of the field swept by a raw wind. On the leather lie the dampness and richness of the soil. Under the soles slides the loneliness of the field-path as evening falls. In the shoes vibrates the silent call of the earth, its quiet gift of the ripening grain and its unexplained self-refusal in the fallow desolation of the wintry field. This equipment is pervaded by uncomplaining anxiety as to the certainty of bread, the wordless joy of having once more withstood want, the trembling before the impending childbed and shivering at the surrounding menace of death. This equipment belongs to the earth, and it is protected in the world of the peasant woman. From out of this protected belonging the equipment itself rises to its resting-within-itself. (Heidegger 1964, 662-663)

As Wartenberg mentions in passing (2018, 118), Heidegger's interpretation of the painting's subject as a pair of shoes belonging to a peasant woman led to a famous dispute. While for Wartenberg this disagree-

¹ For Heidegger, "to see a being in its truth is not to see its correspondence to an idea of it that we have in our minds but to see it for the very thing that it is, to disclose its being." (Wartenberg 223, 116)

ment appears to be a minor detail, it is worth reflecting on it in more depth, given Elgin's proposal that "with different backgrounds, different features will be exemplified and different insights will emerge" (2018, 31). Indeed, this is arguably what happened when, among others, Meyer Schapiro and Jacques Derrida took Heidegger to task for his interpretation and use of the painting as an example to serve his theory.

Art historian Schapiro complained that Heidegger, although aware that van Gogh had painted such shoes several times, did not actually identify the particular painting he had in mind (1968, 136). Narrowing down the suspects in the systematic fashion favoured by his discipline, Schapiro instead affirmed that "they are more likely pictures of the artist's own shoes, not the shoes of a peasant" (1968, 136). By "replac[ing] a close attention to the work of art" (1968, 138) and projecting his own interpretation upon the painting, Schapiro went on to argue that Heidegger missed "an important aspect of the painting: the artist's presence in the work" (1968, 139). Running with this point, Schapiro wrote:

For an artist to isolate his worn shoes as the subject of a picture is for him to convey a concern with the fatalities of his social being. Not only the shoes as an instrument of use, though the landscape painter as a worker in the fields shares something of the peasant's life outdoors, but the shoes as "a portion of the self" (in Hamsun's words) are van Gogh's revealing theme. (1968, 140)

Wading in with a characteristically unwieldy text, Derrida found these two positions instructive, highlighting the uncharitable way in which Schapiro conducted his dissection of Heidegger's work while also arguing that Heidegger's interests weren't in the shoes as painting (1978). Instead, Derrida highlighted that neither thinker could resist determinacy and brought a Freudian twist to the discussion of the depicted boots:

And these shoes look at them. They look at us. Their detachment is evident. Unlaced, abandoned, detached from the subject (porteur, bearer, wearer, holder, or owner, indeed author-signer) and detached in themselves (the laces are untied, détachés). — detached from each other, even if matched, but with un supplément de détachement, a detaching supplement, if we suppose that they don't make a pair. For where do both of them (I mean Schapiro on one side, Heidegger on the other) get the certitude that the question involves a pair of shoes? What is a pair in this case? (1978, 4)

Each of these parties in the debate used the painting to exemplify different properties that were salient to their own theoretical positions. For Heidegger, van Gogh's painting exemplified how phenomenological encounters with art are capable of helping us to transcend modern aesthetics – the target of his critique – from within (Thomson 2019). For Schapiro, however, the painting exemplified the concept of the artist's presence, while for Derrida it exemplified philosophical ideas relating to detachment.

As these different interpretive positions demonstrate, given the relative repleteness of aesthetic symbols, disagreement may be interminable (Elgin 2018, 39). However, with the generative potential of exemplification, which is “not always a matter of making manifest antecedently known properties” (Elgin 2018, 31), we are well-placed to account for the contributions of these illustrations to philosophy. The versatility of exemplification, I suggest, is key to the explanatory power of Wartenberg's category of theory-based illustrations and this is particularly pronounced in the case under discussion.

Heidegger's use of the painting brought the formal ambiguities of the work to the fore and helped to constitute his philosophical understanding, but it is perhaps the broader debate that ensued which solidifies the contributions of this artwork to philosophy. Each subsequent thinker

responded to others by highlighting properties that they felt exemplified more significant insights, and in doing so shed new light upon, and advanced, philosophical understanding of the issues under discussion. These contributions were not necessarily intended by van Gogh but afforded by his skilful handling of materials and curious compositions.

In relation to this last point, I invite Wartenberg to consider how his account sits in relation to matters of artistic value, which we hear surprisingly little about. Perhaps the most pertinent question in relation to artistic value, given the topic of the book, is how do Wartenberg's claims relate to those of *aesthetic cognitivism*, the view that cognitive value – the capacity to convey knowledge – often contributes significantly to an artwork's artistic value? There are hints at an answer in many of the cases that Wartenberg examines, such as his consideration of the extent to which works like Kosuth's *Intellect to Opinion* (2017), which features a quotation in white neon tubing from the Divided Line section of *The Republic* (534a), are epistemically successful. As Wartenberg writes, this work seems to lack “the profundity” of 276. (*On Color Blue*):

While it does provide its viewers with a perceptual experience of the distinction between an object—in this case, a neon tubing version of Plato's text—and its shadow cast on the wall where the work is exhibited, I don't see it as shedding light on or criticizing the metaphysical view Plato illustrates in the displayed passage. (2023, 180)

Given that it is the relationship between the form of the work and how it conveys its content that Wartenberg foregrounds, we might gain the impression that this is at once an epistemic and aesthetic judgement. Moreover, given the emphasis on the work as not shedding light on or criticizing the metaphysical view, we might take it that Wartenberg implicitly holds that works, such as Kosuth's, which function as illustrations of philosophical texts are better as art for not only being able to

convey, but to contribute to, knowledge. This is a question that seems relevant to all the types of illustrations Wartenberg discusses, and it would be intriguing to hear his response. In sum, Wartenberg's *Thoughtful Images* is a thoughtful reflection on the dialogue between the visual arts and philosophy, and I hope that what I have said in this short commentary is an aid to his account of the contributions that these disciplines have made to each other.

References

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