

COMMENTARY ON THOMAS WARTENBERG'S *THOUGHTFUL IMAGES*

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Consider the question 'can the visual arts – painting, drawing, etching, sculpture etc. – produce works that function as illustrations of philosophical texts?' (Wartenberg, 2023, xi). Tom Wartenberg has produced a book that answers that question in the affirmative. The subject is a rich one, and, as Wartenberg says, it is slightly puzzling that there is so little written on it (9). Wartenberg's *Thoughtful Images* covers philosophical reflections on the history of illustrations of philosophy; a theory of illustration; the use of illustrations to clarify aspects of a particular theory; a peculiarly modernist use of illustrations to further an ongoing discussion in philosophy; the use of images to explore the work of a particular philosopher (in this case Wittgenstein); and the use of the comic form to write philosophy ('graphic philosophy').

The book is fascinating, and full of insight. I have no complaints about the project and hence no grand claims about how it can be undermined. Responses such as this, however, are required to focus on points

of disagreement which I will do in a rather journeyman approach. I shall focus primarily on the theory part (that is, Chapter 2); say a little about Greenberg and Modernism (Chapter 6); and express a little scepticism about Wartenberg's claims about what we as the audience can learn from illustrations of Wittgenstein (Chapters 7 and 8).

The theoretical task requires clarification on the nature of 'illustration' before we can clarify what it would be to 'illustrate philosophy'. As Wartenberg says, calling something an 'illustration', or calling someone who produces pictures an 'illustrator', seems to come with an implicit value judgement (41-51). Many years ago, I asked a noted theorist of Modernism how his theory could accommodate artists such as Lucien Freud. The reply came back that it did not have to; Freud was not an artist, but 'a mere illustrator'.<sup>1</sup> Wartenberg's reply to this goes via him giving a descriptive account of what it is to be an illustration that begs no value questions. As we shall see, once this has been done any argument for the artistic weakness of illustration will have to take place on other grounds.

Let us focus for the moment on pictures that illustrate a text: 'text-based illustrations'. Wartenberg's account of this is done via analogy with translation. In translation, there is a source text (that which will be translated) and a target text (the translation). Analogously, there is a source (the text on which the illustration is based) and there is a target (the illustration) (23). However, and obviously, 'an illustration, unlike a translation, *transforms* a written text into something visual' (25). I shall return to this, and the various additional norms that govern these practices, in a moment. However, we already have enough to trouble those who denigrate illustrations for being illustrations. For centuries, artists have drawn on classical sources as content for paintings. Wartenberg's example is Titian's *Rape of Europa* (1560-62), which has as its source the Greek myth – in particular, as told by Ovid. This has a source, it is a tar-

<sup>1</sup> Wartenberg gives a further example of this locution on p. 44.

get, and has transformed the text into something visual. Hence, it is an illustration. There is nothing in this, as Wartenberg says, to detract from artistic greatness (47).

The argument has a simple form: an account of what it is to be an illustration, and a claim that there is nothing in that account to suggest that illustrations cannot be great works of art. I find the account of illustration convincing and hence, if there is a dispute, it must be about the claim.

To evaluate the claim let us look at an additional three norms that Wartenberg claims govern illustration. The first two are, once again, drawn from translation. The first is fidelity or faithfulness. Here is how Wartenberg describes them:

On the one hand, a translation might seek to provide the most accurate rendering in the target language of a text written in the source language. The norm of fidelity clearly derives from such a goal. On the other hand, one could view the goal of translation as providing a reader of the target text with as close an experience as possible to what they would have experienced had they been able to understand the source text in its original language. Here, the norm of felicity would come into play as what would enable the reader to have the requisite experience. (24-25).

These have clear analogies in the case of illustration. First, 'a text-based illustration exhibits fidelity to a written text just in case all or most of the elements of the text are visually reproduced in the illustration' (25). As an example of felicity, Wartenberg turns to illustrations of Plato's cave. Plato is giving us an allegory. Hence, the point of an illustration will be to convey (the experience of) the allegory, rather than fidelity to the features as described (33).

This brings us to a problem with the claim that illustrations 'transform' the text into something visual. Visual images are more informationally

dense than descriptions. Lewis Carroll's description of the white rabbit includes no information about whiskers. However, Tenniel, in illustrating the character, had to include a depiction of whiskers. Hence, 'visual illustrations must supplement the verbal description with features that are not specially mentioned in the description but that the depicted objects have to have to be recognisable in their visual form' (27). Such supplementation is constrained by 'the similarity heuristic': that when there are features included in a visual representation that are not specifically determined by a literary text, then those features must be as similar as possible to those that the object would have in the real world' (32).

What, then, of the claim that there is nothing in that account to suggest that illustrations cannot be great works of art? Is there something about operating within these norms and constraints that precludes producing great art? If there were, it would need to be that the norms and constraints somehow make it impossible for the artist to externalise their mental states in such a way that makes for an expressive object.<sup>2</sup> I cannot see that they would make it impossible – which is just as well given the vast number of pictures hanging in the world's best galleries that are, by Wartenberg's definition, illustrations.

Am I in complete agreement with Wartenberg? Not quite. My quibble is about the similarity heuristic. Recall that Wartenberg claims that, when an illustrator needs to add things to the picture that are not mentioned in the text, what gets added is governed by the features that the things being drawn would have in the real world. This does not seem generally true. Take, as an example, the 'conceited man' in Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's story, *The Little Prince*. The text only specifies two facts about the conceited man: that he is a man and that he is wearing a hat. Thus, the illustration should feature a hatted man, perhaps wearing the visual appearance of conceit. All other features of the illustration should be

<sup>2</sup> I am presupposing a broadly Wollheimian account of artistic creativity (Wollheim 1987).

as similar as possible to the appearance a hatted conceited man should manifest in the real world. However, this does not seem to be the constraint governing the illustration, which is of a man in a top hat (with an ear of wheat protruding from the band), bow-tie, and frock coat (De Saint-Exupery 1992, 38). I have met a lot of hatted conceited men in my time, but none have looked anything like that.

What, then, does constrain supplementation? I suspect the constraints are fairly loose. In as much as there is something akin to the similarity heuristic, it will be that the features must be as similar as possible to those the object would have in the world of the story. This will, of course, often be the real world. However, it will not always be (not even in philosophy texts). Stories which are set in worlds other than the real world will be, by their nature, indeterminate (written stories particularly so). Hence, there will be a great deal of latitude as to what features can be added. Choosing which features will be, in part, determined by the creative tastes of those who get to have a say – particularly, the illustrator. Such illustrations are also in the enviable position of being able to themselves determine what is an appropriate illustration of the text. What conceited men look like in the world of *The Little Prince* is partly (indeed, largely) determined by the actual illustration of the conceited man. However, that does not mean that prior constraints are entirely absent. The look needs to be consistent across the book; it would be no good if, among all the other drawings, the conceited man was a pencil sketch of Nigel Farage. Furthermore, the naïve, knockabout world of *The Little Prince* does suggest a sort of visual style. I might be deceiving myself, but I think I understand why St Exupery drew the conceited man as he did. He does sort of look how one would expect a conceited man to look in the world of *The Little Prince* (and not in the real world).

My second discussion moves on from text-based illustration to 'concept-based illustrations': those which illustrate an abstract philosophical concept or idea' (Wartenberg, 2023, 5, 35-40). Wartenberg discusses

these with reference to a discussion from Dom Lopes, concerning Tom Phillips' picture that illustrates the notion of *contrapasso* – where the nature of the punishment fits the nature of the crime. The illustration is tied to Canto XXVIII of Danté's *Inferno* concerning the fate of the schismatics: those responsible for breaking up social cohesion. Phillips gives us a 4 x 6 lattice of paper figures, some with body parts missing, which Lopes (quoted by Wartenberg) describes thus:

The schismatics are not mutilated because they rend the fabric of society; they are mutilated because to rend the fabric of society juts it to rend themselves. Phillips' picture expresses the idea visually. (Lopes 2005, 175) (Wartenberg, 2023, 38)

I agree with Wartenberg (and Lopes) that this is a particularly good example of philosophical concept-based illustration (Wartenberg is happy to admit there are other, that is, non-philosophical, sorts of concept-based illustration as well). Wartenberg goes on to discuss various other examples, which are always interesting and enlightening. A discussion that particularly caught my eye was that of Greenberg and Abstract Expressionism.

I shall briefly recap the story (or, at least, one version of the story – the matter is contested). In his influential paper, 'Modernist Painting', Greenberg argued that each art should 'entrench itself more firmly in its area of competence'. This was interpreted as claiming that each art should focus on foregrounding that property (or those properties) that differentiated it from any other art: 'Because flatness was the only condition painting shared with no other art, Modernist painting oriented itself to flatness as it did to nothing else' (Greenberg 1961, 308-309). That is, flatness was essential to paintings as paintings. There is certainly some concept in the offing (even if it is not clear whether this is a claim about their nature, a claim about their value, or a claim about what needs to be in place to ensure a continuity of high art) and, the claim is,

artists produced works of concept-based illustrations. As Wartenberg says:

It is important to recognize that the Abstract Expressionists made their philosophical point by creating concept-based illustrations. The concept that these painters illustrated was, not surprisingly, flatness. In creating their revolutionary paintings, the Abstract Expressionists not only undermined traditional assumptions about the nature of painting, but they did so by illustrating their understanding of what the essence of painting was and, in so doing, philosophized in paint. (152)

However, as Wartenberg says, Greenberg was wrong: 'the attempt to provide a definition of painting that would lay bare its essential nature was a mistake'. However, we now seem to have a tension. On the one hand, the claim that Greenberg is mistaken, and on the other hand, the claim that following Greenberg, the Abstract Expressionists were successful: they 'undermined traditional assumptions about the nature of painting ... and, in so doing, philosophized in paint' (152). Let me grant immediately that some painters were explicitly following the Greenbergian programme; they were self-consciously foregrounding flatness. My question is whether this is concept-based illustration or whether it is attempted concept-based illustration that failed.

Greenberg's theory, if not just mistaken in its misplaced essentialism, is mistaken at its very core. Wollheim put the point pithily:

To talk of the use of a surface and to contrast this with the fact of the surface, and to identify the former rather than the latter as the characteristic preoccupation of modern art, attributes to modern art a complexity of concern that it cannot renounce. (Wollheim 1970, 125)

In other words, what is being foregrounded is not just the fact of flat-

ness (as we would, say, with a billiard table) but the role of a flat surface in a painting. We are essentially stuck with the flat surface *of a painting* and are thus stuck with the ‘complexities of concern’ that characterise paintings: complexities that Modernist paintings share with all other paintings. In short, it was a mistake to attempt to foreground flatness in the way that Greenberg mandated. It cannot be done. Hence, if that was the philosophizing in paint that the Abstract Expressionists were trying to do, it was a failure.

What kind of failure was this? Here are two options. The Abstract Expressionists were (a) philosophizing but the content of the philosophy was wrong (this would make what they were doing analogous to what Greenberg was doing) or (b) the very attempt to philosophize was a failure.

Here are two rational reconstructions of what a viewer might think that reflect each of the two options.

(a) I see what Rothko is trying to do here. He is trying to foreground the fact of flatness. However, that attempt has failed because my experience of flatness is irreducibly the experience of the flatness of a surface of a painting.

(b) I see what Rothko is trying to do here. He is trying to foreground the fact of flatness. However, he is simply barking up the wrong tree because the experience of flatness is, necessarily, irreducibly the experience of the flatness of a surface of a painting.

If Wollheim is right that there is a complexity of concern that *cannot* be renounced, it looks as if we are forced to the second option. Rothko (on this reconstruction) was trying to do something that cannot be done; he was attempting the impossible. That is, he was not philosophizing, but attempting to philosophize and failing.



Finally, I turn to Wittgenstein. As Wartenberg says, it is easy to forget that there was a time when the Avant Garde of the day looked to Anglo-American philosophy for its theoretical grounding. Joseph Kosuth, a major Conceptual Artist discussed by Wartenberg, has an extended discussion of Wittgenstein and Ayer in his classic paper, 'Art after Philosophy' (Kosuth 1969). Wartenberg gives examples of artists whose work draws on Wittgenstein (Le Witt, Kosuth, Nauman, Bochner, Johns, Bussman, Paolozzi, and Bochner) before devoting a full chapter to Bochner's illustrations of *On Certainty*. Wartenberg has a deep knowledge of Bochner's work, having curated an exhibition for which he wrote the catalogue.

Wartenberg makes some strong claims for these works. He says that Kosuth 'undermines viewers' received understanding of the notion of colour analogous to that which Wittgenstein achieves in the passage displayed in the work' (it is a new category for Wartenberg: 'quotation-based illustration') (178-179). Nauman 'produces a work of philosophical significance' (185); Bochner's work succeeds in 'engaging its audience in reflecting on the truth of the distinction Wittgenstein makes' (189) and, in his illustration of *On Certainty*, he is able to 'achieve a philosophical depth...with visual works whose interpretation reveals insights similar to those developed by Wittgenstein' (237).

It seems clear to me that artists are able to illustrate Wittgenstein, whether that is text-based illustration, concept-based illustration, quotation-based illustration, or even 'concept-based analogical illustration' (229). It also seems clear that artists can produce beautiful works inspired by Wittgenstein. The contentious issue is whether philosophers can manifest philosophical insight, of the sort achieved by Wittgenstein, in their art. As Wartenberg surely realises, we are straying into the contentious area of how best to construe those elements of the value of art that are in the domain of the cognitive. Let us take an example he discusses at length: Bochner's *Range* works. Wittgenstein made the

point that there is a difference between global scepticism and making a mistake; the latter only makes sense in the context of a rule. Bochner's works exhibit regular sequences of numbers (with variation in colours) which contain 'errors'. The errors can only be seen as errors within the context of seeing them as a series of numbers. To ask whether that is really an achievement is to align oneself with Jerome Stolnitz's challenge to those who claim that cognitive elements form part of the value of *Pride and Prejudice*. What, Stolnitz asks, do we learn, apart from that 'stubborn pride and ignorant prejudice sometimes keep attractive men and women apart'? (Stolnitz 1992, 198). Plenty of ink has been spilled showing that we don't have to construe those elements of the value of art that fall within the domain of the cognitive in this way. However, outlining how we construe those elements is a challenge, and it is interesting to see how Wartenberg meets it.

Wartenberg cleverly ties Bochner's achievement back to Wittgenstein's distinction between showing and telling.

It is important to my appreciation of Bochner's *Range* works that they are *concept-based illustrations* of Wittgenstein's claim. Wittgenstein makes a conceptual claim in *On Certainty* about the nature of doubt and its relation of its possibility of error. And he does try, to use one of his oft-quoted distinctions, to *show* us rather than *tell* us why this is so. Still, it is a difficult claim to justify and one of the virtues of the *Range* works is that they really do *show* that a mistake can occur only in the context of a rule, one that can be followed either correctly or incorrectly. This claim is shown to us with clarity and vividness in Bochner's works, whose illustrations illuminate the rationale for Wittgenstein's claim. (Wartenberg 2023, 236)

The claim, then, is that the global scepticism/error distinction is difficult to justify and that Bochner's works 'illuminate the rationale' for the claim. Let us grant that Bochner's work gives us an instance of the

claim that for something to be a mistake in a series of numbers only makes sense given that there is a correct way to go on with that series. Wartenberg says that the featured anomalies 'provide an illustration of the problem with the skeptic's claim that all our empirical beliefs could be mistaken' (235). However, it is difficult to see how one can get from the one to the other. Wartenberg's view faces a dilemma. If the viewer has prior knowledge of Wittgenstein's claim, he or she could fill in the background and see the possibility of a mistake as presupposing the falsity of global scepticism. In such a case, however, the *philosophical* contribution of Bochner's view seems fairly minimal. If the viewer does not have knowledge of Wittgenstein's claim, it is difficult to see how the leap from a single instance of a mistake to a problem with global scepticism could be made.

In thinking through these issues, I am surprised to discover that I am gently sceptical of the claims to painters being able to do a great deal of philosophical work. I do not claim to have justified this view. Readers of the book will need to look at Wartenberg's discussion – which is supported by the high-quality colour prints – to see if they are convinced.

I have picked and chosen those bits of the book on which I felt I had something to say, and completely neglected other parts. One lesson of this is that Wartenberg has opened a whole new field – complete with sub-divisions. In particular, I have had nothing to say about the history, paintings that illustrate philosophy, or graphic philosophy. I would not want my doing my job as a commentator (to find points of disagreement) to prompt any doubt that I thoroughly enjoyed the book, which I can recommend as consistently interesting and enlightening.

#### References

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