

The Image and Human Formation:

With a view to the creation and appreciation of visual art

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Abstract

In education, images function as representations of educational content, such as illustrations in textbooks or wall pictures, where “what” is represented is more important than “how” it is represented. On the other hand, in the history of art, especially in formalism, the form of “how” something is represented is regarded as more important than “what” is represented. In contrast to these two viewpoints, here, I aimed to examine the meaning of understanding an image as it is.

For this purpose, I refer to the theory of the aesthetic regime proposed by Jacques Rancière, which contested the representational regime of art. Unlike in the representational regime, which emphasizes the reproduction and communication of the author’s intentions, under the aesthetic regime an expression emerges through each of the descriptive acts of objects and bodies. In this sense, the work of art is not a reproduction of the artist’s intentions. Even to the artist, those intentions can be revealed only after the completion of the work. In this paper, I approach an image as a symptom instead of a representation.

From this perspective, I also refer to Aby Warburg’s *Mnemosyne Atlas*, which represents a *way of thinking by means of images*. Didi-Huberman said, “Expression according to Warburg is not the reflection of an intention; it is, rather, the *return in the image of something that has been repressed*.” The image as a symptom escapes fixed meaning. Therefore, it has never been suited to data mining and is inevitably misunderstood. This uncertainty activates the viewers’ inner images. To understand an image in itself means to activate the viewers’ inner images in line with their respective experiences by using the clue of symptoms.

To understand an image as an image means neither to see a representation nor to read its visual quality. Instead, it means to appreciate the image in terms of symptoms that even the author can grasp only *a posteriori*. Because of insufficiency of the image as a symptom, we think not only about “what” the image represents and “how” it represents it, but also a lot about the image as a description. Appreciating the image activates our internal images, through which we can connect our self-

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formation with cultural formation, thus potentially enabling realization of the simultaneous production of self and culture.

Key words: Jacques Rancière, aesthetic regime, symptom, *Mnemosyne Atlas*, arts-based research

Introduction

What function do images play in education? There are images that represent educational content, such as illustrations in textbooks or wall pictures. The aim of using these images is to deepen our understanding of verbal explanations, where “what” is represented is more important than “how” it is represented. The visual quality of the image itself seems to be irrelevant; instead, the image can be viewed as a transparent sign pointing to other things.

The visual quality of an image, such as its composition and color, has been part of the basic training content of education for artists, and it is still studied in professional training institutions today. Although some of these types of training are also pursued in school art classes, the emphasis in school art is on the externalization of internal images on the basis of “ideas and concepts,” rather than “academic” training. Insufficient attention seems to be paid to the fact that ideas and concepts are supported by culture. The issue of how to link appreciation of culture with production based on the creation of images should be a major one in art education today.

According to Michael Parmentier, human formation that is realized simultaneously with transformation of the external world requires both “cultural materials as intellectual and physical objects for self-formation” and “active subjects contributing to cultural formation.” Subjects participate in the formation of culture through their own activities while accepting the culture (Parmentier, 2012, pp. 233–234). How can we realize this “simultaneous production of self and culture” (ibid., p. 234)? This paper aims to examine the meaning of self-cultivation through images, i.e., *Bildung* (human formation) through *Bilder* (images), with a view to the production and appreciation of art.

1. Representation in education and art

“We have long accepted that the world of pedagogy is a huge montage of images and representations that are not ‘things themselves’, but only ‘point to’ things and facts”

(Mollenhauer, 2008, pp. 52–53). With reference to Comenius' *Orbis Sensualium Pictus* (*The Sensible World in Pictures*), Mollenhauer refers to the “fundamental problem of modern pedagogy” as follows: “The educational world of the child must be constructed in such a way as to *definitely* reflect the reality in phenomena instead of just their superficial appearance. This becomes possible only when the educational world of the child correctly represents the cosmic order of things as well as it activates both sensibility and understanding” (ibid., p. 67). Mollenhauer states that the purpose of *Orbis Sensualium Pictus* was the creation of a “pedagogical mirror room.”

Furthermore, Mollenhauer states that the issue of representation is “not only a pedagogical issue, but also an issue of the entire cultural habitus”; he points out that the structure of Velázquez's *Las Meninas* (*The Maidens*) is a mirror image that “encodes the content of educational theory” at that time (ibid, pp. 61–68).

Two things can be drawn from Mollenhauer's statement. One is that education and the plastic arts are both founded on representations that denote reality; i.e., they are artificially reconstituted at a distance from reality. The other is that the plastic arts “play with the border between virtuality and reality,” whereas education requires “correct representation” (ibid., pp. 67). Thus, in the educational world, even representations require good norms. So what kind of representation can be right?

On the other hand, in the history of art, the view of art as representation has been questioned since the advent of modernism. Clement Greenberg, who popularized the concept of medium specificity, states that the most fundamental thing defining modernist painting is “the ineluctable flatness of the support” (Greenberg, 1989, p. 196). He says that “Modernist painting asks that a literary theme be translated into strictly optical, two-dimensional terms before becoming the subject of pictorial art” (ibid., p. 199). In other words, the form of “how” something is represented is regarded as more important than “what” is represented.

Nelson Goodman states that “Denotation is the core of representation and is independent of resemblance” (Goodman, 1976, p. 5). Pictorial denotation “represents something” with a certain translation. According to Goodman, in terms of denoting an object, the picture performs the same symbolic action as the words that describe it.

Insofar as the image is taken as pointing to something, it acts as a symbol that mediates some object or content. However, understanding an image as it is, is different from receiving the denoted content. What does it mean to understand an image as it is? The next section will consider this point on the basis of the theory of Jacques Rancière, who discusses the difference between the representative regime and the aesthetic regime.

2. Understanding an image as an image: Rancière's theory of the "aesthetic regime"

Jacques Rancière distinguishes three regimes of art, namely the ethical regime, the representational regime, and the aesthetic regime. In the ethical regime, "art is not identified as such." It focuses on the usage and effects of images (Rancière, 2000, p. 27). In contrast, the representational regime makes art autonomous as art. The "art" that we are familiar with was established under this regime. It is characterized by "the representational primacy of action over character or of narrative over description" (ibid., pp. 30–31). In the literature, the plot of the story takes precedence over the description of the characters' personalities and appearance. This regime has a normative character that defines the hierarchy of artistic themes and genres.

Against these two regimes, Rancière counterposes the aesthetic regime of art. From a pedagogical perspective, it is important that Rancière refers repeatedly to Schiller's theory of aesthetic education as the "first—and in a sense insurmountable—manifesto" (ibid., p. 33) of the aesthetic regime of art. As is well known, Schiller states that beauty "is the common object of both [sense and form] impulses, that is to say of the play impulse" (my brackets added; Schiller, 1954, Letter 15). The aesthetic regime of art is driven exclusively by neither the sense impulse nor the form impulse, but by the play impulse, which combines the former two impulses but is distinguishable from them. Rancière adds that, "The aesthetic state is a pure suspension, and a moment in which form is felt as itself. And it is the occasion of the formation of a specific humanity" (Rancière, 2000, p. 33).

To narrate a story through *mimesis* means to formalize a fluid reality into a narrative world. The aesthetic regime subverts this process. However, that does not mean that this process is subject to the sense impulse (Schiller, 2003, Letter 15). Just as Schiller regards the object of the play impulse as the aesthetic properties of "vital forms," so the aesthetic plays freely with the fiction between material and form, so that we are "aesthetically anticipating the future" (Rancière, 2000, p. 44).

Rancière cites the "Mallarméan idea of the poem of the spectator-poet, written 'without scribal apparatus' by the steps of the illiterate dancer," as an example of art constituting aesthetic thought (ibid. p. 32). This is a different expression from the hylomorphism that imposes the artist's formalizing will on the material; according to Mallarmé, ballet is "une écriture de gestes (a writing of gestures)" and "une écriture corporelle (a bodily writing)" (Rancière, 2003, pp. 108–109). The dancer's steps

themselves are descriptions. They do not represent some action or story, but rather an expression that emerges each time through the descriptive acts of objects and bodies. In this sense, the work is not a reproduction of the artist's intentions.

This view of expression as description overlaps with that of *Kulturwissenschaft* (cultural studies)¹, which rediscovers “the power of the image to generate value,” in contrast to the text-centered humanities (Nawata, 2022, p. vi). For example, Bredekamp's *Bildakt* (Image Act) considers “the image itself as an agent of action and examines various aspects of the ‘action’ performed by the image” (Tanaka, 2022, p. 7). In other words, rather than images being read as symbols that denote something, the focus is on the fact that the images themselves create meanings.

Unlike the representational regime, which emphasizes the reproduction and communication of the author's intentions, under the aesthetic regime democratic equality between different artistic genres, as well as between author and recipient, becomes possible because “description instead of instruction” is regarded as important (Rancière, 2000, p. 17). In the aesthetic regime, descriptions are not meant to convey anything but are merely traces inscribed on the page (or, as we saw earlier, on the dancer's body). What is read into these traces is up to each recipient.

3. The image as a symptom: an attempt at arts-based research

Rancière points out that the “aesthetic revolution” that enables the equality of genres and themes comes under the same logic as the “new historiography,” which finds the symptoms of a time, a society, or a civilization in the minute details of ordinary life (ibid., pp. 50–51). Rancière, considering literature itself to be “a kind of symptomatology of society,” considers that literary works that describe characters' lives and dwellings as they are exemplify the aesthetic regime (ibid., p. 51)

Aby Warburg, who is said to be “an important pioneering thinker in *Kulturwissenschaft*” (Erll, 2022, p. 41), read images as symptoms. According to Didi-Huberman, Warburg, regarding the image as “a result of movements that are provisionally sedimented or crystallized in it” (Didi-Huberman, 2017, p. 19), pointed out

¹ The title of the English version of *Einführung in die Kulturwissenschaft*, written by Aleida Assmann, is *Introduction to Cultural Studies*. However, Assmann said that “The genealogy of German *Kulturwissenschaften* is quite different from that of British and American ‘cultural studies’” (Assmann, 2019: 19).

that “what creates meaning in a culture is often its symptomatic, unthought, or anachronistic aspects” (ibid., p. 28). Didi-Huberman tries to understand Warburg’s scheme of deriving *Pathosformel* (emotive formulas) from *Nachleben* (survivals) in images as follows. “The *Pathosformel* should not be translated in terms of semantics, or even semiotics of bodily gestures, but in terms of *psychological symptomatology*” (ibid., p. 180). Didi-Huberman said, “Expression according to Warburg is not the reflection of an intention; it is, rather, the *return in the image of something that has been repressed*” (ibid.).

Furthermore, “What the survivals remember is not the signified, which changes at every moment and in every context, and in every relationship of forces it enters into, but rather the signifying line or feature [trait] itself” (original brackets, ibid., p. 110). In other words, “It is not the *Gestalt* (forms) that matters, but the *Gestaltung* (shaping process)” (ibid., p. 110). Focusing on the *Gestaltung*, the expressive person who leaves traces comes into view.

Warburg tried to understand the “repressed” by means of the *Mnemosyne Atlas* as a *way of thinking by means of images* (ibid., p. 296). In the *Mnemosyne Atlas*, “temporary configurations of fragments of various images allow much more imaginative space than montage relationships because of their fragility in the process”² (Tanaka, 2022, pp. 62–63). The arrangement of images, and moreover the “movement of thought” (ibid., p. 120), represented as the lines drawn by Warburg among images, is important.

The concept of the image as a symptom thus escapes fixed meaning. Therefore, it has never been suited to data mining and is inevitably misunderstood. This uncertainty activates the viewers’ inner images. To understand an image in itself means to activate the viewers’ internal images in line with their respective experiences by using the clue of symptom.

Inspired by Warburg’s *Mnemosyne Atlas*, we have been promoting Arts-Based Research (ABR), which considers inquiry during creative practice as research (Komatsu, 2008). Shaun McNiff describes ABR as “a process of inquiry whereby the researcher, alone or with others, engages the making of art as a primary mode of inquiry” (McNiff, 2018, p. 24).

Artists create their works with inspiration from the works of other artists, historical situations, social issues, philosophical theories, literature, and many other things. Artists’ inquiries are folded into their works but are not made explicit as such. Although artists

² In this meaning, Tanaka regards the *Mnemosyne Atlas* as a parataxis that lacks syntax rules and common ground among elements, rather than as a montage that needs conscious configuration.

have some kind of image before the work is created, only through reflection after its completion and its criticism by others do they realize what they wanted to express. In other words, artists become aware of what has been created only by making their works of art as symptoms. There is then no difference between the viewer trying to understand the work by using the symptom as a clue, and the artist thinking through the making of the symptom.

To understand an image as an image means neither to see a representation nor to read its visual quality. Instead, it means to appreciate the image in terms of symptoms that even the author can grasp only *a posteriori*. Because of the insufficiency of the image as a symptom, we think not only about “what” the image represents and “how” it represents it, but also a lot about the image as a description. Appreciating the image activates our inner images, through which we can appreciate the image deeply. The aesthetic regime “shattering the mimetic barrier that distinguished the ways of doing art from other ways of doing and separated its rules from the order of social occupation” (Rancière, 2000, p. 33) always allows freedom of understanding. Activation of the images in accordance with the experience and memory of viewers enables the viewers’ own transformation through the images.

Conclusion

Nowadays, especially in the business world, “Art Thinking” is suddenly flourishing, and creativity is required for innovation. Can Art Thinking deliver human formation? What is the difference between ABR and Art Thinking?

The point of divergence lies in the relationship of art with culture. The argument for using art for innovation does not question the quality of the art; it may not even have to be art. It would not lead to either the transmission or the renewal of culture. We should ask, “What culture is desirable for human formation?” Does the question turn us back to the Kulturpädagogik (cultural pedagogy) of the early 20th century, which assumed the inheritance of culture as objectified mind?

Rancière, discussing aesthetic regimes, points to the identification of art with various forms of life. This does not mean the incorporation of art into life. Rancière says that “politics and art, like knowledge, construct ‘fiction’” (ibid., p. 62). He does not separate art from life as “art for art’s sake”; nor does he integrate art into life. The identification of art with life means, as Schiller put it, “suspending” the two and bringing art and politics, life and labor to a state of “fiction and free play” (Ibid., p. 39).

So, the value of culture relies on activation of the internal image through individual play with fiction. Culture enfolds various images and things, which generate new meaning by relating to other images and things. The multilayered traces of images connect self-formation with cultural formation in a way that differs from just following the existing canonized culture.

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