

THINKING WITH IMAGES: AN INTERVIEW WITH THOMAS E. WARTENBERG

Sam Heffron

In his most recent book, *Thoughtful Images: Illustrating Philosophy Through Art* (2023), Thomas E. Wartenberg explores the variety of ways in which visual art has illustrated philosophy. Employing a new framework for thinking about the nature of illustration, Wartenberg surveys a wide variety of cases which, he argues, show not only that philosophical concepts can be illustrated but that such illustrations have the capacity to do philosophy in a substantial way.

I sat down with Professor Wartenberg to discuss the book and its central themes, including the nature and aesthetics of illustration, how art can cultivate philosophical understanding, and how it can contribute unique philosophical insight.

*Sam Heffron: In your most recent book *Thoughtful Images* you reveal there to be a rich tradition of illustrations of philosophy that has received more attention from art historians than philosophers, even philosophers of art. Why do you think there has been so little attention paid by philosophers to the visual arts' relationship with philosophy?*

Thomas Wartenberg: In general, I think philosophers are pretty sceptical of the idea that the visual arts can illustrate philoso-

phy. More generally, I think there's scepticism about the relationship of visual arts and philosophy so that philosophers tend to be interested in the question of specifying what it is for something to be a work of art and various questions having to do with the ontology and epistemology of artworks. They have not paid as much attention to the issue of art as a way in which philosophy can be done. I think a lot of them think that that's just not possible.

In my own case, it was really the work of Arthur Danto that first put me in touch with that pos-

sibility, specifically when he discusses Andy Warhol and what he thinks Warhol's innovations were. That made me start thinking more generally about the relationship between art and philosophy, and then specifically the question of whether visual art can actually illustrate philosophy.

SH: Can you clarify the sense in which you're talking about illustration throughout the book?

TW: I think one of the problems with the notion of illustration is that people just assume that illustration is a specific art form, so they might think of it as the sort of thing that's done in comics and advertising, etcetera. What I argue is that illustration is not a specific art form, but rather has to do with a sort of logical connection whereby an illustration is something that's derived from a source. If we look at that sort of structure as definitive of what it is to be an illustration, then it can mean that works of art in all sorts of different genres or art forms can be illustrations. For example, early in the book, I argue that paintings can count as illustrations, and that saying a painting is an illustration doesn't subtract from or conflict with it being a great work of art. Rather, it has to

do with the fact that the painting is actually derived from a source. I think that the fact that people don't analyse illustration in this way accounts for some of the reasons why illustrations are not regarded as something that can have philosophical content.

SH: You classify illustrations into four types which relate to different sources: text-based, concept-based, theory-based and quotation-based illustrations. Can you briefly explain these types of illustrations?

TW: I began investigating different ways in which philosophy has been illustrated and I found that the type of illustration that's most generally acknowledged is one where you have a piece of text and then you have a visual image that illustrates it. So, if you take a children's picture book or an illustrated novel, it's almost always the case that there's a piece of text with an accompanying illustration that illustrates the text. That's also true in philosophy. In introductory textbooks, for instance, you often have the image of Plato's cave alongside the text in which Plato describes The Cave. So, you have a visual image that puts the information into visual form.

I then started looking at other

types of illustration and seeing that artists had attempted to illustrate philosophical concepts or theories. For example, I discovered a fourteenth-century French manuscript translation of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (1985) and *Politics* (2017). It's an interesting case because what you have are Aristotle's three types of friendship illustrated by three pairs of individuals in an image, and so I thought of that as a concept-based illustration. Although, you could also argue it's really a theory-based illustration and go back and forth about which way to categorise it. In any case, it's a clear example of an illustration which doesn't link to a specific piece of text, but rather to generalise a discussion in Aristotle's work. What's also particularly interesting about this example is that the French language didn't have certain concepts to articulate Aristotle's philosophical terminology, and so when it came to translating the original texts from Latin, new French terms had to be introduced. So, the illustrations actually served the function of helping readers figure out the meaning of terms that didn't have an ordinary use in French.

You also mentioned quotation-based illustration. The first examples that I found of these

were by, broadly speaking, conceptual artists in the 1960s. What they did was take sentences or phrases from the works of philosophers and make works of art that featured those sentences. The first one that I discovered was Bruce Nauman's sculpture *A Rose Has No Teeth* (1966) which takes its name from the sentence "A rose has no teeth" in Wittgenstein's (2009) *Philosophical Investigations*. So I call it a quotation-based illustration. Now, of course, in a certain way it is a text-based based illustration, but it's a particular type of text-based illustration because it's not illustrated in the text: it's using the text as the work.

SH: You draw a parallel between successful illustrations and translations, given that they share similar aims of what you say as being 'faithful' and 'felicitous' to their source material. Can you say a bit more about what those aims are?

TW: Let me answer that question a little bit indirectly. What happened was that after I'd done a fair bit of work on illustration, I started to realise that I didn't have any theoretical account of illustration, so I tried to figure out where I could find one. As we said earlier, philosophers haven't done very much work on illustration and

so I couldn't find any theoretical work on what made something an illustration. However, after hunting around a bit, I discovered 'translation theory', which seemed relevant because it appeared to me that an illustration is a type of translation where you're taking something not from one language into another language, but from one medium into another medium. In translation theory, they talk about what I call norms of *fidelity* and *felicity*. The basic idea is that translations ought to always be faithful to their source, and yet, on the other hand, perhaps surprisingly, not every translation has to be a word-for-word translation of its source. This is particularly true in poetry. For instance, one interesting case is Dryden's approach to translation where he basically proposes that to create a work where if the original poet was writing in the language that he [Dryden] was writing in at the time, this is what they would have created. That's using the norm of felicity. You can violate the literalness of a translation in service of creating a work that accords with the spirit of the original.

SH: There tends to be a value distinction made between works of art and illustration, where illustration is taken as inferior to 'proper'

art. You refer to this as the 'denigration of illustration'. You argue, however, that works of art can be illustrations, and that the two are not mutually exclusive. What do you think illustration has to contribute to our understanding and appreciation of art?

TW: I think that there are certain works of art – let's just stick to oil paintings for the moment – that I think are clearly illustrations. I think it's very important to understand them that way because, if we think again of fidelity and felicity, you can get a better conception of what the artist is trying to do if you see that there are elements of the work that are faithful to the source and other elements that the artist has chosen to employ in service of felicity. I think a good example is David's *The Death of Socrates* (1787), which is clearly based on Plato's dialogue, *Phaedo* (2010). If you don't see the painting as an illustration, you won't raise the question, for example, of why, right before the French Revolution, David chose to paint this picture of Socrates about to take hemlock. I think seeing the painting as an illustration helps us think about what David is trying to use this portrait of Socrates for. I think the answer is something along the lines of: he wants the model of

Socrates not fearing death, but instead continuing to teach and perform his life's work in the face of death, as a model for his contemporaries. I think seeing the painting as an illustration highlights that feature of the work. I don't want to say someone wouldn't have seen it that way if they didn't think it was an illustration, but I think it helps us comprehend the artist's aim in creating the illustration.

SH: You discuss art that has been made to illustrate the ideas and theories of philosophers, in particular art that took inspiration from the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein. What do think it was about Wittgenstein's writings that inspired so many artists?

TW: One of the things that I think made Wittgenstein attractive to artists was that his aphoristic style meant that they didn't have to follow a long complex argument in order to think about producing art that was influenced by him. In the book I talk about Mel Bochner's work *Counting Alternatives: The Wittgenstein Illustrations* (1991), where what he was doing was thinking through his own reaction to and understanding of Wittgenstein's book *On Certainty* (1969). So, one of the reasons that artists like Bochner might have found

Wittgenstein inspiring is that they could focus on an aphorism or a shorter section of text rather than, for example, trying to understand Kant's transcendental deduction of the categories. If you wanted to try to illustrate Kant, good luck! That's a lot harder to understand, especially given the protracted way Kant writes. So, I think artists just found Wittgenstein's style inspiring, and that inspiration led them to want to create art that somehow reflected that.

We should also bear in mind that Wittgenstein was not the only philosopher who inspired artists. Interestingly, the other philosopher who did is also a master stylist: Plato. Perhaps he also inspired artists because, again, you read the Allegory of The Cave and it's such a great linguistic image but in just a few pages. The brevity of his style allows you to think about drawing or making something involving that image a lot easier than if it was across lengthy passages of text.

SH: It's also interesting that both philosophers you mention – Plato and Wittgenstein – are associated with philosophical ideas that are based on, or at least heavily reference, images. Wittgenstein's picture theory of meaning or use of the duck-rabbit drawing to illus-

trate his theory of seeing 'aspects', and Plato's Allegory of The Cave...

TW: On that point, it's really important to distinguish a visual image from a linguistic image. People often get confused between the two and say that Plato contains lots of images, so of course philosophy can use images! And I say, well, *visual images are not the same as linguistic images, which I think is very important to bear in mind to avoid confusion.*

SH: *You say that one purpose illustrations can serve is to clarify an idea because, unlike lengthy verbal descriptions, they show their contents, which makes their information easier to access and understand. However, some of the examples you discuss are incredibly complex and can be as difficult to understand as written text. In those cases, what is the benefit of an image over text?*

TW: The examples you are referring to were illustrations made for students studying for exams that required them to reproduce a lot of the details of Aristotle's philosophy. They are very beautiful and incredibly complex engravings that use a very basic metaphor of a garden to present Aristotle's ideas. It turns out that around the time these engravings were made,

formal gardens had just been introduced. I imagine that the students were really interested in the novelty of these gardens, and so presenting Aristotle's philosophy as a formal garden acted as a heuristic aid, like a visual mnemonic. It allowed the students to remember the relationships that you would have to memorise if you were to just read the text, whereas the image provides you with a visual guide, and so it's the visual relationships that made it easier for these students to remember the features of Aristotle's philosophy that they had to reproduce in an examination. That's a case in which I think the image is a visual mnemonic. It's not so much about understanding as remembering, but the image being a stimulus to your memory.

I think the preference for image over text also depends on who the person is that has to read the text. For instance, when I first encountered Plato's literary image of the Divided Line as a sophomore in college, I remember being incredibly confused. I couldn't remember which section was what and basically had to produce my own visual image of what Plato was describing, because he's describing something that's purely visual. There's a case where a more sophisticated

reader of philosophy would be able to read the text and visualise the concept: they could essentially perform the work of illustration mentally. But I think for people who are less schooled in philosophy, a visual image of a text like that would enable them to understand it. So, it would seem to me that it really depends on the sort of status of the person who's reading the text and what would be helpful or not helpful to them, what they can imagine or not imagine.

SH: Sometimes philosophers employ narratives to illustrate an idea, as we see in Plato's Allegory of the Cave. Do you not think that film would be a better medium in which to translate the text as it has a temporal dimension to convey the narrative, whereas still images seem less suitable since they have to reduce the narrative down to static segments?

TW: One of the things I think that's true for is if you wanted to go through the whole trajectory of the Allegory of The Cave. Then it would work better with a sequence of images, like a graphic novel, where you have a series of images conveying the course of events that happen in the story. But for certain aspects of that, it seems to me that a static image is prefera-

ble because a graphic novel lets you attend to one image at a time, whereas a film just goes by and you can't go back. For example, if you look at the situation of the prisoners in *The Cave*, it can be helpful to just have a static image there because you can look at all the different elements of the scene and see what's going on. Compare this to Bertolucci's film *The Conformist* (1970) where the central character recites Plato's text and Bertolucci does an amazing job with the lighting to make you feel like you're in *The Cave*, but you don't get to sit there and figure out all the elements of the story since it goes by so quickly. In that case, having a static image might help you better understand certain elements than seeing them in a film. What this shows is that there are ways in which the static image can do something that the film can't, although the film can obviously do things that the static image can't.

SH: Not only do you claim that visual art can illustrate philosophical ideas, but also that it can make a substantive contribution to philosophy. In what way do you think illustrations are capable of contributing to philosophy?

TW: One of my favourite examples

of a work that illustrates philosophy is Joseph Kosuth's *One and Three Chairs* (1965). It seems like for most people it's an illustration of Plato's metaphysics, namely his theory of Forms, because you have a physical chair, a photograph of its chair, and a dictionary definition of a chair in an installation. It's a perfectly good illustration of Plato's theory that ideas are the basis of the physical world and that works of art – in this case the photograph in the work – stand at two removes from reality, given that it is a copy of the physical object that is identifiable through its idea, or in this case its definition. Most of the things that I've read seem to stop at calling the work an illustration and don't consider the further fact that you have an artwork that's actually presenting you with a metaphysical view. In Book XI of the *Republic*, Plato (1974) basically says that this is something that art can't do: it is philosophy that is more closely aligned with the truth than art. But here's Kosuth saying that this is not so true. He's saying that, as an artist, I can make a critique of Plato by creating an artwork that embodies truth. Of course, there are other people who criticise Plato's conception of art, but here's an *artwork* that's doing it. So that's a case which shows how art is capable of doing a lot

more philosophically than simply taking a preestablished metaphysics and providing a visual image of what is basically a literary image or literary description.

SH: You dedicate a chapter to the discussion of comics that illustrate philosophical ideas, which you term 'graphic philosophy'. In it you claim that some comics are actually 'doing philosophy'. What is it about comics that enables them to do philosophy?

*TW: First of all, the reason that I call it 'graphic philosophy' is because I think the notion of a graphic novel is a misnomer. These are not novels. If there's going to be a generic term for them, they're really graphic memoirs for the most part, although there are notable exceptions to this such as Scott McCloud's (1993) book *Understanding Comics*. That's a work in which the images show McCloud giving a lecture about the nature of comics, so that would be the sort of thing to which I think most people say: "that doesn't really count because it's the words that are doing the philosophising and he just happens to be putting speech bubbles around himself". But what I try to do is to say that's true for a large majority of the text, but then there are certain plac-*

es where his argument relies on using images to make his point. One of them has to do with his claim about how comic images are abstracted from realistic photographs. He proceeds to show us through a sequence of images the process of abstraction by which we get to a comic figure like Charlie Brown, for example. He shows you how there is a series of steps that create the process of abstraction by which we get to the comic image. That is doing something that the words alone can't do. It allows us to actually see the process that he's talking about. That's a case where he's actually doing philosophy through the visual images, and that's what I want to say is a unique philosophical contribution that the comic makes.

SH: People might be surprised then when you claim that despite being able to illustrate philosophical ideas in this way, the images that we find in comics should not be considered illustrations.

TW: Well, that goes back to my original claim about what makes something an illustration: that it is something that's derived from a source. In most comics, but not all, there is no story that's told independently of the images. Of course, there are counterexamples

such as Classics Illustrated comics, where basically the text tells you the story, and then the pictures just illustrate what's being said in the panels. But like in McCloud's discussion, that's not true. I don't think those images are really illustrations because there's no pre-existing story that the images illustrate.

SH: The examples of graphic philosophy you discuss show that there are a variety of ways in which philosophy can be done in comics that extend beyond the analytical method that is generally adopted as the framework for academic discourse. Do you see this as having implications for how we conceive of the role of philosophy as a discipline and practise?

TW: I think the implications are that we shouldn't restrict philosophy to the work of professional academic philosophers. There's a lot of philosophical work being done in a lot of other sites in our culture, and graphic novels are very good example. Some graphic novels are done by professional philosophers who are trying to illustrate, for example, the failure of the project of logicism. That's something that only a philosopher would have come up with. But McCloud is not a philosopher, and neither is an

author like Alison Bechdel, whose work *Fun Home* (2006) I also discuss. But in different ways they're both doing or using philosophy in their work in ways that I think are really instructive. For example, with Bechdel, I was surprised when I explored the philosophical ramifications of her book. Despite it being a mega success, it seemed to me that it was filled with philosophy and that she had clearly thought about and used certain philosophical ideas as a way of clarifying her own life. That's a very different use of philosophy than what we see from McCloud, where he's got a thesis about the nature of comics that he's trying to prove and show to you, or *Logicomix* illustrating the history of logicism in the 20th century philosophy of mathematics (Doxiadis and Papadimitriou 2009). Broadly speaking, what I hope people take away from this is that there's philosophy all over the place. You just have to be aware of it or allow yourself to notice it and you'll see that it's not just in those academic journals that very few people read, but that people are interested in and are doing philosophy in lots of different places.

SH: Your research has looked at the capacity of film and visual art to not only contain philosophical themes, but to actually provide

philosophical insight. Are there any other art forms that you think have the capacity to do philosophy, and that you think require further attention?

TW: I think the question of whether music can do philosophy is an interesting one. I've begun thinking about whether there could be musical illustrations of philosophy. Leonard Bernstein composed a piece which he said illustrated Plato's *Symposium* (1989) with the different movements associated with different characters. But there's a lot of talk associated with it to help you understand that. If you just heard the music, I don't think you would necessarily notice that. But even with the talk, is it doing philosophy in some substantive way? I don't know the answer to that, but I think it's an interesting question. Ultimately, I hope what happens is that people don't just think that philosophy occurs in different places and look at how it's being illustrated, but think about whether we can find philosophy in other art forms. Who knows what the next one will be?

Conclusion

The typology of illustrations that Wartenberg develops provides an invaluable framework for thinking about the philosophy of illustra-

tion. Yet, despite the distinctions that are drawn, questions still arise. Consider cases of theory-based illustrations where philosophers have appropriated pre-existing artworks to illustrate their philosophical ideas.¹ In such cases, does focusing on the capacity of artworks to illustrate philosophical theories perhaps misplace our interest in the use of such works? For example, Nietzsche used Raphael's *Transfiguration* (1516-20) to illustrate a key conceptual distinction in his theory of history and culture. However, is the most striking fact about the use of Raphael's painting that it can illustrate this distinction, or is it the fact that Nietzsche chose the painting to illustrate his theory in the first place? If our interest lies in how the painting has been used by Nietzsche, to what extent - if any - does this threaten to undermine the ability of such works to stand as illustrations that function independently of their use? Indeed, given that the painting existed prior to the theory that it was used to illustrate, I wonder whether it is 'doing philosophy' in the same way as an image that was created with the specific intention

of illustrating a particular concept or theory?²

In our interview we briefly touched upon how illustrations can contribute to philosophy. Throughout the book, Wartenberg highlights various ways in which artworks can engage with philosophical ideas: some by directly illustrating a particular claim, others by helping us understand a concept or theory through more indirect, expressive means. How a work engages with an idea is significant in how it affects the nature of its contribution. Some works, for example, contribute directly to the ideas of particular philosophers, with the artwork essentially being instrumental to the idea it illustrates, whereas others can contribute by helping us to understand a particular claim or theory through an artwork. We would be missing something if we saw Kosuth's *One and Three Chairs* as simply reducible to the theory it illustrates. A full appreciation of the work requires that we not only see it as an illustration of Plato's metaphysics but also as a unique instance of the theory being realised in an artistic context. Attending to how the theory is mani-

¹ See Chapter 5, where Wartenberg discusses the work of Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger and Michel Foucault.

² See Chapter 4, where Wartenberg discusses images that were created with the intention of illustrating specific philosophical works.

fested within the work not only enriches our aesthetic appreciation but also aids our understanding of its philosophical content. In this sense, the art of illustrating philosophy and philosophising itself can sometimes be one and the same thing.

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