

# BOOK REVIEWS

---

## Sehen lassen: Die Praxis des Zeigens

LAMBERT WIESING

SUHRKAMP 2013. PP. 230. €12 (PBK).

A possible translation of the German title of Lambert Wiesing's new book is the oddly repetitive '*Showing: The Practice of Showing*'. Such a gloss, however, would miss a distinction that is central to Wiesing's argument. As he emphasizes (21), the German verb *zeigen* designates a genus of which both acts of showing and acts of pointing are species: I may show you Eleanor Catton's new novel by holding it up before your eyes, or use my stretched-out finger to point in the direction of some bookcases. In the first instance, you are visually confronted with the novel, while in the second, I only confront you with my index finger, which may direct you to a best-seller that is itself hidden from sight. Armed with criteria borrowed from phenomenology and ordinary language philosophy, Wiesing argues that distinguishing these practices of *zeigen* (showing and pointing) is necessary for an adequate explication of statements like 'this image shows my home town' or 'the postcard shows the Eiffel Tower'.

The book has three parts. In the first, Wiesing explains what it is to show something, and how showing differs from pointing. Following Heidegger, he insightfully lays out how phenomenological analysis limits itself to what is unproblematically manifest; what, metaphorically, 'shows itself' in experience. In the second part, Wiesing criticizes three closely related theories of depiction: illusion theories, phenomenological theories, and a family of views scathingly labelled 'the new image mythology' (78). In the final part he motivates his own double-edged view, which combines perceptual and semiotic elements. He moreover raises and answers several thought-provoking questions about visual perspective, museum

exhibition, and the special 'indexical' status of photography.

*Sehen lassen* makes a significant contribution to ongoing philosophical discussions about depiction. It offers a development and a sharpening of a view Wiesing has argued for in recent years, most notably in his *Artifizielle Präsenz* (2005; trans. *Artificial Presence*, 2010). The current monograph differs from the earlier work in its emphasis on vision and on how things are shown or made visible by people, and in its fierce criticism of a dominant interpretation of phenomenological image theory. Wiesing denies that depiction can be analysed as a purely perceptual phenomenon, but at the same time argues that this does not undermine its status as a truly visual kind of representing. The work offers careful analysis and witty polemic, and almost every chapter foregrounds arguments that even to experts will have a refreshing and novel ring.

Most of Wiesing's examples and case studies are mundane, ranging from images found on eBay to the postcard from a friend. This is on purpose. Wiesing is not primarily interested in what hangs in museum galleries, because he wants to say something perfectly general about depiction. Fortunately, this also absolves him from the kind of amateur art history so common in recent philosophy of depiction.

What does Wiesing think we mean when we say that an image shows some object or scene? He offers a compound analysis. Someone claiming 'this postcard shows the Eiffel Tower', implicitly means that: (1) on the postcard's surface one can see an object that can only be seen—an 'image object' that to some extent visually resembles the Eiffel Tower—and that (2) some person used or intended this object to point us to the famous lattice tower in Paris, perhaps intending to suggest that the visual appearance of the image object we see matches the way the Eiffel Tower looks

when one would see it from Pont d'Iéna. In short, the image object that is visible to us is used as a pointer to something that may itself remain out of sight.

Wiesing develops this compound analysis on the ruins of three interconnected, rival theories. The first of these, illusion theory, has been both popular and controversial since Zeuxis and Parrhasius. It holds that when we look at an image, that image's coloured surface will appear to us as if it were some entirely different object or scene. Images are optical illusions.

Against this, Wiesing develops a familiar argument. If images were optical illusions, the depicted object or scene would appear to us as present—as if we were perceiving it. Yet depicted objects typically do not appear to us as present. As Husserl pointed out, a depicted object generally reveals itself as unreal. This is the core insight of phenomenological theories. What we see on the postcard's surface stands out as both distinct from the card's surface and at the same time as visibly not genuinely there: it is an image object. Hence, an adequate description of depiction must claim, against illusion theories, that, instead of the physical image surface, an image object comes into view.

But what kind of thing could be both visible and at the same time manifestly be unreal? At this junction, Wiesing takes a distinctive turn. Developing a point by Günther Anders, Wiesing suggests that the image object is an artificial presence (73), by which he seems to mean we must think of the image object as an extraordinary kind of thing, not just as an ordinary thing made present to us in an extraordinary way. Anders characterized image objects as 'ghosts', and accordingly, according to Wiesing, we can never see a real tower—a physical, material thing—on the surface of a postcard, but only a merely visible 'ghost-tower' that at best bears a striking resemblance to, say, the Eiffel Tower in Paris.

Phenomenological theories have never gone out of fashion since their emergence early in the twentieth century, but Wiesing is very critical of the way they have come to be understood and developed. He points to a standard interpretation that has dominated at least the German discussion in the last two decades,

according to which the phenomenon of depiction is adequately captured by the thesis that images show image objects (73).

Wiesing argues that any theory of that ilk will be dangerously incomplete. The first problem is that, if we do not see the Eiffel Tower but only a merely visible, non-physical and immaterial thing, then why do we nonetheless persist in speaking of a postcard that shows the Eiffel Tower? According to Wiesing, phenomenological theory does not adequately address this question, and hence fails to make our ordinary attributions intelligible.

The second problem with the standard interpretation Wiesing identifies is that it makes a mystery of why we tend to speak of the postcard's showing something or other, given that, by hypothesis, an image object becomes visible on its surface. Who is showing anything here? Taken as a metaphor, Wiesing observes, the use of 'show' could be innocent (97). Saying that 'the image shows something' is comparable to saying, metaphorically, that 'the human brain thinks quickly in dangerous situations'. Brains, of course, don't really think—it is people who think, and similarly it is people who show things using images.

However, just as an alarming portion of popular neuroscience easily mistakes metaphorical language about brains for literal description, a trend in recent image theory insists on interpreting literally the thesis that images show things. Wiesing cites the work of authors such as Horst Bredekamp and Gottfried Boehm who conceive of the postcards and paintings we encounter as genuine actors that show us image objects. Yet if such accounts are presented as phenomenological analyses, then they introduce an element that is not itself manifest or apparent in experience: that the image actively shows something is not itself something that 'shows itself', as Wiesing, with reference to Heidegger, puts it (93). From a philosophical vantage point, Wiesing's frustration, embarrassment even, about these developments seems understandable. Risking a methodological mud fight, Wiesing labours the absurd implications of this kind of 'image mythology', and criticizes it for its kitschy attitude towards images.

Just as Husserl rescued an insight from the illusion theories he criticized, Wiesing attempts in *Sehen lassen* to salvage a gem at the heart of the phenomenological project. Despite the typical incompleteness of their analyses, the phenomenologists at least saw that, if we want to understand depiction, we should explain the role of the image object in our depictive practices. Wiesing's critical rejoinder, however, is that this role is not exclusively perceptual.

The main move Wiesing makes is to distinguish the relation between, for example, postcard and image object, on the one hand, from that between image object and Eiffel Tower, on the other. The former relation Wiesing regards as straightforward: it is one of being visible on something else. Visible on the surface of the postcard is a specific kind of image object. Wiesing regards this fact as unmysterious.

The second relation, that between image object and Eiffel Tower, brings us to the heart of things. Only here we find an act of showing (*zeigen*): someone uses the image object visible on the postcard's surface to direct our attention to a tower in Paris currently absent to us. This act only becomes possible, Wiesing argues, because the visual appearance of the image object resembles the monument in Paris. When someone intends to show something by presenting you that postcard, the image object visible on its surface becomes an instrument, one that shows how something that is not itself present looks, by virtue of sharing visible properties (136).

Probably the most pressing questions a reader is left with after this analysis concern the precise nature of the image object on Wiesing's account. His attempts to clarify the concept have mixed results. At several occasions Wiesing states that the image object is a distinct kind of thing, and not an ordinary thing given in a distinct kind of way (e.g. 125, 137). But does this mean image objects are, as some philosophers put it, individuals? Are they mind dependent or mind independent? It is not entirely clear where Wiesing stands on these issues.

Wiesing compares image objects with other instruments that can be used in practices of showing (*zeigen*): index fingers and fabric samples. In each

case, the instrument's function depends on a resemblance with whatever it is that someone wants to show by using the instrument. About the index finger, Wiesing advances the questionable thesis that this is a resemblance between the direction of the finger and the direction of the gaze of the person who points with it. Further, the evolutionarily primitive status of pointing with our fingers, Wiesing speculates, could help explain how we ever started using images in the first place (118).

These clarifications are only partially satisfactory. However, there are two more fundamental disputes I wish to highlight. First, one may question Wiesing's distinctive take on the identity of the image object. Even if one accepts the phenomenological critique of illusion theories, why not think that the image object that can be seen when we look at the postcard simply is the Eiffel Tower, but then made present artificially? Jean-Paul Sartre, in *L'Imaginaire* (1940), insists that in looking at a portrait of his friend Pierre, it is Pierre himself that appears to him, and not something else in lieu of Pierre. Sartre denies that the image object is an extraordinary kind of thing; rather, he takes it to be manifest that it is an ordinary thing made present to us in an extraordinary way.

Against this Wiesing might reason that Sartre must agree that the 'Pierre' he sees on the portrait cannot be touched, smelled, tasted, or heard—Sartre can only see him. Therefore, what he sees could not be a real person of flesh and blood. However, someone might respond that this objection fails to register that the evidence here only supports a conditional claim. Of course, Pierre is merely visible if one sees him represented in the portrait in the confines of one's study, but this does not rule out that there could be other conditions in which Pierre could be touched, smelled, heard, or even talked to!

The worry here is that those more sympathetic to Sartre's phenomenological description will not feel compelled to think of the relation between image object and Eiffel Tower along the lines of acts of pointing or referring. Instead, 'the postcard shows Paris' could be said to mean just that someone uses the postcard to let a spectator see the Eiffel Tower,

made present artificially. Given that this corrects the standard interpretation Wiesing criticizes, why would it not be an adequate analysis?

The second concern is no less grave. By focusing on the relation between image object and Eiffel Tower, Wiesing's account leaves unexplained, mysterious even, what the relation is between the picture's surface and the image object. Indeed, he makes it clear that he considers an image object's being visible on the material surface of a postcard to be just trivial and obvious (92). However, given Wiesing's not entirely straightforward story about the metaphysical status of this object, some might worry that central philosophical questions about depiction are left unanswered and hidden from sight by a relation that is too rashly stipulated as basic.

I am confident that even those who feel that these critical points should force Wiesing to say more than he actually does in *Sehen lassen* will find in the book plenty of insight and ample occasion for argument. The way he sets up the problem he pursues is novel and exceptionally fruitful, and at the same time retains an overlap with the recent philosophical literature on depiction. Wiesing's criticisms are on the mark, and his prose is analytical and careful. Questions of resemblance in pictures, the role of intention in creating or selecting a picture, and analyses of the visual experience we have when we cast our eyes on an image are all addressed and discussed with a laudable crispness, and the book provides countless anchor points for discussion and commentary of the most fertile kind.

Maarten Steenhagen  
University College London  
[m.steenhagen.09@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:m.steenhagen.09@ucl.ac.uk)  
doi:10.1093/aesthj/ayu016

## Minerva's Night Out: Philosophy, Pop Culture, and Moving Pictures

NOËL CARROLL

WILEY-BLACKWELL. 2013. PP. X + 358. £16.99 (PBK).

Noël Carroll requires no introduction and his reputation comes courtesy of the quality and quantity of his

contributions to analytic aesthetics over a period of thirty years. Where his most recent collection, *Art in Three Dimensions*, targeted aestheticism, formalism, and artistic autonomy, the focus of *Minerva's Night Out* is broader: the philosophical questions raised by the phenomenon of mass art.<sup>1</sup> Carroll concurs with the traditional classification of the popular arts in general as emotional arousal, charts the relationship between popular and mass art which developed in the twentieth century, and characterizes the latter in terms of its intended consumption, i.e. large numbers of people, often separated by great distances. He justifies his choice of subject on the first page of the first paper, 'The Ontology of Mass Art': 'mass art, or, if you prefer, mass entertainment, is probably the most common form of aesthetic experience for the largest number of people' (9).<sup>2</sup> The phenomenon is indeed one which philosophers should not ignore, and although the last two decades have seen increased attention paid to popular film, popular music, song, photography, and comics, the mass arts remain under-represented in academic philosophy. As such, *Minerva's Night Out* is a very welcome addition to the literature.

The volume comprises a brief introduction and twenty-one self-contained papers, which span the period from 1997 to the present (and include one new article scheduled for forthcoming publication elsewhere). There are six sections: 'The Philosophy of Mass Art', 'The Philosophy of Motion Pictures', 'Philosophy and Popular Film', 'Philosophy and Popular TV', 'Philosophy on Broadway', and 'Philosophy across Popular Culture'. In terms of particular art forms, there are nine papers on film, three on television, and two on theatre. The value of the collection is enhanced by the inclusion of five essays which—appropriately, given the subject matter—were published in popular philosophy anthologies (four by Open Court and the other by Wiley-Blackwell) and may thus have escaped the attention of academic readers. Whether aimed at an academic or non-academic audience, the papers

1 Noël Carroll, *Art in Three Dimensions* (Oxford: OUP, 2010).

2 Originally published in *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 55 (1997), 187–199.