

Thomas E. Wartenberg: *Thoughtful Images: Illustrating Philosophy Through Art*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023, xvii + 324 pp., \$90.00 hardcover.

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Thinking Through Illustration

One part theory and eight parts art historical study, *Thoughtful Images* is an interesting preliminary foray into what we might call the philosophy of illustration. In this labour of love, Thomas E. Wartenberg sets out to answer the question of whether the visual arts are capable of “produc[ing] works that function as illustrations of philosophical texts” (xi), taking the reader on a guided tour of the history of illustrations of philosophy.

Our first stop on Wartenberg’s tour is largely theoretical, and for my money this is where the book’s most interesting contributions are found. Chapter 2 lays the foundations for thinking about the philosophy of illustration. An illustration, Wartenberg argues, is a visual representation which “sheds light” on an external source (20-1), and we can distinguish three basic types of illustration: text-based, concept-based, and theory-based illustrations (22). Straightforwardly, text-based illustrations have their content specified by an accompanying text, concept-based theories take some concept for their source, and theory-based illustrations aim to shed light on a whole theory.

Like a translation, an illustration must balance the competing norms of fidelity (i.e. accurate representation of the source’s content) and felicity (i.e. conveying the spirit of the source while maintaining a measure of autonomy from it) (23). In translating a text, these two norms will often pull in different directions; the same is true for illustrations, which must convert a verbal into a visual representation. Doing so effectively requires illustrators to include some elements of a source and omit others (25-7), but it also often requires them to supplement the verbal description with features entirely absent from the source, since a successful image is often more complete than a verbal description (27). When a visual representation includes features not specified by the text, Wartenberg argues, these are subject to the *similarity heuristic*: they should be as similar as possible to what the object would or could have looked like in real life (31-2). Finally, Wartenberg takes aim at what he calls “the denigration of illustration” (41), the assumption that illustration is an inferior art form. One way to cash this out is as the claim that the norm of fidelity stymies creativity (43), since one is just representing content that is already given somewhere else.

The remaining chapters primarily canvas the history of illustrations of philosophy, starting, in Chapter 3, with pre-modern (< c.1650 CE) illustrations, the first of which were just depictions of famous philosophers (e.g. Classical busts) or scenes of people philosophizing (e.g. Raphaël’s *School of Athens*, 1509-11). But Wartenberg also finds several interesting cases of text-based illustrations from illuminated manuscripts, whose illustrations were intended as a kind of visual mnemonic to help students to memorize Aristotle’s philosophy and terminology, often by personifying abstract terms (59) or constructing a sort of memory palace in the form of a garden (65ff).

Chapter 4 considers the frontispieces of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century books, most prominently Hobbes’s *Leviathan* (1651) and Rousseau’s *Émile* (1762). Wartenberg demonstrates convincingly that viewers are meant to attend to these images in very particular ways informed by, and

complementing, the text. The *Leviathan* frontispiece, for example, is meant to be viewed from bottom to top in order to show how the state is generated from warring individuals, transforming the many into a unified whole (80-4). The frontispieces to Rousseau's *Émile*, by contrast, do not illustrate the text itself, but rather the positions which Rousseau aims to refute in each book (85-6; these illustrations are *counter-textual*, 95). Such illustrations do not just illustrate a particular moment in the text, they summarize or articulate substantive theses.

Chapter 5 concerns itself with cases in which philosophers select pre-existing works, such as paintings, to illustrate their ideas. These are what Wartenberg calls *theory-based illustrations* (99), and all that is necessary for an artwork to count as such is that there be a plausible interpretation of that artwork as an illustration of some particular theory. Heidegger's is probably the best-known example of such an illustration: in order to illustrate *The Origin of the Work of Art* (1950), Heidegger asks us to consider van Gogh's *Shoes* (1886), which he uses to call to mind certain key elements of his theory, much as mediaeval scholars used pictures of gardens as mnemonics for Aristotle's philosophy. In doing so, he calls attention to aspects of the painting to which we might not otherwise have attended (132).

In Chapter 6, Wartenberg makes the case that the works of certain artists and artistic movements, notably Modernist painting and Abstract Expressionism, should be counted as concept-based illustrations. The works of Jackson Pollock, Janet Sobel, and Adrian Piper in particular, he argues, work to illustrate the kinds of claims critics like Clement Greenberg have made about the essential 'flatness' of painting (151-2, 159).

Chs. 7 and 8 are devoted to illustrations of Wittgenstein's work, a decision which Wartenberg justifies on the grounds that, among artists working after the Second World War, Wittgenstein seems to have been the philosopher who enjoyed the most influence, perhaps due to his aphoristic style (167, 208). Chapter 7 is especially concerned with works which make use of Wittgenstein's own words; for this reason, Wartenberg calls them *quotation-based* illustrations (179). Chapter 8, on the other hand, is devoted entirely to a single artist's—Mel Bochner's—illustrations of Wittgenstein's *On Certainty* (1969). It may seem strange to devote an entire chapter to this subject, especially on the heels of a chapter earmarked for work inspired by Wittgenstein, but Wartenberg argues that Bochner's works represent unparalleled successes in illustrating Wittgenstein's ideas.

Finally, Chapter 9 covers what Wartenberg calls "graphic philosophy," that is, philosophically-themed comics like Apostolos Doxiadis's and Christos Papadimitriou's *Logicomix: An Epic Search for Truth* (2008). He distinguishes comics from illustrated books on the grounds that in comics the text and the image are co-equal contributors to the story (253). With illustrated books, however, the text is ontologically primary; there is an asymmetry between text and image (245).

The distinctions which Wartenberg draws in this study offer a very useful starting point for thinking about the philosophy of illustration. Unsurprisingly, however, some of these starting points may prove contentious. Consider, for example, the fact that if Wartenberg's account of illustration is correct, then the practice of illustration is *much* more widespread than we might otherwise have thought. Most European art from the mediaeval until the modern era was religiously-inspired, after all, and will thus count as text-based illustration. This is, I think, a welcome consequence, but it is not clear how to reconcile it with the supposed denigration of illustration. Certainly, illustration often seems to enjoy a lesser status than other art forms. Consider the illustrations which often accompany scientific texts, of which Mark Witton's *Tyrannosaurus rex* is an excellent recent example (see Cullen *et al.* 2023). The digital painting illustrates the hypothesis that this theropod's teeth were hidden by lips, rather than permanently bared in a gruesome grin. Although created as a standalone digital artwork, we would be hard-pressed to find it hanging in the Louvre or reproduced in an art history text. On the other hand, consider Jacques-Louis David's *Oath of the Horatii* (1784), which depicts a scene from a Roman legend about an ancient conflict with the city-state of Alba Longa, as told by Livy and

Dionysius. It is clearly a text-based illustration; yet it is heralded as a great work by a master painter, and *it* hangs in the Louvre. Opening our eyes to the breadth of illustration in art history could be an effective counter to the denigration of illustration; yet it seems to primarily work by altering our view of great works, rather than re-evaluating those relegated to the category of “mere” illustrations.

I have a similar concern with the category theory-based illustration, which seems to entail that any work at all can be reappropriated and made into an illustration. I cannot help but wonder whether the introduction of this category of illustrations doesn't obscure what is really going on in these cases. That is, I wonder whether what is of interest here isn't rather that Heidegger *illustrates* (note the verb) his theory using van Gogh's *Shoes*, rather than that the painting “is” an *illustration* (note the noun).

Finally, concerning Wartenberg's thesis that comics and graphic philosophy are distinguished from other illustrated texts by the co-equality of text and images, I would be remiss if I did not note that this is a highly useful and informative way of thinking about the difference. But I am less sure of its extensional adequacy, because it seems like many children's picture-books likewise feature co-equal text and images. It is not obvious, for example, that the text of Leo Lionni's *Inch By Inch* (1960) has ontological priority over its images. Perhaps a more significant difference—if it is one—is that, where books for very small children are concerned, child and reader each seem to engage primarily with *separate* elements of the story (i.e., the child with the pictures, the reader with the text), rather than both in tandem.

Contentions aside, aestheticians and philosophers of art are sure to be surprised by the artworld's level of engagement with philosophy throughout history and will find, in *Thoughtful Images*, fertile ground for new research.

References

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