Thoughtful Images: Illustrating Philosophy Through Art

Thomas E. Wartenberg
Mount Holyoke College

Thoughtful Images is the first comprehensive study of works of visual art that illustrate philosophy. It is surprising that there are so few philosophical works that focus on visual illustrations of philosophy. After all, there are many studies of how literary works raise philosophical issues and the number of books about films as philosophical works continues to grow at a furious pace. Why, then, has there been so little attention paid by philosophers to the visual arts’ relationship to philosophy?

Art historians have not exhibited the same reticence about discussing artistic illustrations of philosophy. However, they generally have focused on a specific historical period or set of works. For example, Claire Richter Sherman studied a set of 14th-century manuscripts that illustrated Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics*, while Susanna Berger wrote about a series of broadsides produced in the early 17th-century that illustrated Aristotle’s logic and metaphysics.

Art historians were not the only ones to discuss philosophically rich visual illustrations. Political scientists exhibited an interest in the frontispieces of 17th- and 18th-century philosophical works. These works rely on technological advances that made it possible to print images and text together. Quentin Skinner investigates the significance of Abraham Bosse’s frontispiece of Hobbes’s *Leviathan*, while John T. Scott explores the puzzling frontispieces to Rousseau’s *Émile*. In both cases, the engravings play a role in the audience’s understanding of the respective works. Even though both *Leviathan* and *Émile* are important works of philosophy, philosophers who have discussed them have largely ignored the visual images that they contain.

Despite the importance of these studies that focus on visual images that express philosophical ideas, I could find no thorough and systematic study of visual illustrations of philosophy. In order to remedy this situation, I set about writing a book that contains both a theoretical framework for thinking about visual illustrations as well as a survey of the different ways in which philosophy has been illustrated from Ancient Greece to contemporary graphic works.

Working on Thoughtful Images proved to be illuminating in many ways. One of the most surprising discoveries I made was how many conceptual artists had turned their interest in Wittgenstein’s writings into genuine artworks that illustrated his ideas. Using such diverse mediums as neon tubing, lead casting, drawing, and printing, artists like Joseph Kosuth, Bruce Nauman, Jasper Johns, Mel Bochner, and Maria Bußman created challenging artworks that asked their audiences to reflect on how Wittgenstein’s ideas were illuminated by them.

Since Jasper Johns’ print *Seasons (Spring)* (1987) appears on the cover of my book, I’ll discuss that work briefly as an example of a work of visual art that illustrates philosophical ideas. The unique feature of Johns’ print from the point of
view of the history and theory of visual illustrations of philosophy is that Johns uses a visual image from a written philosophical text and reproduces it in his artwork. So far as I know, this feature of Johns’ piece is unique, for no other artwork illustrating philosophical ideas employs a visual image taken directly from a philosopher’s text. Of course, the lack of other similar examples is not surprising given the paucity of visual images in works of written philosophy.

The image Johns uses is the well-known one of the duck-rabbit that Wittgenstein includes in his *Philosophical Investigations*, part II, ¶113. At the most obvious level, Johns’s use of the duck-rabbit shows that he is interested in Wittgenstein’s notion of aspect seeing, a fact supported by the two other ambiguous images Johns includes in the work. What’s less obvious is the significance of Johns including this image in his work. What we can say is that Johns here registers the significance of aspect seeing for understanding art, a fact that was also acknowledged by Ernst Gombrich and Richard Wollheim among others.

Other works by Johns are more easily interpreted as illustrating philosophy. For example, *Fool’s House* (1962) is a witty representation of the picture theory of language. The work contains actual objects found in an artist’s studio on the canvas each of which is pointed at by a painted arrow and the name of the object. It might even be interpreted as a parody of that theory, given the superfluousness of the names included in the work, as if our ability to recognize the objects required the presence of those words.

I want to mention two problems I encountered in researching the book. The first was figuring out how to proceed in developing a typology of types of illustration as part of the book’s theoretical framework. Lacking any useful predecessors, the method I generally used was to inspect the different illustrations I discuss and base my typology on how they illustrate philosophy. The typology includes text-based, concept-based, theory-based and quotation-based illustrations. I explain all of these and provide numerous examples of them.

The only modification to this rather *ad hoc* manner of proceeding was to employ the theory of translation as a model for my analysis of the most common type of illustration, a text-based illustration. Because visual illustrations must “transpose” a verbal description into a visual object, I had to modify some elements of translation theory so that it would be applicable to visual objects. Still, this model was helpful in developing my analysis.

Another problem I faced was how to discover works of art that illustrated philosophy. While I had found some while pursuing my interest in illustration, I hoped to employ a more rigorous methodology. Unfortunately, I couldn’t think of one; all I was able to do was to rely on many internet searches and scour books for works that would be relevant to my study. I found this empirical method unsatisfying, yet I couldn’t think of a better option. And while this did yield many works with which I was not previously familiar, it had no guarantee of completeness.

Among the many interesting images yielded by my “search and discover” method that I discuss in the book are works by Maria Bußmann. This Austrian artist-philosopher has undertaken the project of illustrating the works of many philosophers including Wittgenstein with her unique style of drawing. Bußmann’s Wittgenstein-inspired drawings, each of which illustrates a specific text from his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, provide understated but profound visual analogues for Wittgenstein’s claims and theories.

Unfortunately, the lack of a systematic method for finding artworks that illustrate philosophy resulted in my overlooking some significant ones. For example, the catalogue for the 2018 *Plato in L.A.* art exhibition curated by Donatien Grau included works by eleven artists who attempted to illustrate Plato’s ideas. While I don’t think all of the works successfully achieve that aim, they are very interesting and it would have enhanced my book to have included them, especially since I do discuss a number of works that illustrate Plato’s ideas such as Jan Saenredam’s *Antrum Platonicum* [Plato’s Cave] (c.1640).
Another book I wished I had known about features a unique set of illustrations of Wittgenstein’s *Remarks on Colour*. This book was published in 2000 in a limited run of 42 copies by the ArtCenter College of Design “directed” by Vance Studley, then a professor there. The book employs a unique strategy for illustrating philosophy: it uses colorful typography to reproduce quotations from *Remarks on Colour* in order to illustrate the claims made in them. While using quotations from Wittgenstein’s work to illustrate his ideas was something employed by Kosuth, Nauman, and others, these artists had not employed typography itself as a means to do so. Since all of the illustrations in the book were created by students, it’s not surprising to find that they are not completely successful as illustrations of Wittgenstein’s text. Nonetheless, the idea of employing typography as the means for illustrating Wittgenstein’s ideas strikes me as a genuine innovation.

Earlier, I said that philosophers were largely silent about the topic of illustrations of philosophy. This is not quite accurate. There are some philosophers who discuss specific paintings that they think illustrate their ideas. In *Thoughtful Images*, I explore how Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, and Michel Foucault each use a specific painting to illustrate their theories, but it was only through the typology I developed that I was able to see these three philosophers as developing a new conception of how philosophy could be illustrated. What was unusual is that the paintings these philosophers use to illustrate their views antedated the theories they were supposed to illustrate. I call this type of illustration a “theory-based” illustration of philosophy to indicate that it was the presence of a theory that motivated the interpretations put forward by these philosophers.

I hope this brief discussion whets readers’ appetite to read more about illustrations of philosophy, as well as to view the many illustrations included in *Thoughtful Images*. Illustrating philosophy visually is a topic that deserves more attention than philosophers have given it.

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