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The Genealogy of the Image

Introduction

The genealogy of the image and its relationship to reality can be traced from Plato's Republic,¹ through to Walter Benjamin,² and more recently, Hito Steyerl. Each of these accounts discusses the 'poverty' of the image in comparison to the original, but they also consider the production, reception and dissemination of the image, thus suggesting the possibility for the image to change or enhance reality through "[placing] the copy of the original in situations beyond the reach of the original itself".

The relationship of the image to reality is also addressed in the field of image studies, which aims to investigate the complex interdisciplinary nature of the image as it relates to the study of different genres such as art, aesthetics, anthropology, cultural studies, history, philosophy and science. Sunil Manghani introduces the concept of image studies by using the metaphor of 'an ecology of images', as he believes that "the classificatory, comparative, and systems-based approach of ecology can be made pertinent to image studies, as it too seeks to locate how and why images operate in certain 'environments' or systems of meaning".³

Manghani also locates the image within an "image community" where images share formal and aesthetic content and properties, and are situated in an "image system... [of] political, technical, cultural, social and legal discourses". Therefore this 'ecology of images' not only relates to the use of images within different disciplines in order to visualise reality, but also the relational networks within which the image operates.⁴

The use of the term 'genealogy of the image', rather than Manthony's 'ecology of images', is specifically intended to evoke the idea of 'families' of images. As W.J.T. Mitchell describes in his 1984 essay, 'What is an image?': *"If we begin by looking, not for some universal definition of the term, but at those places where images have differentiated themselves from one another on the basis of boundaries between institutional discourses, we come up with a family tree... [which] designates a type of imagery that is central to the discourse of some intellectual discipline."*⁵

A 'genealogy of the image' also suggests a network of cultural production which could function as a kind of visual anthropology. This is expressed in Aby Warburg's study of cultural artefacts and traditions in the development of a theory of the psychological dimension of culture, whereby the human experience produced patterns of reasoning which would be evident within works of art.⁶

My particular interest in image studies relates to the visual arts: the ways in which image reproduction has developed as a medium for disseminating and analysing artworks, the contribution this can make to creating new dialogues between works of art, and the role of image memory in facilitating a deeper engagement with the art object.

Image memory, in this case, combines the formal and stylistic elements of visual perception, with an idealised quality of the remembered image. This is explained in Warburg's study of moving draperies in Botticelli's *'Birth of Venus'*, as Gombrich translates: *"If the artist draws figures he has never seen, allegories or deities, he is not hampered by the sense impression from the static real model standing in front of him. Such figures merge more easily with the remembered images of movement seen in the past"*.⁷

These image memories, in an art historical sense, can be facilitated by the use of image reproduction. The history of image reproduction in art provides an insight into the history of technological development, from the engravings of the *'Theatre Pictorium'*, through to Warburg's use of photographs in his work on the *'Mnemosyne Atlas'*. The use of photography as a method of reproducing images has also exponentially increased our ability to analyse artworks online, contributing to new academic fields such as the Digital Humanities.

The history of image collecting

The history of image collecting can be explored through the creation of illustrated catalogues where, as early as the 17th Century, collectors sought to capture and distribute images of their treasures in more portable means. As such, artists were commissioned to produce printed reproductions of artworks for study, comparison and distribution.

In 1660, David Teniers the Younger produced the *'Theatre Pictorium'*, the first printed catalogue of a major paintings collection. The collection was owned by his patron the

Hapsburg Archduke Leopold Wilhelm, who was cousin to King Philip IV of Spain. His first depiction of the collection however, was in the form of the painting *'Archduke Leopold Wilhelm in his Picture Gallery'*, which detailed Leopold and his fellow collectors surrounded by a selection of his paintings. As a historical artefact, this painting not only reveals the extent of Leopold's collection, but also documents elements of the Archduke's social relationships.⁸

Teniers continued to document the collection through the selection of 243 of the approximately 1300 works to depict in his *'Theatre Pictorium'*. He created miniature reproductions of the paintings in oil, which were then used as models by a team of engravers to ensure the accuracy of the printed copies. Despite the inaccessibility of the private collection, the catalogue made it possible for the images to be used for reference up until the 18th Century, *"and had an enormous influence on the way that collections came to be organised, understood and published"*.⁹

The history of the *'Theatre Pictorium'* and the circumstances surrounding its publication were displayed in an exhibition at the Courtauld Gallery, UK, from 19th October 2006 to 21st January 2007. The small oil reproductions were shown alongside engravings from the catalogue and the large gallery interior paintings. Although the works were produced as reproductions of the original collection, they have since become a valuable historical resource, showing original compositions of paintings from the collection that have now been lost or altered over time.¹⁰ In addition to this, the 2006 exhibition enabled the life of these images to extend to contemporary networks and audiences, thereby impacting on their art historical knowledge and image memory.

Networks of influence

The impact of image memory in understanding how ideas proliferate across temporal and geographical boundaries was of particular interest to German born art historian Aby Warburg. He was influenced in part by the methods of his teacher Karl Lamprecht, who believed that *"the visual arts provided the only clear manifestation, or objectification, of intellectual culture that could offer access to the mentality and collective psyche of the era in which the artforms were produced"*.¹¹

This prompted Warburg to consider artworks as more than simply cultural products, but also as a monument, illustration or documentation of a historical period; an idea which he applied to understanding the Florentine Intermedi of 1589.¹² This investigation into theatrical production in Renaissance Italy specifically referred to the Florentine use of images from antiquity. This led to his ongoing scholarly endeavour to find a solution to the question: *"Was bedeutet das nachleben der Antike? roughly translated as How are we to interpret the continued revivals of elements of ancient culture in Western civilisation?"*¹³

In the pursuit of this question Warburg began to construct a vast library called the Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg in Hamburg. It was here that he began to

develop his work on the *'Mnemosyne Atlas'*, a series of exhibition screens onto which were pinned photographs that explored the relationships between visual images.¹⁴

Producing this work at the turn at the 20th century, concurrent with the development of photography, afforded Warburg a great advantage in visualising these relationships, which he often reconfigured and photographed to explore new themes within the work. The use of images also allowed him to create multiple narratives as *"every [image was]... not only connected forward and backward in a 'unilinear' development [but] it could only be understood by what it derived from and by what it contradicted"*.¹⁵

This dialectical method was conceived as an 'iconology of intervals', where objects were not to be classified according to art historical narrative, but rather through considering *"the contrasts, analogies, tensions, and anachronisms among them"*.¹⁶

According to Richard Woodfield, Warburg's main achievement was in raising specific questions about the relationship between visual art and culture. Woodfield explores and extrapolates on Warburg's central tenet by repurposing it as *"How would Botticelli have acquired his skill in the rendition of drapery and what were the technical resources available to him?"* This instead focuses on the proliferation of pattern books containing images of antiquity across fifteenth century Europe, thus shifting the emphasis of Warburg's argument from a solely psychological investigation of a civilisation, to an exploration of the networks of cultural production and dissemination.¹⁷

Despite Woodfield's criticism, the first plate taken from the archive of Mnemosyne Atlas appears to show exactly these cultural networks. The plate contains images of a *"map of heaven with its constellations, a map of Europe marking the places which played a role in the transmission of astrological lore, and finally a family tree of the Medici which Warburg showed in his lectures on European pageantry"*.¹⁸

Analysing artwork through images

While Warburg's project used images of artistic production to understand culture, conversely, the context in which the work of art was created can also be used as an indicator for interpreting the art object. However, as Warburg experienced when attempting to map linear narratives of historical processes,¹⁹ often the complex nature of these connections can create a problem for displaying objects in a traditional gallery setting.

As Price, Koontz and Lovings argue in 'Curating Digital Spaces, Making Visual Arguments', the role of the curator *"is often couched as a mediating experience [where] the curator negotiates the relationship of artist, work, and audience"*. Furthermore, the *"institutional and physical limitations of museum spaces"* necessitate a focus on a specific strand of enquiry between the objects, where their *"meaning emerges because of the discursive avenues created by the objects in an emergent*

conversation via the exhibit".²⁰ This suggests that the physical exhibition space, whilst offering the viewer access to the original objects, also produces a prescribed and diminished interpretation for audiences.

A response to these issues was the advancement of the Digital Humanities in the 1980s, which "*embraced pioneering work from the late 1940s and the models that inspired archival projects at Oxford in the early 1970s [to] develop, critique, and disseminate ways of structuring humanities data to dialogue effectively with computation*".²¹ This trend continued to grow throughout the 1990s and into the 21st Century, incorporating the use of "*visualizations, geospatial representations, simulated spaces, and network analyses of complex systems*".²²

The Digital Humanities can be seen as an evolution of earlier attempts to categorise and display connections between images. As the MIT Press manifesto for the Digital Humanities states: "*The capacity with digital media to create enhanced forms of curation brings humanistic values into play, in ways that were difficult to achieve in traditional museum or library settings. Rather than being viewed as autonomous or self-evident, artifacts can be seen as being shaped by and shaping complex networks of influence, production, dissemination, and reception, animated by multilayered debates and historical forces*".²³

In other words, the Digital Humanities allows us to explore the ways in which image reproduction the interpretation of artworks, and how these images contribute to the continued life of objects and the networks within which they are situated.

Conclusion

These examples of image reproduction have shown how images in the visual arts operate to enhance the life of the object. From Enlightenment philosophies of classification and cataloguing of the image, through to photography and online image sharing, each process explores the complex networks surrounding the production, collection and dissemination of the image.

The use of painting and engraved reproductions by David Teniers the Younger highlighted artworks from a collection that was not publicly available, sometimes even beyond the life of the original. At the same time, his gallery interior painting exposed some the social circles of the patrons and collectors who were prevalent at the time.

The development of photography, as evidenced in Warburg's methods, allowed for similarities between disparate cultural artefacts to become more apparent. This, in turn, contributed to an understanding of the relationship between art history and culture, the ways in which ideas in material culture were reiterated both spatially and temporally, and how this can impact on new forms of artistic production.

Within the digital realm, initiatives such as Google Art Project have used 3D mapping technologies to create online galleries where users can experience artworks in the context of the virtual gallery. These digital representations allow audiences to navigate

the space and create connections between works, through additional contextual information and the ability to build their own collections online.

The image, as both belonging to, and comprising of, these various different networks, increases and enhances our ability to engage with the original.

¹ Plato, 'The Simile of the Cave', in *Images: Critical and Primary Sources Volume 1: Understanding Images* ed. by [Sunil Manghani](#) (Oxford, UK: Berg Publishers, 2013) pp. 166-172

² Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, translated by J. A. Underwood, (London: Penguin Books, 1936/2008)

³ [Sunil Manghani](#) (ed), *Images: Critical and Primary Sources Volume 1: Understanding Images*, (Oxford, UK: Berg Publishers, 2013) p. xiv

⁴ [Sunil Manghani](#) (ed), *Images: Critical and Primary Sources Volume 1: Understanding Images*, (Oxford, UK: Berg Publishers, 2013) p. xv

⁵ W.J.T. Mitchell, 'What is an Image?', in *Images: Critical and Primary Sources Volume 1: Understanding Images*, ed. by [Sunil Manghani](#) (Oxford, UK: Berg Publishers, 2013) pp. 3-32 (pp. 4-5)

⁶ Richard Woodfield (ed), *Art History as Cultural History: Warburg's Projects* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001) pp. 67-68

⁷ Ernst H Gombrich, *Aby Warburg: An Intellectual Biography*, (Michigan, USA: Phaidon Press, 1986) p. 83

⁸ Exhibition Archive: David Teniers and the Theatre of Painting
<<http://www.courtauld.ac.uk/GALLERY/exhibitions/2006/teniers/index.shtml>>
[accessed 29 August 2014]

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Kathryn Bush, 'Aby Warburg and the Cultural Historian Karl Lamprecht' in *Art History as Cultural History: Warburg's Projects*, ed. by Richard Woodfield (London and New York: Routledge, 2001) pp. 67-68

¹² M A Katritzky 'Aby Warburg and the Florentine Intermedi of 1589: Extending the Boundaries of Art History'. in *Art History as Cultural History: Warburg's Projects*, ed. by Richard Woodfield (London and New York: Routledge, 2001) p. 210

¹³ Ernst H Gombrich, 'The nineteenth century notion of a pagan revival' in *Art History as Cultural History: Warburg's Projects*, ed. by Richard Woodfield (London and New York: Routledge, 2001) p. 55

¹⁴ Charlotte Schoell-Glass, "'Serious issues": The Last plates of Warburg's Picture Atlas Mnemosyne' in *Art History as Cultural History: Warburg's Projects*, ed. by Richard Woodfield (London and New York: Routledge, 2001) p. 184-185

¹⁵ Ernst H Gombrich, *Aby Warburg: An Intellectual Biography*, (Michigan, USA: Phaidon Press, 1986) p. 284

¹⁶ Martha Blassnigg, 'Ekphrasis and a Dynamic Mysticism in Art: Reflections on Henri Bergson's Philosophy and Aby Warburg's Mnemosyne Atlas', in *New Realities: Being*

Syncretic, ed. by Ascott/Bast/Fiel/Jahrmann/Schnel, (Wien & New York: Springer, 2009), pp. 42-45 (p. 42).

¹⁷ Richard Woodfield, 'Warburgs "method" in *Art History as Cultural History: Warburg's Projects*, ed. by Richard Woodfield (London and New York: Routledge, 2001) p. 277

¹⁸ Ernst H Gombrich, *Aby Warburg: An Intellectual Biography*, (Michigan, USA: Phaidon Press, 1986) p. 292

¹⁹ Ernst H Gombrich, *Aby Warburg: An Intellectual Biography*, (Michigan, USA: Phaidon Press, 1986) p. 284

²⁰ [Daniel Price](#), [Rex Koontz](#) and [Lauren Lovings](#), *Curating Digital Spaces, Making Visual Arguments: A Case Study in New Media Presentations of Ancient Objects* <<http://www.digitalhumanities.org/dhq/vol/7/2/000159/000159.html>> [accessed 29 August 2014]

²¹ [Anne Burdick](#), [Johanna Drucker](#), [Peter Lunenfeld](#), [Todd Presner](#) and [Jeffrey Schnapp](#), *Digital Humanities* (Massachusetts and London: MIT Press) p. 8

²² [Anne Burdick](#), [Johanna Drucker](#), [Peter Lunenfeld](#), [Todd Presner](#) and [Jeffrey Schnapp](#), *Digital Humanities* (Massachusetts and London: MIT Press) p. 9

²³ [Anne Burdick](#), [Johanna Drucker](#), [Peter Lunenfeld](#), [Todd Presner](#) and [Jeffrey Schnapp](#), *Digital Humanities* (Massachusetts and London: MIT Press) pp. 17-18