Theories of agency in art

Review of:


Matthew Rampley

When it was first published in German in 2010, *Theorie des Bildaktes* attracted considerable attention. It promised to be a major theoretical treatise by one of the pre-eminent art historians in Germany, who had played a leading role in the growth of Germanophone visual studies (‘Bildwissenschaft’). Bredekamp’s interests have been wide-ranging but this volume takes its lead from one of his recurring preoccupations: the historiographical legacy of Aby Warburg. Not only a member of the editorial collective involved in the publication of Warburg’s *Nachlaß*, he has also written extensively on Warburg. Indeed, a study by Bredekamp of Warburg’s anthropological writings has just been published to add to his already impressive output on the thinker.¹ *Image Acts* is a continuation of that set of concerns, and one might regard it as an attempt to construct a general Warburgian theory of the image.

At its heart is the claim that artworks are not just the passive recipients of an aestheticising gaze but that they exercise a Medusa-like power over the spectator. This is driven by Bredekamp’s response to the ubiquity of images in contemporary global societies, but much of his analysis is devoted to the early modern period – reflecting many of his earlier art historical interests.² The book presents a dazzling array of examples that illustrate how the image acts, such as: the use of self-referential inscriptions and signatures on objects and images that appear to make them speak in the first person; the presentation of ‘living images’ and *tableaux vivants*; automata that erase the boundary between humans and things; the tradition of the *vera icon* whereby the image is not merely a representation but also the living presence or substitution for the real thing; the use of images as a punitive measure (in Prussia, if an escaped criminal could not be punished, the punishment would be *depicted* as a substitute for the real thing); images that gaze back at the beholder; meta-representational and self-referential images that thematise (and transgress) their own pictorial conventions (what Victor Stoichita has termed the ‘self-aware’ image).³

The book sweeps across the landscape of (mostly Euroamerican) visual culture, discussing, for example, early medieval carvings, works by contemporary artists such as Nikki de Saint Phalle, Joseph Beuys, Vanessa Beecroft and Eleanor Antin, seventeenth-century German swords, classical and archaic Greek vases and sculptures, Enlightenment mannequins and automata, Islamic metalware, the Buddhas of Bamiyan, Renaissance Italian and Netherlandish paintings, and the music videos of Michael Jackson. It brings them together in unusual constellations and suggests novel ways in which they can be thought about.

How, then does it frame its principal focus and what conceptual labour does it undertake? Warburg runs throughout its pages, from Darwinian speculations on the evolutionary origins of the image (with frequent discussion of prehistoric art) to its principal theoretical tenets, which are an amalgam of Cassirer’s philosophy of symbolic forms and Warburg’s methodological introduction to the Mnemosyne atlas. For the image, as presented here, as a source of emotive power, bears more than a passing resemblance to Warburg’s notion of the pathos formula. At the conclusion of the book Bredekamp makes a number of assertions that, in this context, might draw our attention. First is the need, he states, to place the image in a wider philosophy of embodiment and to consider it in terms of ‘the evolution of self-consciousness and self-distancing’ (Warburg referred to this as an ‘iconology of the interval’). This contention is, in turn, based on the assertion that ‘the interaction of the body and images constitutes the precondition of the capacity to think.’ (p. 282)

Evolutionary thinking of the kind that motivated Warburg underpins Bredekamp’s thinking, too, since it informs the conceptual edifice of the entire project. Specifically:

... primitive man as homo faber ... created a world of artefacts. Although produced subjectively, these were subsequently encountered – in a process that recalls the echo-orientation employed by bats – as part of an autonomous objective world. (p. 282)

This leads to the bold conclusion that:

Images do not derive from reality. They are, rather, a form of its condition. Images, through their own potency, empower those enlightened observers who fully recognise this quality. Images are not passive. They are begetters of every sort of experience and action relation to perception. This is the quintessence of the image act. (p. 283)

In other words, humans find themselves in a symbolic universe of their own creation, and that act of creation is what defines them as a species, but they no longer experience it as such. Cassirer was mostly interested in language as the primary form of such symbolic activity, but for Bredekamp it is the image that is the more fundamental, and this reflects both his idiosyncratic definition of ‘image’ and also the fact that the German term ‘Bild’ has connotations of making and forming that its English equivalent ‘image’ does not possess. For, he notes, ‘In its fundamental, initial definition, the concept of the “image” encompasses every form
of conscious shaping.’ (p. 16) ‘Image’ thus becomes a generalised concept that denotes all human artefacts.

Bredekamp does not rest with this point, however. He states that not merely do we reify the world and overlook its status as our own creation, but that also the apparently objective world, by virtue of ‘resonances of perception,’ acquires agency. This is a crucial part of his argument, and he introduces it early on; he explores parallels between his theory of the image act and the speech act theory of philosophers such as John Searle but also important differences, for in contrast to the latter, the theory of the image act ‘locates the image not in the place formerly occupied by the spoken word, but in that formerly occupied by the speaker. The image is, in short, no longer the instrument, but the actor – indeed the “prime mover”, the protagonist.’ (p. 33)

At first sight, Bredekamp’s book appears to be preoccupied with similar questions to those explored by W. J. T. Mitchell in What Do Pictures Want?, namely the extent and consequences of the tendency to treat images as if they were living beings. As Mitchell stated, ‘I am concerned …. to look at the peculiar tendency of images to absorb and be absorbed by human subjects in processes that look suspiciously like those of living things. We have an incorrigible tendency to lapse into vitalistic and animistic ways of speaking when we talk about images.’

Indeed, the title of Mitchell’s book is a conceit that foregrounds the peculiarity of our behaviour towards images, and it is perhaps no accident that one of the chapters on ‘Totemism, Fetishism, Idolatry’ encapsulates a leitmotif of the book as a whole. In contrast, Bredekamp appears to be advancing a much stronger claim, to the effect that images are ‘autonomously active entities’ (p. 278).

What are we to make of this and similar contentions? What does it mean to say that the image exercises agency? And even if we experience a form of cognitive ‘resonance,’ what does this mean? How and why does it lead us to experience images as actors as opposed to objects? Unfortunately, we are never really given answers to such questions, and in general, the book lacks conceptual exposition and analysis of some of its key ideas. Most puzzling, perhaps, is the fact that Image Acts lacks a theory of agency, despite the central role played by the notion in the project.

The philosophy of action is a massive subject of debate, and a review is not the place to embark on an in-depth presentation of some of the main positions, but some salient points are worth making. Specifically, following what one might term the ‘standard’ theory, agency can be defined as the capacity to act intentionally, which involves acting towards a goal. In other words, it is related to a set of mental representations, desires and beliefs. This view has not been uncontested; it has been objected, for example, that one might talk of non-intentional agency. Habitual actions (such as driving a car) as well as spontaneous and skilful action (in sport, for example) are examples of such non-intentional agency, as is the behaviour of bacteria and other simple life-forms. Such objections, while important, do not

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5 What Do Pictures Want?, 188-200.
necessarily undermine the standard theory, since they simply involve recognition that there exist different kinds of agency. On this argument, one might even find a space for a theory of pictorial agency, which might perhaps be one such other kind of agency. Yet on the other hand, even in the case of the bacterium, it has been suggested that its activities are still goal-directed – i.e. they are actions rather than purely physical events – even if there is no conscious mental representation of those goals. In the case of human actors, most such behaviours are embedded in the longer-term conscious goals and desires of the agent – reaching a planned destination, winning the game. Furthermore, if they are not to be reduced to purely causal physical reactions, all actions are deliberative and involve decision-making. No matter how circumscribed the alternatives and the conditions of the choices may be, being an agent means making a selection between alternatives.

What does it mean, in such a context, to talk of visual agency? In what ways do images select from alternatives and act on the basis of intentions and (conscious or unconscious) goals? To put the question in this form may seem deliberately obtuse, for paintings, swords and Palaeolithic sculptures clearly do not have intentions and goals, but Bredekamp’s study invites such questioning since it makes such bold claims about the agency of the image. Given the absence of mental representations, goals, beliefs and intentions, Bredekamp needs to indicate what he means by ‘agency’ and how it is to be differentiated from the ‘standard’ theory, or indeed, how it might be seen as more than simply a metaphor. His account invites a further question, namely, what does he mean by ‘cognitive resonance’ and what is it such that it leads human subjects to experience the world as exercising agency?

These cut to the heart of the intellectual framework of the enterprise, and in the absence of a more developed theoretical framework, the book runs the danger of comprising mostly a positivistic catalogue of instances in which images are treated as if they are agents but without further analysis. For all its intriguing claims, therefore, Bredekamp’s book is theoretically underdetermined. This is not helped by the tendency to retreat into historical exposition just when a more pointed theoretical analysis is required. In the introductory chapter, for instance, a working concept of the image is introduced, but before taking time to articulate it fully – as well as its implications – the discussion moves on to Alberti, Heidegger and Lacan, which, while historically informative, does little to advance the theoretical discussion. Indeed, it is difficult to establish the logic underpinning the thematic organisation of the book as a whole, an issue that is all the more striking given its claims to be a ‘systematic’ approach to its subject.

Perhaps such criticism might be viewed as unfair, for this is a primarily historical work, but here other reservations might be expressed. On the one hand the geographical and chronological reach of the book is impressive, and the dizzying array of ‘images’ is testament to the ambitions of the book. But what is gained in breadth is lost in depth; cultural contexts and differences are erased. A discussion of colour, for example, covers a 15th-century Bohemian crucifixion, Hans

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Holbein the Elder, Yves Klein, Stephan von Huene, a 16th-century Flemish manuscript, Lucio Fontana, Anselm Kiefer, Jacopo Pontormo and Titian’s Flaying of Marsyas in order to illustrate the thesis that colour triggers certain ‘motoric impulses in the spectator’ (p. 212). Yet aside from its questionable theoretical premises – which seem rooted in the empirical psychology of the 1870s - the heterogeneous nature of this selection means that it struggles to support an historical thesis. Very little binds these together other than the contingent fact that they use colour in striking ways – but then neither are they adduced to help work through a theoretical position.

In Bredekamp’s defence it might be argued that, in keeping with his adherence to the legacy of Warburg, the book is a montage that echoes the approach of the Mnemosyne Atlas. Yet even if we accept this – and Warburg’s project was arguably less radical than is often assumed, despite its superficial similarity to modernist practices of montage – one might still have reservations about Bredekamp’s swift transition from archaic Greek ceramics to medieval Islamic metalwork, fifteen-century Flemish painting and Nikki de Saint Phalle to illustrate, for example, how inscriptions endow works of art with subjective agency. These objects inhabit entirely different worlds, and in each case this process – assuming we accept Bredekamp’s initial thesis – has entirely different meanings.

It is worth comparing Bredekamp’s book with another analysis of agency: Alfred Gell’s Art and Agency. In that earlier work, Gell had also made the power of images the central focus of investigation, yet like Mitchell, and in contrast to Bredekamp, he examined the variables that informed the ascription of agency to them by different cultures. In the theory of the art nexus agency could be exercised by the artist, by the medium and its material properties, by the referent (in icons or other religious depictions), or by the spectator. In turn, such ascriptions of agency co-existed with the differing roles of ‘patient’ that the artwork could occupy. Gell’s point was that in different cultures the relations between these roles would vary; the power of the Byzantine icon rested in the fact that it was a site of the presence of the divine, whereas that of the Renaissance portrait may well have lain in the astonishing technical and artistic skill of its maker. One might note that in each case Gell is not advancing a substantive thesis about agency, merely making an ethnological observation about how, in a range of cultures, it is attributed to images. He is therefore not under any obligation to formulate a theory of agency even though, in fact, he does, with a highly suggestive theory of distributed personhood.

Comparison with Gell throws up some of the difficulties in Bredekamp’s book. For Art and Agency has a carefully crafted theoretical armature that is used consistently, and which is also coupled with recognition of the limits to the kinds of claims it can be used to advance. This is not to overlook certain weaknesses in Gell nor is to suggest that Bredekamp’s approach should approximate to that of Gell. It is to suggest, however, that Gell avoids some of the pitfalls evident in Image Acts, which stem, perhaps, from a mismatch between Bredekamp’s ambitions and the theoretical resources he mobilises in pursuit of them. Image Acts presents an imposing and impressive series of examples, which, while not all equally

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convincing, point to the complex nature of our engagement with images. Its case, however, is undermined by its ambiguity of purpose which might have been resolved had a more stringent and fully worked out set of theoretical and methodological premises been developed to flesh out its principal claims.

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