

Abstraction and Representation: Form and Meaning in the Philosophy of Images

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This article examines the complex interplay between abstraction and representation in the ontology of images. Images inhabit an in-between space as tangible artifacts that also convey intangible ideas and meanings. The analysis synthesizes perspectives from across the history of philosophy to elucidate how images bridge abstraction and representation through their form and function. It engages with ongoing epistemological and aesthetic debates concerning the dual nature of images. Plato's theory of ideal forms is outlined as an early attempt to define abstraction. Modern semiotic theories are discussed for their insights into how images create meaning through codes and signs. Phenomenology offers an alternative approach by prioritizing the sensorial, affective impact of images. Poststructuralism problematizes representation in the context of mechanical reproduction and simulacra. While diverse, these philosophical frameworks all grapple with the issues images pose between abstract essence and concrete appearance, conceptual ideas and sensory manifestations. The article reveals the richness of images as liminal constructs that collapse dualisms in their creative interfacing of material forms and immaterial meanings. It concludes that this ontological ambiguity empowers images as mediators between imagination and perception, subjectivity and reality.

Keywords: abstraction, images, semiotics, dualism, Plato

Introduction

Images inhabit an intriguing ontological space between the concrete and the abstract, the perceptible and the symbolic. As artifacts that are physically crafted yet conceptually evocative, images have long occupied philosophers concerned with representation, signification, and epistemology. This article will examine philosophical perspectives on the dual nature of images as both tangible objects and intangible conveyors of meaning. It will analyze how imagery bridges abstraction and representation through its form and aesthetics on one hand, and its function as a medium of ideas on the other. Modern semiotic theories will be considered along with phenomenological approaches to imagery and postmodern discourse on reproduction. The analysis will synthesize insights across the history of philosophy to elucidate the shifting ontology of images and the philosophical issues they raise regarding perception, imagination, and knowledge.

By questioning how images make the immaterial manifest through formal designs and qualities, this article will engage with ongoing inquiries into the aesthetics and semantics of visual culture. It will assess

philosophical attempts to articulate how images utilize their sensible, plastic nature to represent immaterial concepts, memories, emotions, and metaphysical themes. Fundamentally, this article will address how the form of images relates to their meaning and powers of signification. It will confront the epistemic limitations and possibilities of images as nexuses between tangible appearances and intangible ideas that comprise human thought and expression. The duplicitous ontology of images as both abstractions and representations positions them at the heart of philosophical investigations into perception, consciousness, and knowledge.

Images possess a remarkable duality—they are both tangible objects and intangible representations. As physical artifacts crafted through various media, images undeniably occupy a concrete presence. Yet as symbols, images also point beyond themselves to convey meanings related to identities, narratives, concepts, and metaphysical themes. It is this liminal space images inhabit between materiality and abstraction that has intrigued philosophers seeking to elucidate the nature of representation. Plato grappled with this by developing his famous theory of forms—immaterial archetypes that earthly particulars imperfectly manifest (Plato, 2000). For Plato, images are thrice removed from the essence of the forms themselves. Modern semiotic theories shifted focus to how images generate meaning through signs and visual codes (Barthes, 1977). Phenomenology redirected attention to the sensory impact and dynamism of images in contrast to linguistic models (Heidegger, 1993). Poststructuralism complicated matters by questioning representations amidst reproduction (Baudrillard, 1994). Across these frameworks, the questions images prompt between abstraction and representation remain philosophically significant.

Semiotics became a dominant framework for analyzing representation and meaning in images. Saussure conceived a dyadic model of the linguistic sign as the conjunction of signifier and signified. This was extended to visual analysis, as structural anthropologist Lévi-Strauss examined recurrent motifs in art and myth as signs encoding meanings through binary oppositions (Lévi-Strauss, 1963). Critiquing this, Barthes argued images synthesize connoted and denoted meanings from socio-historical contexts, emphasizing contextual fluidity rather than invariance. Eco furthered semiotic study of codes and “units of meaning” in visual culture (Eco, 1979). While variably foregrounding structure or plurality, semiotics reveals how images leverage culturally-defined signs and symbols to represent ideas and concepts beyond their tangible forms. It probes the nature of visual language and its relationship to wider meaning-making processes. However, semiotics has been accused of neglecting the sensorial, imaginative, and affective qualities of images in its focus on decoding (Mitchell, 1986).

Phenomenology presented an alternative approach to imagery that prioritized direct sensory engagement over semiotics’ mediation through language and signs. Merleau-Ponty asserted painting creatively discloses the world by giving visible form to the unseen realm of perception. Similarly, Heidegger’s analysis of van Gogh foregrounded the revelatory power of images to unconceal truth through their aesthetic presentation, beyond conceptual representation. For Gadamer, the presentation-form of images is self-referential, collapsing subject-object distance in the immediacy of the aesthetic experience (Gadamer, 2006). Drawing from phenomenology, Sartre examined the irreality yet imaginative pull of image-objects (Sartre, 2004). These perspectives emphasize the sensorial dynamism and affective impact of images in contrast to semiotic preoccupation with codification and meaning. However, phenomenology has been critiqued for romanticizing

aesthetic experience and neglecting images' discursive embeddedness. Still, its attentiveness to the affective, embodied encounter with images provides a vital counterpoint.

Poststructuralist thinkers complicated representation and meaning amidst mass reproduction and circulation of images. Walter Benjamin theorized mechanical reproduction as negating the aura of authenticity in artworks, with photography and film exemplifying duplication's effects (Benjamin, 1968). Guy Debord critically analyzed the rise of image-saturated mass media spectacles and commodity fetishism in late capitalism (Debord, 1994). Jean Baudrillard controversially argued images have become detached simulacra, copies without originals bearing little indexical relation to any reality. Jacques Derrida's deconstruction aimed to dismantle the persistent binary oppositions inherited from Platonic metaphysics that hierarchize presence over representation (Derrida, 1976). Despite their differing views, these postmodern perspectives all problematize representation and meaning in images as endlessly reproducible, mediated, and detached from stable referents. However, they have been accused of denying images' creative power.

While philosophical perspectives on images vary, common threads arise regarding form, meaning, and representation. Plato introduced timeless forms as ideal abstractions embodied imperfectly in material images. Semiotics decodes images' cultural meanings but risked neglecting aesthetic and affective dimensions. Phenomenology foregrounded the latter through the image-encounter (Merleau-Ponty, 1964). Poststructuralism complicated meaning amidst reproduction. Yet images' creative vitality persists despite this postmodern uncertainty. Mitchell synthesizes these tensions, theorizing images as "living organisms" with dynamic power to reconfigure form and meaning. Beyond one-sided reduction, the animate yet ambiguous ontology of images stimulates imagination and unveils new worlds. Growing philosophical recognition of this generative liminality suggests images' conceptual fecundity arises from their unresolvable navigation between abstraction and representation.

Ultimately, the shifting ontology of images remains suspended between oppositional poles—ideal/material, symbol/substance, transparent/opaque (Belting, 2011). Rather than resolving this liminal ambiguity, contemporary philosophers increasingly accept images' irreducibility to abstract essences or fixed meanings. Mitchell advocates embracing images as "metarepresentations" that reflexively exhibit their own mediated process of representation. For Boehm, images problematize representation while opening novel modes of seeing and thinking (Boehm, 2009). Far from destabilizing knowledge, the conceptual volatility of images serves an epistemic function. Their fluid existence between abstraction and representation drives ongoing negotiation of reality, ideas, and subjectivity. By foregrounding this tensile duplicity, philosophy delineates the fertile epistemic terrain images inhabit between percept and concept, concretion and evocation, apprehension and imagination.

By refusing to reduce images to either abstraction or representation, their duplicitous ontology is embraced, opening new theoretical terrain. Conceptualizing images as "picture-acts," Gombrich stressed the beholder's active role in mobilizing fluid meanings (Gombrich, 1960). Warning against linguistic models, Didi-Huberman described images as visual events disclosing possibilities through imagistic operations distinct from language (Didi-Huberman, 2003). Groys argued images access cultural meanings more readily than texts precisely because of their ambiguous ontology between abstraction and tangibility (Groys, 2008). Emphasizing tactility, Marks proposed a haptic visuality present in certain images that privileges embodied perception beyond the

visual. Despite differences, these approaches all highlight how images productively complicate representation and meaning. Their protean existence between abstraction and concreteness underpins the co-creation of meaning with viewers and their imaginative capacities.

By unleashing images' mediating potential, new connections emerge between embodiment, empathy, and knowledge. Drawing from psychology, Breckner theorized images as projections of intrapsychic dynamics that viewers interact with as externalized "third spaces" (Breckner, 2010). Combining phenomenology and hermeneutics, Boehm proposed images act as "iconic *diferends*" that bridge lived experience and comprehension. For Belting, images are "living agents" mediating between visible physicality and invisible worlds of beliefs, values, and ideas. Assimilating these insights, Freedberg and Gallese linked mirror neuron research to image response, arguing our neurobiological resonance with depicted bodies subliminally motivates empathy and appropriation. Such diversity reflects images' generative ontological instability. Always shifting between form and content, representation and sense, materiality and affect, images prompt equally fluid models to grasp their mobility across once-impervious philosophical binaries.

Conclusion

In summary, this analysis has outlined key philosophical perspectives on the complex interrelation between abstraction and representation integral to images. While approaches vary, diverse frameworks illuminate images' duplicitous ontology suspended between materiality and immateriality, sensory form and conceptual meaning. Contemporary theories increasingly embrace this liminality, recognizing images' vitality stems from their refusal of reduction. Their generative space between abstraction and representation engenders dynamic interaction with viewers, facilitates empathy and imagination, and reveals novel modes of thinking. Images activate this process as "metarepresentations" that turn representation back upon itself, "iconic *diferends*" that embody the collision of experiences, and "living agents" that perpetually reshape vision. By perpetually navigating the divide between abstraction and representation, images unveil the interconnectedness of perception, embodiment, and cognition while critically reflecting the mediated process of signification itself.

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