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A New Classification for Art

Die Klassifikation und ihr Umfeld. Proceedings 10. Jahrestagung der Gesellschaft für Klassifikation eV, eds. P. O. Degens et al., (Frankfurt: Indeks Verlag, 1986), pp.76-84, (Studien sur Klassifikation, Bd. 17).

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0. Introduction

Three years ago I drew attention to the phenomenon that most efforts at classification have been in terms of verbal images. Visual images have been relatively neglected. Photographic archives of paintings typically have an author index and a primitive subject index. In some cases a search can be made under the names of individual gods, goddesses, etc. Van der Waal's Iconclass provides one of the first comprehensive lists of subjects and contents of visual images. The Canadian Heritage Information Network (CHIN) and the Getty Center's Art History Information Program (AHIP) are also working in this direction. In computerized form, these developments will allow a new degree of access to the subjects and contents of art.

These subjects and contents depend largely on the particular functions or goals of art in a given culture. Sir Ernst Gombrich's work has thrown much light on several of these functions, particularly, 1) mimesis, imitation or matching (e.g. *Art and Illusion*), 2) allegory or symbolism (*Symbolic Images*), 3) pattern or ornament (*A Sense of Order*). If one could identify all the chief functions of art, then these categories could be used for a new classification. This paper is a preliminary attempt in that direction. Seven basic categories are suggested: connecting, ordering, matching, systematizing, mixing, internalizing and externalizing.

1. Connecting

In so-called primitive cultures art aims at connecting visible objects with invisible powers. Here the gods are presented in the work of art itself rather than represented. To be recognized by members of the tribe or culture, the work of art needs some naturalistic

features. These are usually anthropomorphic, zoomorphic or some combination thereof. However, because the work of art aims at connecting natural objects with supernatural realms, it can never be fully realistic. If the pantheon of gods becomes too large it will undermine the powers attributable to any single god. Hence the goal of connecting leads to a closed repertoire of images, and usually involves preliterate cultures.

2. Ordering

Another fundamental goal of art involves ordering the world in terms of a recurrent pattern. In early cultures these patterns are usually organic (e.g. acanthus leaf) or geometric (e.g. meander pattern). Because the goal is to impose on the surroundings a set of readily recognized shapes, it also tends towards a closed repertoire of images, and especially in pre-literate cultures, where the patterns of art serve as integrating themes in the community.

In literate cultures the patterns are often based on verbal sources. These may be mythical, as in the Chinese tradition, in which the dragon is associated with the emperor and the phoenix with the empress, whence dragons and phoenixes become recurrent motifs in Chinese art. The verbal source may be literary, as in the Chinese tradition in which a pun on the word for happiness makes the bat a favoured motif. Or the verbal source may be religious as in Islam in which verses from the *Koran* become important motifs on the walls of mosques and other buildings.

3. Matching

In marked contrast to the above two goals, matching (also termed imitation or mimesis) aims to separate the outer from the inner world and focus on the outer world, which in turn stimulates an open repertoire of images. The goals of connecting and ordering involve presentation of an image which tends to fix expression in one medium, usually sculpture. The goal of matching involves re-presentation and thus invites images in various media. In its simplest forms matching represents the natural world directly as portraiture, representations of *homo faber*, *homo ludens*, wildlife, still life, townscapes and landscapes. There are, however, at least six other categories of matching which involve vision, anamorphosis, caricature, abstraction, explicit verbal sources and implicit verbal sources. Each of these will be considered in turn.

The goal of matching is inherently ambiguous. Is the aim to record objects as they are or to record what (we think that) we see? Some will insist that these two aims are synonymous. When discrepancies emerge between these aims the theory of vision nominally governs the practice of representation and every change in optical theory supposedly involves a change in painting practice.¹¹ However, artists frequently follow only those aspects of theory that interest them or ignore theories altogether which leads to considerably more variations than provided for by formal theories of curvilinear and spherical perspective based on visual theory.

Anamorphosis is another form of matching. It involves systematic distortion to produce a reversible image which returns to normal when looked at from a specific point of view, as in the case of Schrot's portrait of *Edward VI* (London: National Portrait Gallery). Another kind of matching produce distortions which may not permit reversibility in a scientific sense but is calculated to remain recognizable, as in caricatures, in which essential features are usually exaggerated. Related is distortion through abstraction, as evidenced by various impressionist and post-impressionist paintings. Degas' *Danseuse* or Picasso's *Figures au bord de la mer* are examples. Matching can also involve the natural world illustrating explicit verbal sources. Mediaeval illuminated manuscripts provide obvious examples. This phenomenon also extends to other cultures as witnessed by illustrations to the Persian *Shah-Nama*, the Indian *Mahabharata*.

The most complex type of matching illustrates implicit verbal sources, which may involve i) common sources illustrating a) topoi, b) narrative and c) narrative as everyday life, as well as ii) uncommon sources. Matching with topoi illustrates themes such as the three Graces, the three ages of man, four seasons, seven planets and twelve months of the year.

Matching with narrative from common verbal sources is predominantly a Western development. The roots of this interplay have been traced back to Greek culture.² In the Renaissance the development of printing gave an entirely new meaning to the notion of a basic or "classic text". Hence when it came to representing *Paris and the Three Graces* Domenico Veneziano and Rubens could assume that the story was known and could produce their own particular versions. The same occurred in the case of the *Bible*. Whereas pre-literate artists were burdened with creating communality through the work of art and hence produced common images without surprises, Renaissance artists were free to create surprising versions of already common images. In the later sixteenth century the representation of narrative shifted to the context of everyday landscapes and life. Topics which once dominated the foreground, gradually receded into the background. For instance, the story of *Adam and Eve* might become an excuse for painting magnificent gardens.

This goes hand in hand with another trend whereby the purported subject is not to be taken literally.³ Sixteenth century painters often represented Mercury as if he really existed. Boucher's eighteenth century *Venus, Mercury and Cupid* shows the god's ankle wings delicately tied on by a string as if to show that this part of their anatomy is a conscious fiction. These parallels are the more interesting because they may well offer important clues for the development of secular painting. Hence themes such as the *Seven Acts of Mercury*, the *Prodigal Son* and the *Calling of St. Matthew* begin as strictly religious scenes and are slowly transformed into images of everyday life. Matching can also illustrate implicit uncommon verbal sources. These visual images were inspired by some verbal source which in the meantime has either been lost or forgotten. An artist might portray a scene with gods and goddesses the identities of whom are no longer known.

From the fifteenth century onwards, matching with its different versions involving descriptive texts, is complicated by the development of prescriptive theoretical texts, that is, so-called "how to do it" books.⁴ For a brief period it seemed as if texts on perspective would furnish rules for a scientific method of matching representations with originals and thus limit the artistic imagination. One might also have expected that the most important examples of perspectival space should have occurred in matching the natural world directly, thus producing early counterparts of photographic images.

The chief impact of perspective lay elsewhere. It opened up new horizons of artistic imagination in 1) the representation of regular, semi-regular and highly irregular solids, 2) the visualization of both realistic and fanciful ruins, townscapes and cityscapes and particularly 3) the illustration of idealized scenes and places described in the verbal images. Indeed the *Bible* inspired the greatest examples of Renaissance perspectival space. This claim can be restated in terms of four basic factors: A) Visual Work of Art, B) Visual Source in the Natural World, C) Descriptive Verbal Source (Bible, Classic Text), D) Prescriptive Verbal Source (Perspective Treatise, Anatomy Text, etc.). The particular contribution of the Renaissance can then be described as 1) making new links between A and C and 2) establishing links between A, B, C and D. In short, the secret behind the unprecedented proliferation of visual images in the West lies in the paradox that verbalization and visualization are twins.

4. Systematizing

A fourth goal of art involves a systematic combination of ordering and matching to create integrated artistic programmes involving whole contexts rather than just isolated pictures. Such systematizing characterizes most of the greatest achievements of Mediaeval and Renaissance art including the Sistine Chapel in which all the surfaces are part of a single artistic system.

5. Mixing

Whereas the goal of matching seeks to separate outer from inner world, mixing aims at fusing them. One strand of modern art has attempted to use mixing in visualizing implicit uncommon verbal sources or personal statements, showing a mixture of logical and psychological aspects of an artists experience. However, such paintings pose problems for viewers unfamiliar with the life history of a particular artist, which may well explain why visualizing explicit verbal sources in the form of deluxe illustrated books (*les livres d'art*, *Malerbücher*) has become a major art form in the twentieth century.

6. Internalizing

Parallel with this aim of mixing inner and outer images is another goal which focusses on inner images. In extreme cases artists strive to create images which are inspired strictly, from within and bear no recognizable connection with forms in the outside world. Some artists create panels calculated to arouse specific inner effects such as after images (op art). Others seek to record images from dreams and the unconscious realms of the mind.

7. Externalizing

Another goal aims to make the work of art as autonomous and external to the artist as possible. The paint throwing exercises in the tradition of Jackson Pollock, experimental art and happenings belong to this category in which chance becomes an important factor in artistic production.

8. Conclusions

Building on the approach of Sir Ernest Gombrich seven basic functions or goals of art were outlined: connecting, ordering, matching, systematizing, mixing, internalizing and externalizing. It was suggested why only the first two of these goals, connecting and ordering, tended to produce closed repertoires of images, whereas the other goals stimulated open repertoires of images. A contrast emerged between closed repertoires of visual images in non-literate societies and open repertoires in literate societies. A chief reason for these open repertoires was found, in an interplay between visualization and verbalization, which increased with the advent of printing.

Three years ago I lamented the absence of classification systems for visual images. For the reasons outlined above I am now convinced that visual images cannot be classified independently of verbal images.⁵ The categories have proposed are not final. They are intended to stimulate further study.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Professor Ian Hacking, Sergio Sismondo, Professor Dan Blickman and Dr. Ruth Mellinkoff for their advice and criticism. I thank Nancy Sacksteder for typing this paper.

Notes

¹ Some authors have assumed a necessary connection between theories of vision and representation. See Panofsky, E.: "Die Perspektive als symbolische Form." In: *Vorträge der Bibliothek Warburg 1924-1925*. Leipzig, Berlin: 1927. pp. 258-330. For a critique of these assumptions see the present author's "Perspective, Anamorphosis and Vision." In: *Marburger Jahrbuch*. 1986, pp. 92-117.

² See Gombrich, E.H.: *Art and Illusion*. Princeton, NH: Princeton University Press. 1960. p. 129. = The A.W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts, 1956. Bollingen Series, XXXV. 5.

³ Cf. Ligota, C.: "The Story is Not True..." In: *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*. London. Vol. XLV, 1982, pp. 1-13.

⁴ There are, of course, mediaeval precedents. See, for instance, Scheller, R.W.: *A Survey of Medieval Model Books*. Haarlem: De Erven F. Bohn. New York. 1963.

⁵ This remains a matter of great debate. For two recent attempts to construct such a classification for visual images see: Irvine, H.B.: *The Syntax of Art: The Logical Form of Visual Language*. Ph.D. Dissertation. New York University. 1981. Also Saint-Martin, F.: *Introduction to a Semiology of Visual Language*. Kingston, Ontario: Queen's University Press. 1985. Monographs, Working Papers and Prepublications of the Toronto Semiotic Circle, Vol. 3.