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ANATOMY OF ART. PHILOSOPHICAL, PEDAGOGICAL AND THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON THE IMAGE

Anatomia sztuki. Filozoficzne, pedagogiczne i teologiczne refleksje na temat obrazu

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Introduction

The article entitled "Anatomy of Art. Philosophical and pedagogical reflections on image" is intended to introduce the notions related to the nature of the painted image. I there address the problem of the reception of images, their impact on reality, as well as their functioning in the world after the digital revolution. The text is in the form of philosophico-pedagogical considerations, therefore it does not focus on providing ready, definite answers but rather asks questions and attempts to formulate a philosophical reflection on issues relating to the epistemology and semantics of the painting.

Within the text, several notions have been described, such as: symbol, allegory, index sign, meaning, open work. The most essential purpose of the article is a philosophical question regarding the perception of paintings, therefore the way to perceive them and how to look at them, how to see them in depth, how to recognize the signs within them, how t interact with the signs within them in order to create one's own meanings, and thanks to that – according to Umberto Eco's concept – to be the co-author of created meanings based on the painting understood an 'open work'.

Many objects and phenomena can be viewed in two ways: from the outside and from the inside². When I look through the window at the world, I look through the glass from my room, my safe place, my haven sheltered from the hustle and bustle. I thus view reality from the outside. On the other hand, when I open the window and let the buzz inside, I look at that reality in a different way, I become active, I experience it more deeply: smelling the air, hearing the noise of other people's conversations. This analogy of the window can also be applied to art. When I look at a painting in a museum, it is an external perception, as if from behind the glass, because I am in a public space, I do not touch the painting, I do not feel it, I cannot reveal my feelings in front of the people present in the museum. But when I create a painting, I experience it more deeply, I open myself to it with all my senses, I experience myself in the painting, and thanks to this, it begins to affect me mesmerically. Sometimes I can contemplate paintings in depth while looking at an exhibition in an art gallery. Wassily Kandinsky wrote about such perception stating that painting can not be perceived by sight only, because in fact it is perceived unconsciously with all five senses³.

Leon Battisty Alberti, in turn, invokes the analogy of a window open to art, dating back to the XVth century. According to him, a painting is a window to the world in the context of the 'mimesis' and therefore its imitation. Nature was a major inspiration for art in the century mentioned. Nowadays the paintings not only mimic the reality, but also comment on it, change it, criticize, bring aesthetics into it.

An image, in order to affect us in a profound way, must be perceived with reverence, for a long time and carefully. Unfortunately, as citizens of the modern world, in a time of chaos,

¹ U. Eco, Dzieło otwarte: Forma i nieokreśloność w poetykach współczesnych, W.A.B. Warszawa 2008.

² W. Kandinsky, *Eseje o sztuce i o artystach*, przeł. E. Sagan, Wyd. Politechniki Krakowskiej, Kraków 1991.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 9.

diffusion of meanings, dynamism of ever-changing signs, where dominant visual messages are fleeting and quickly lose their meaning, we are unable to focus longer on a single message.

As Agnieszka Rejniak-Majewska writes: Qualities (of the artwork: M.K.) are revealed as a result of the mutual, relational interaction of elements, and although we see them, they actually refer to a deeper multisensory and multilevel foundation of our perception⁴. It is known that when deciphering visual data, nearly 80 per cent of the activity occurs in our mind, as indicated by research conducted at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology⁵. Therefore, by looking at images we stimulate our brain, we develop and learn the visual literacy. After all, our experience of an image consists not only of its form and how it was created, but equally on the context and temporal circumstances in which it was created. Images need to be interpreted in the context of direct realism, historicity, politics, ideology, and power.

If we look at them from the perspective of historical realism, we find that they are an excellent source of knowledge, and in former centuries - for example in the Middle Ages, they helped illiterate people to understand the world⁶. Images enable the viewer to know the 'truth' about an event from the past, but they are also able to show the supernaturalness of an object, elevating it to a symbol of worship, or attributing to it feelings, will, consciousness and desires⁷. In his work "The Missing Structure" on the nature of art, Umberto Eco writes that while the painting "although recognizable, is always burdened with a certain non-clarity and more easily denotes the general things rather than the particular ones". The painting is therefore open to a possibility of multiple interpretations, our subjective creations and imaginings. Therefore, while entering a semiotic dialogue with a painting, we may impose meanings on it in any way, becoming at the same time its co-authors, therefore in a way its authors as well⁹.

William Mitchell writes that although images imitate life, they also seem to live their own life¹⁰. Images, thanks to us - the viewers - come alive. It is through our interpretations, our emotions that they become important and stay with us in our imagination. It is important to remember, however, that their impact can be positive, but also negative. Since images are saturated with ideologies and manipulate our needs, dreams, and moods. As Susan Sontag wrote they are bearers of modernity and desirable substitutes for faceto-face experiences¹¹.

Images are our world, and at the same time, its reflections. Through these reflections they become mirrors, in which we get to know ourselves and enter an interesting visual game. In the modern world, one can even speak of the disappearance of an image and its replacement by a media copy.

So, what is an image and what is a copy? Nowadays we look at thousands of images, from painting to photography, film, videoart, billboards, book illustration, internet memes, computer games and so on. We belong to an image-centric age, and we are a generation of overfamiliar with image people, as Susan Sontag would say¹² which is why we forget images so quickly and are discouraged from observing them for a longer period. So, since we are inundated by images, we do not have enough time to give them meaning, to analyses them, to co-create them. There is an overabundance of images, and they are not always of good quality; on the contrary, they

⁴ A. Rejniak-Majewska, *Chaosom, czyli o gramatyce i fizjonomice form*, [w:] Kandynski W., *Punkt i linia a płaszczyzna. Przyczynek do analizy elementów malarskich*, Wyd. Oficyna, Łódź 2019, s. 212.

⁵ A. Czajkowska, *Fototerapia. Fotografia w pracy nauczyciela, pedagoga i terapeuty*. Wyd. Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, Łódź 2019, s. 13.

⁶ M. Karczmarzyk, *Polska sztuka współczesna w oczach dzieci i dorostych*, Wyd. UG, Gdańsk 2020.

⁷ J. J. Winckelmann, *Dzieje sztuki starożytnej*, tł. Zatorski T., Universitas, Warszawa 2012.

⁸ U. Eco, Dzieło otwarte: Forma i nieokreśloność w poetykach współczesnych, W.A.B. Warszawa 2008.

⁹ M. Karczmarzyk, Co znaczą rysunki dziecięce? Wyd. Anwi, Gdańsk 2014.

¹⁰ W. Mitchell, Czego chcq obrazy, tł. L. Zaremba, Wyd. Narodowe Centrum Kultury, Warszawa 2013, s. 40.

¹¹ S. Sontag, Świat obrazów [w:] Sontag S., O fotografii, przeł. S. Magala, Wyd. Karakter, Kraków 2009, s. 162.

¹² S. Sontag, Świat obrazów [w:] Sontag S., O fotografii, przeł. S. Magala, Wyd. Karakter, Kraków 2009.

can be poor and banally aesthetic in their message. According to Jean Baudrillard: aestheticization is a phenomenon associated with excess that bursts every structure¹³. This author often writes about images in which there is nothing to see¹⁴. The aestheticization of reality leads to the impression that art is everywhere, but it cannot be distinguished from other objects. Aestheticization also makes the world artificial and leads to substitute experiences, subordinates reality to marketing strategies and promotion, and mainly serves the development of the market and the growth of consumption¹⁵. Therefore, it is worth thinking about good quality images which makes a fundamental difference.

1. Explanation of basic notions relating to the philosophy of an image

Writing about the nature of a painting requires defining the elementary notions from areas of the philosophy of art, therefore I will now describe what are: symbols, allegory, index sign, optical hygiene, sign, meaning, open work. These notions are key to my considerations related to assigning meanings to paintings.

Symbol – a semantic stylistic figure which has one literal meaning and a varied number of hidden meanings.

Allegory – a plastic or verbal image illustrating a concept, an idea, a thought or an event with the help of an image that is mobile or symbolic in nature. Index sign – has a direct physical relation with the object to which it refers.

Open work – a work, from the area of art or literature, characterized by an infinite multitude of interpretations. Due to the multitude of recipients and addressees of the work, but also due to the fact that two different readings of a given work of art will never be identical, each work is polysemic. Meaning – Charles Sanders Peirce stressed that a painting may mean something but is not capable of conveying a definite meaning by itself¹⁶.

Sign – according to Charles Sanders Peirc "a sign as anything which is so determined by something else, called its object, and so determines an effect upon a person, which effected its interpretant, that the latter is thereby mediately determined by the former"¹⁷.

According to semioticians, all cultural signs – visual or verbal – are a fulfilment of a given world model¹⁸. It is the symbolic systems of meanings that determine the boundaries of a unit's cognition, therefore culture utilizes a redundant modelling system, composed of multiple semiotic systems, such as, for example: ritual, art, literature¹⁹. Systems and symbolic codes, characteristic for a specific culture zone, are internalized by individual units from the earliest stages of worldly existence, therefore they have a frequently unconscious character – intersemiotic i.e. the meanings are transmitted in in various codes – linguistic and iconic²⁰. Culture is formed by various semiotic phenomena: verbal expressions, texts, paintings – components which may be equaled to signs and sign processes; personal interpretations of reality are created as a result of complex mechanisms, where a significant role is played by specific 'filters' arising in the discourses of a given cultural formation, the purpose of which is to allow given manifestations of

¹³ J. Baudrillard, *Symulakry i symulacja*, przeł. S. Królak, Wyd. Sic! Warszawa 2005.

¹⁴ Ibidem, s. 11.

¹⁵ G. Dziamski, *Sztuka i estetyzacja świata w: Co z tym odbiorcą? Wokół zagadnienia odbioru sztuki*, Kędziora M., Nowak W., Ryczek J. (red.)., UAM, Poznań 2012.

¹⁶ T. L. Short, *Peirce's Theory of Signs*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2007.

¹⁷ Ch. S. Peirce, Wybór pism semiotycznych, Znak-Język-Rzeczywistość, Warszawa 1997.

¹⁸ S. Miceli, *Z semiotyki kultury*, [w:] *Semiotyka dziś i wczoraj: wybór tekstów*, pod red. J. Pelca i L. Koja. Ossolineum, Wrocław 1991, s. 157.

¹⁹ S. Żółkiewski S., *Przedmowa* [w:] *Semiotyka kultury. Antologia tekstów. Wybór i opracowanie*, red.: E. Janus, M. R. Mayenowa, Wyd. PIW Warszawa 1977, s. 26.

²⁰ A. Wasilewska, M. Karczmarzyk, W" jak wojna, "W" jak wojsko. Dziecięce interpretacje rzeczywistości. Konteksty rozwojowe i edukacyjne, Wyd. AMW, Gdynia 2021.

the picture of the world²¹. Optical hygiene – a notion created by me for the purposes of this article, relating to aesthetic values essential in the perception process of a painting.

2. Language, image, interpretation

Zygmunt Bauman once described a recipe for a work of art that concerned the compositional possibilities of a single painting. It was about a painting by Piet Mondrian in which differently colored squares are arranged. This is what Bauman writes about it: cut out the colored rectangles from Mondrian's canvas (...) and try to arrange them in a different (...) order - and you will find that each, but every alternative arrangement of the cut-outs, no matter how many times you try, will satisfy you less aesthetically than the original one²². This interesting thought must have been tested by Zygmunt Bauman, since it is difficult not to agree with its accuracy.

It seems, however, that it would be possible to continue trying to rearrange the squares and seek different interpretations for the subsequent resulting compositions. They would not have to be perfect, but they would bring different meanings each time. Since art is open to every possible meaning and to every possible act of creation.

The language of art comments on found reality and digests given qualities to turn them into sensations. As Arthur C. Danto writes that art must represent something and therefore it must have certain semantic properties²³.

Art, therefore, must mean something, it must have its being, its voice heard by society. Indeed, images have a social power derived from the properties of a given culture²⁴. This happens precisely when we (art recipients) interpret them. The semiotic perception of an image expands the possibilities of interpretation, and this is how art should be interpreted. According to the semiotic perspective, I rest interpretation of a painting on the concept of the Open Work according to Umberto Eco. And this means that, when analyzing a painting, I open myself onto every possible meaning of the interpreter. Moreover, even extending Eco's concept, I open myself onto a painting perceived with all the senses, without the so-called Model Reader hidden in the work²⁵.

In turn, Rudolf Arnheim illustrates in his considerations regarding paintings that visual perception is connected with visual thinking. Perception and thinking intertwine with each other, that is why when we observe it depends on the way we observe. Everything is connected with our mind and experience. The process of seeing is not passive. Since we perceive according to certain rules, archetypes and patterns. An image-based representation of the perceived reality illustrates human struggles with the world and exposes the ways to understand it²⁶.

Wladyslaw Strzeminski also commented on visual communication, pointing out in his book "Teoria widzenia" [The Theory of Seeing] that our perception is linked to experience²⁷. We learn to see during the successive years of life. This experience and the number of visual phenomena we see every day causes the image of the world we see to change. As W. Strzemiński wrote: The image of the world as seen by man undergoes changes and growth. The process of growing visual awareness is a historical and historically conditioned process (...). Thus, the image of the world that we see with our visual consciousness is not an unchanging image, it is not the only, 'true' reality, given once and for all (...) but a changing image, dependent on the development of history²⁸. Strzeminski shows the mutability of the visual language. According to him the relationship between what is visible and what we know about a

²¹ *Ibidem*, s. 73.

²² *Ibidem*, s. 17.

²³ A. Danto A. C., *Encounters and Reflections*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1997, s. 45.

²⁴ Mitchell W., Czego chcq obrazy, tł. L. Zaremba, Wyd. Narodowe Centrum Kultury, Warszawa 2013.

²⁵ Eco U., Dzielo otwarte: Forma i nieokreśloność w poetykach współczesnych, W.A.B. Warszawa 2008.

²⁶ R. Arncheim, *Myślenie wzrokowe*, Wyd. słowo/obraz terytoria, Gdańsk 2011.

²⁷ W. Strzeminski, *Teoria widzenia*, Wyd. Literackie, Kraków 1969.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, s. 55.

phenomenon by viewing it is changeable and depends on knowledge, time, and the cultural and social context in which we find ourselves.

However, let us remember that there is still a filter of knowledge, experience and ideology running through our vision. It is not always the case that what we see is consistent with what we know about the world. Or is it actually the case that we only see what we know and cannot see parts of the world and its other dimensions without adequate knowledge of them?

3. Images and the development of imagination

Every human being has a predisposition to create mental images for objects, things, phenomena, or people. We like to imagine our future, daydream about wealth, fame, perhaps a career, or beautiful beaches, travel, clothes, cars, interiors, etc. As A. Czajkowska writes: through the eyes of our imagination we can see (...) various images, evoking, for example, childhood memories. While the left hemisphere of the brain is responsible for language, the right hemisphere of the brain deals with complex visualizations²⁹.

According to J. Suler, one can speak of so-called verbal systems and mental images³⁰. The mental image system is more holistic than the verbal system, it is based on imagination, emotions, and the senses. This is because images interact much more with our senses, they contain individual elements that only the eye can grasp, in the course of analysis - if, of course, we are able to look³¹.

Let us remember that imagination develops in a long process, during the successive years of our lives. However, if it is not developed, it can disappear. As Wojciech Eichelberger says: Research conducted on the generation of people born in the digital and image age shows that the ability to imagine on (...) an internal screen various situations, forms and even the faces of loved ones is disappearing. Indeed, the imaginative function of the brain has no reason to develop when kids are still looking at memes, podcasts, movies, music videos, emoticons, and other images. They all exempt their brains from the need to generate creative imaginations. Even what they watch does not need to be memorized, i.e., stored in the files of the reproductive imagination, because they can take a picture of it at any time and recreate it when the need arises. This is also the source of young people's reluctance to read books - the joy of reading largely comes from the creation of imaginations³².

Imagination allows one to step out of patterns, and this is the basis of innovation. Transgressive behavior can be directed towards four areas: people, things, symbols, or the self. In this way, people satisfy their needs for self-fulfillment, achievement, and success³³.

We can distinguish between reproductive imagination - constituting images of objects, persons, scenes or phenomena previously perceived and remembered and appearing in their absence³⁴ and creative imagination - associated with images of objects, scenes or phenomena that do not exist, which can be created as combinations of known elements (the so-called centaur) or as something completely different, e.g. a scientific work, a plastic drawing, a musical piece³⁵. As Jozef Górniewicz writes, it is a mental disposition (...) that creates new mental images, i.e., representations³⁶. According to Wojciech Eichelberger, we develop imagination, for

²⁹ A. Czajkowska, op. cit. 2019, s. 23.

³⁰ J. Suler, *Photographic, Psychology: Image and Psyche*, Rider University 2013.

³¹ A. Czajkowska, op. cit. 2019, s. 98.

³² Po co nam wyobraźnia? Wywiad Beaty Pawłowicz z Wojciechem Eichelbergerem, "Zwierciadło" nr 2/, luty 2020, s. 12.

³³ B. Skałbania., *Rola wyobraźni we wczesnej edukacji – wychowanie do transgresji i innowacji.*, "Scientific Bulletin of Chełm. Section of Pedagogy", 2017, nr 2, s. 34.

³⁴ J. Górniewicz., Rozwój i kształtowanie wyobraźni dziecka, Wyd. Naukowe "Praksis", Warszawa 1992.

³⁵ B. Sufa., *Rozwijanie wyobraźni twórczej dzieci w edukacji elementarnej*, "Rocznik Komisji Nauk Pedagogicznych", 2013, tom LXVI, s. 146.

³⁶ J. Górniewicz., Rozwój i kształtowanie wyobraźni dziecka, op. cit., s. 5.

example during reading, when our brain does the work of a director, set designer, costume designer, make-up artist, lighting director and camera operator. It creates a multi-dimensional, dynamic performance in the imagination. Unfortunately, the young generation is increasingly replacing their internal screen of imagination with the external screen of a smartphone³⁷. This does not go unchallenged in terms of emotional life and problems in achieving success in professional life. The lack of a developed imagination is also linked to difficulties in building lasting relationships and navigating the reality around us. As Beata Sufa writes: "Creative imagination is one of the most essential abilities that contribute to the effective realization of creative potential. It enables a person to navigate the surrounding reality that he or she creates and lives in. Developing imagination in each of its functions, whether cognitive, stimulating, or creative, is a crucial factor in adapting to the environment"³⁸.

The power of imagination is immense, so it is worth remembering and developing its potential. For imagination triggers three moments of the mental process itself: imagination, creativity, and expression. The basic indicators of the level of functioning of imagination are novelty and originality. According to Jozef Kozielecki: imagination builds our world, and it is related to emotions, intuition and thinking. It is a source of transgression that helps us to cross material, symbolic, cultural, and social boundaries³⁹.

Imagination allows to step out of patterns and is the basis for innovation. Transgressive behavior can be directed towards four areas: people, things, symbols, or the self. In this way, people satisfy their needs for self-realization, achievement, and success.

Polish researchers working on issues of imagination include: Józef Kozielecki, Józef Górniewicz, Edward Nęcka, Witold Dobrołowicz, Krzysztof Szmidt, Stanisław Popek, Piotr Francus and Magdalena Marszał-Wiśniewska.

4. Summary of reflections

Images cannot speak in words, but they mediate speech. Images do not feel, but thanks to them we experience emotions. Images do not love, but it is through them that we can show our feelings. An image is not just a visual representation on canvas, it is, for example: an illustration, a comic strip, an advertisement, an animation, an installation, a metaphor, an emoticon, a film, a performance, video art, a conceptual image, an imaginary image; contemporary paintings talk to us on many levels, whether flat, spatial, or moving. They are a dynamic conversation, a record of experiences, emotions⁴⁰.

My reflections on image have a semiotic basis and are close to sociology, epistemology, image semantics, anthropology, visual communication, pedagogy. While relating to varied semiotic, epistemological and anthropological concepts in my considerations related to the nature of a painting, I attempted to focus not only on the analysis of selected theories, but most of all I wanted to reflect along with the reader on how to look at the paintings in order to see them? How to look at the paintings in depth? How to notice signs in them? How to interact with the signs of the painting in such a way, so as to create one's own meaning?

In my article, I referred to the optical hygiene in the context of aesthetic values, to the visual language, imagination and creation, which is possible if we will read the painting in the way Umberto Eco wished, as an open work⁴¹.

Art is open to random meanings and therefore has an emancipatory potential. By interpreting a painting we may speak different languages, we may relate to any area of knowledge,

³⁷ Po co nam wyobraźnia? op. cit., "Zwierciadło" nr 2/, luty 2020, s. 13.

³⁸ B. Sufa, *Rozwijanie wyobraźni twórczej dzieci w edukacji elementarnej*, "Rocznik Komisji Nauk Pedagogicznych", 2013, tom LXVI, s.145.

³⁹ J. Kozielecki, *Społeczeństwo transgresyjne. Szansa i ryzyko*, Warszawa 2004., s. 45.

⁴⁰ M. Karczmarzyk, Sztuka współczesna, op. cit., s. 25.

⁴¹ U. Eco, Dzieło otwarte: Forma i nieokreśloność w poetykach współczesnych, W.A.B. Warszawa 2008.

our own experience, but only when we allow ourselves to focus on a given painting and allow ourselves the time to truly admire it.

Streszczenie:

Anatomia sztuki. Refleksje filozoficzne, pedagogiczne i teologiczne nad obrazem

Artykuł bada naturę obrazu, skupiając się na recepcji, wpływie na rzeczywistość oraz roli w świecie po rewolucji cyfrowej. W formie filozoficzno-pedagogicznych i teologicznych rozważań, tekst stawia pytania i formułuje refleksje nad epistemologią i semantyką malarstwa, zamiast dostarczać gotowych odpowiedzi. Omawiane są kluczowe pojęcia, takie jak symbol, alegoria, znak indeksowy, higiena optyczna, znak, znaczenie i praca otwarta. Głównym celem artykułu jest filozoficzne pytanie dotyczące percepcji obrazów, skupiające się na tym, jak patrzeć na nie, jak dostrzegać znaki w ich wnętrzu, jak wchodzić w interakcje z nimi w celu tworzenia własnych znaczeń i, zgodnie z koncepcją Umberto Eco, być współautorem tworzonych znaczeń w oparciu o malowidło rozumiane jako "praca otwarta". Artykuł skłania do kontemplacji wielowymiarowych sposobów postrzegania i oddziaływania na obrazy, podkreślając aktywne zaangażowanie, które przekształca czynność obserwacji w mesmeryczne oraz duchowe doświadczenie.

Słowa kluczowe: obraz, pedagogiczno-teologiczne rozważania o obrazie, duchowość, percepcja

Summary:

Anatomy of Art. Philosophical, Pedagogical and Theological Reflections on Image

The article explores the nature of painting, focusing on its reception, impact on reality, and role in the post-digital world. Presented in a philosophico-pedagogical and theological framework, the text poses questions and formulates reflections on the epistemology and semantics of painting, rather than providing ready-made answers.

Key concepts such as symbol, allegory, index sign, optical hygiene, sign, meaning, and open work are discussed. The primary goal is a philosophical inquiry into the perception of images, emphasizing how to look at them, recognize signs within them, and interact to create personal meanings. Following Umberto Eco's concept, the article encourages being a co-author of meanings based on the understanding of painting as an "open work."

The article prompts contemplation of multidimensional ways of perceiving and influencing images, underscoring active engagement that transforms the act of observation into a mesmerizing and spiritual experience.

Keywords: pedagogical-theological reflections on the image, spirituality, perception

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