

From Greek Sculpture To Nicola Dale's Practice: How Images, Symbols And Signs Travel Through Time - Sara Riccardi

*This abstract was prepared for a British Society of Aesthetics presentation
Sara Riccardi is an art historian*

The talk will encourage some reflections on the multiple levels of meaning images can retain, and on how these affect artworks and their transmission; an analysis of the work of contemporary artist Nicola Dale as a modern example of a centuries-old process will conclude the event.

First of all, when does an image become a symbol? Roland Barthes wrote about possible applications of some categories of linguistics and semiology to the reading of images. Referring specifically to images, he argues that it is virtually impossible to find images completely free from any connoted, or symbolic, meaning, as all forms of communication carry layers of meanings. The way in which images travel and have travelled through time has mainly to do with their connotations, that is, with the layers of meanings societies and cultures have associated with them.

The matter gets multifaceted when images become the means by which the visual arts communicate: Theodor Adorno wrote about the infinite possibilities of communication of pieces of art. His theory of the 'enigma' of the artwork concerns that level of meaning which is never fully expressed, that content to pieces of art which is beyond their internal and specific content, and which can never be entirely known. Pieces of art are first of all experienced: intellectual understanding can be part of this experience, and it can enrich it, but is not the only level to which they communicate. The code of hand gesture in Medieval art, or the use of poses derived from classical sculpture in Italian Renaissance and then 18th-century British painting may serve as examples in which the transmission of images in art is based on their connotations.

Historically, the discipline of iconology aims to unfold layers of meaning of artworks by analysing them within their context. Modern iconology was structured, and it could be said founded, by Aby Warburg, who acknowledged the ancient roots of the discipline, mainly the 'Iconologia' by Cesare Ripa (1593), but who then re-activated it, within his contemporary context and the new historical theories. Therefore, not only images, but also systems through which to look at images and interpret them travel through time, and evolve according to the evolution of knowledge.

'The Things That Look Back' by Nicola Dale seems a perfect quintessential synthesis of the reflection around images. Nicola based her current research on images of past artworks, which she has observed, then disrupted, reconstructed, and ultimately turned into three-dimensional objects, becoming props of performative interventions; as a result, the meanings and connotations they originally bore have been transformed. Moreover, the images Nicola has been working with are not simply reproductions of artworks: they have all been selected amongst the images Aby Warburg had been collecting in the course of his life, still archived the way he had done. They have been the very tools that allowed Warburg to develop his modern iconology, and could therefore be considered as symbols of the modern History of Art, and of the History of Art as a dynamic, evolving discipline. That is how far images can retain connotations, and become symbols.

02/01/2018