Image and representation: the art of mass communication

Introduction

A rich appraisal of instances of today's artistic context, from the images we are bombarded with in everyday media, to institutions that manage the exposure and marketing of contemporary visual art, makes several gains by taking into consideration the relationship of art with the public. One way of assessing the fruitfulness of an approach that explores this dynamic, between art and people, is by considering the way various theoreticians, from modernity onwards, have thrown light on what binds people to art, and what are the effects they themselves observe as people watching people watching art.

Background to philosophical underpinnings

It is worth noting that this type of assessment has interested philosophers and writers for a long time. One can mention the Ancient Greeks, for instance through Plato and his narrative about the beholders of images in a cave and his critique of the mimetic nature of art as opposed to Aristotle's more positive perspective. One may also refer to the writers of the Old Testament and the way interaction between the iconic representations of godly powers weaves itself into the consciousness of the chosen people, particularly with reference to Abraham and Moses. Moving forward in time, we also know that from the seventh century onwards, the resistance of the prophetic tradition of Islam to representational art developed an aniconistic approach to art by artists and the general public of believers.

Moving further ahead towards modernity, it is worth noting the observation that Hegel made in his 'Lectures on Aesthetics', published as a book in 1835. As noted by Wolfgang Kemp, Hegel focused on the relationship between work and beholder as an important factor in his general history of art forms. Eighteenth-century aesthetics had called for the non-recognition of the beholder as the prerequisite for the most intense effect on the beholder; on the other hand, Hegel identifies two modes of being for the work of art, which occur necessarily together, yet in different degrees. These consist of the existence of the work "for itself" in opposition to the work "for us." Hegel considers their relationships maintained through the historical process, which engenders a "development [of art] for others" in three phases. Therefore, as described by Kemp, the "austere style" of the early period remains closed both "to itself" and to its beholder; the "ideal style" of the classical period opens itself "to us" to such an extent that our self-recognition seems like a "gift in a moment of abundance, and not at all like an effort to draw us in and entrap us"; and finally, during the "pleasing style," the "effect on the outer world" becomes purpose and matter in itself. Art no longer lives in and for itself but for its connections to the outer world, concludes Kemp.

However, as elaborated by Kemp, the freer accessibility of art to both the beholder and the scholar still exists under "conditions that are mostly safeguarded by institutions and that, in themselves, require certain patterns of behaviour on the part of the recipient." He argues that the institutions, academic studies and modern techniques of reproduction in modern art have often formed an "unholy alliance", one whose intention is to present their objects as "unrelated monads", as Valéry, Benjamin and Heidegger had noted in the early twentieth century. Kemp argues that the fact that many works of art in modern times were destined neither for a concrete location nor a specific addressee does not suggest, however, that analyses undertaken in the aesthetics of reception are without objects. He notes that "[t]he consideration of a more open reception situation can have as informative an effect on arriving at an interpretation as the information that derives from context-dependent studies". Kemp makes particular reference to a classic study by Brian O'Doherty, showing the power of definition ascribed to the "white cube", described as "the gallery space which supposedly recedes to the neutral background in order to let the works of art be effective "by themselves"", which is however "the same space which in reality has "created" modern art, which was the condition of its possibility, and which, unlike any other institution, has influenced the appearance and reception of modern art even down to its details."

Kemp concludes by noting that although works of art that have "lost their original destination and appear in new contexts are concerned, it can be stated in a generalized way that the new availability will not succeed in severing completely the old relationships." He argues that while two centuries of history of art "may have removed the work's ambience - may have severed it from its original forms of

presentation and therefore may actually have established it as an art object [...] yet it will in any case continue to show fossilized remnants of its context markers that position it and the beholder anew." Kemp argues that reception aesthetics is obliged to reconstruct the original reception situation. In this way it can "reverse the processes that had colluded to exclude this approach in general from the history of art appreciation and that also, in a parallel development, had isolated the works of art."

The role of institutions and the media on a global stage

As we shall see, the institutions play an important role in the management of the communication and distribution of images, albeit ever changing in light of the loosening of their function as guardians of particular aesthetics. The loosening of controlling ties by institutions, and by the gradual loss of site-specificity for works of art, is paralleled by the industrialisation of the image, observed by the Frankfurt School in the early twentieth century, and by the further re-production and proliferation of images on the web.

Referring to reception theory, the term was first used by the German theorist Hans-Robert Jauss in the late 1960s to analyse literature, before becoming a key concept of postmodernism. Reception theory explores how the meaning of a text is located somewhere between the reader and the text and that each person will decode the text slightly differently depending on their background, cultural life experiences and the access they have to the frameworks of power that enable them to make informed judgements. The cultural theorist Stuart Hall took up this concept in the 1970s as a way of understanding cultural representation. For instance, Hall used reception theory to analyse how the British media misrepresented black communities living in Britain. Over time, this approach has been directly used in assessing the visual arts, particularly within the theoretical sphere of postmodernism.

I'd now like to address the relationship between contemporary visual expression, through the powerful lens of the media, within the context of poststructuralism, and particularly within the field of international relations. I will do this in light of the significance of the questions we're addressing at this seminar in a globalized context, the Mediterranean setting, and ongoing discussions today in the world, including in this region, and most particularly in Tunisia, which is often hailed as the only successful instance of the so-called Arab Spring, in itself a term fed and spun by the global media.

In a poststructuralist approach, observation of the context and interpretation of representation and perception are important. David Campbell and Roland Bleiker note that visual imagery is "one of the principal ways in which news from distant places is brought home". Hence, they have a significant impact in today's globalised and media-wired society. Campbell and Bleiker add that like early photography and cartography before it, such images contribute to the development of an "imagined geography" which play out humanitarian emergencies across post-Cold War scenarios. Media materialisations of crises through media coverage "create a range of identities – us/them, victim/saviour". These create audiences, as well as a growing pool of contributors, who in their own way add to the creation of a media event which is linked, in various ways, to reality, both imitating it and distorting it through amplification and selectivity. Development consultant Jonathan Benthall says that:

> *[t]he coverage of disasters by the press and the media is so selective and arbitrary that… they 'create' a disaster when they decide to recognise it. To be more precise, they give institutional endorsement or attestation to bad events which otherwise have a reality restricted to a local circle of victims. Such endorsement is a prerequisite for the marshalling of external relief and reconstructive effort.*

Recalling the Ethiopian famine of 1984 which gave rise to the Live Aid phenomenon led by Bob Geldof, van der Gaag and Nash note that images broadcast worldwide of the disaster:

> *overwhelmingly showed people as needing our pity – as passive victims. This was through a de-contextualised concentration on mid- and close-up shots emphasising body language and facial expressions. The photos seemed mainly to be taken from a high angle with no eye-contact, thus reinforcing the viewer's sense of power compared with their apathy and hopelessness. The 'Madonna and Child' image was particularly emotively used, echoing the biblical imagery. Women were at the same time patronised and exalted.*

This discursive formation, such as analysed through a poststructuralist perspective, reproduces and confirms notions of Self/Other, developed/underdeveloped, North/South, sovereignty/anarchy and democracy/tyranny. As has been showed by and with reference to works by Foucault and Said, the creation and control of political space through the power of representation and self-representation maintains, at best, the status quo, at worst, advanced the political agenda of those who control resources successfully.

Conclusion

Nevertheless, while political, art is not politics. Tania Bruguera affirms that there is "a difference in art between representing what is political and acting politically". The work of Rabih Mroué can be described as being politically reflected and charged, without being political in itself. Various of his works over the past thirty years have brought together, as a kind of dynamic crossroads, his own art meshed with the documentation he has retrieved representing non-artistic works by a variety of people including suicide bombers, family members, political activists and regular citizens capturing reality through electronic means and representing them through social media. Mroué shifts in and out of the position of creator, negotiator and interpreter of different truths, without expecting himself or his audience to reconcile either his material or his different roles. Possibly, it is through the honesty of his disguises and his artistic craft that the spaces with a real opportunity for reflection on contemporary political matters, and the ways they are mediatised and shared, occur. Jala Toufic notes that Mroué's playfulness with truth recalls Pablo Picasso's comment about how "[a]rt is a lie that makes us realize the truth, at least the truth that is given us to understand. The artists must know the manner whereby to convince others of the truthfulness of this idea." Or, as put by Abbas Kiarostami more recently: 'Nous ne pouvons jamais nous approcher de la vérité sauf en mentant."

In relation to his audience, Mroué has an interesting point to make regarding the global context of today's exposure to art:

> *Not-knowing is also my starting point. When I present a work, I come with no knowledge to give to, or to impose upon, the audience. In my work I am very clear about that position. I continuously reveal my shortcomings and lack of knowledge by sharing my questions and doubts with the audience, as I think it is precisely the confrontation with my own and others' lack of knowledge that makes one want to question the world we live in. Thus I do not think my work is about a requirement to "understand" things in the conventional meaning of the word. In this sense, there is no difference between the audience in Beirut, Utrecht, or anywhere in the world. And in the same vein, I don't think that the history of Lebanon and the Middle East is more complex than the history of any other context. When it comes to the audience, I try to think of it not en masse but rather as a number of individuals sharing some concerns, urgencies, and curiosity. Actually I prefer not to think of the audience at all, and if I have to, then ideally I would be in that audience myself. In that sense, any provocation should be addressed to myself before anyone else. Clearly, artists would like to get good feedback about their work and have it be well received by the public. But there is a trap inherent in the issue of the audience. Once wants one's work to be appreciated, but how can an artist both please and challenge the beliefs of the same group of people?*

To conclude, I'd like to add a word about the role of art institutions and their relationship with the general public in the shape of museum, galleries or auction houses. As we have seen, the influence of the media, particularly through the internet, has been far-reaching. The general public can not only access, but make and distribute, its own visual creations and representations. The future of the role of art institutions in this changing landscape will be interesting to see.

http://www.tate.org.uk/learn/online-resources/glossary/r/reception-theory

http://islamic-arts.org/2011/islamic-arts-introduction-and-general-considerations/

http://islamic-arts.org/2014/aniconism-in-islamic-art/

http://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/artdok/1916/1/Kemp_The_work_of_art_and_its_beholder_1998.pdf

http://www.taniabruguera.com/cms/388-0-Political+Art+Statement.htm

Rabih Mroué: A BAK Critical Reader in Artists' Practice, edited by Marija Hlavajova and Jill Winder, BAK, Utrecht, 2012

Iran: La prière des poètes, Jean-Pierre Perrin, Collection L'Ame des Peuples, Nevicata, Bruxelles, 2017