

THE GROWING FEAR OF AN AESTHETIC EVALUATION

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This paper examines the evolution of practice-led image research within Swiss visual communication design departments, observing a shift from basic research inquiries to concrete applications. Recent projects align with the prevailing notion that research is considered scientific if its results are quantifiable, reproducible, delegated to technical apparatuses, and seemingly independent of individual aesthetic judgment. By providing an overview of the aesthetic

discourse in Western philosophy relevant to practice-led image research, this paper establishes a foundation for understanding the potential and pitfalls of aesthetic judgment as a methodological approach to exploring how images generate meaning. The value of aesthetic evaluation in practice-led image research is discussed and contrasted with the critical perspective of aesthetic theory, which highlights the situated nature of aesthetic evaluation.

INTRODUCTION

To review the past years of research in the context of images, I cannot provide a statistical overview of the field, detailing which topics emerged, dominated, or faded away. However, I can examine the developments evident in practice-led image research, which arises from the practice of visual communication design. This assessment is conducted within the context of third-party-funded visual communication research at higher education institutions for visual communication in Switzerland and does not claim to be independent of it.

As a project partner and member of the board of directors of *eikones*, the Swiss National Center of Competence in Iconic Research, from 2005 to 2013, we developed an approach we termed *practice-led image research* (Renner 2010; Renner 2011; Renner et al. 2016/2017). Within the interdisciplinary framework of *eikones*, which brought together various disciplines from the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences, it became evident that the practical field of visual communication design contributes to the broader inquiry into how images generate meaning **1** – particularly through its ability to create visual artifacts. These images, created for research purposes, are intended to enhance the understanding of images through comparative evaluation rather than serving as a medium for transmitting messages for clients. Within the practice-led research approach, we identified two main areas, each addressing a variety of subtopics.

(1) Inquiry into specific categories of images based on their occurrence in daily life, such as documentary, diagrammatic, ornamental, scientific, or portrait images **2**.

(2) Inquiry into the processes of image generation and the evaluation of factors influencing intuitive decision-making, including cultural settings, tools, individual traits, and training **3**. These early practical explorations were grounded in theories of embodiment (Johnson 2007; Johnson&Lakoff 1999; Johnson&Lakoff 2003; Damasio 1999), reflections on gesture

(Tomasello 2008; McNeill 2005), and philosophical concepts such as poiesis (Aristotle ca. 350 B.C./2008, Part XXII). They also considered the relationship between the sensuous and the supersensuous in Western thought (Nietzsche 2010; Heidegger 2010), aesthetic theories (Kant 1790/2018; Heidegger 1950/2008; Dewey 1934/1980), Heidegger's concept of *Hand-lability* (Heidegger 1927/2006; Bolt 2006), and early publications advocating a practice-led research approach in art and design, such as *Art Beyond Representation: The Performative Power of the Image* by Barbara Bolt (Bolt 2004).

WHAT HAS CHANGED?

In the meantime, the discourse surrounding the practice-led approach to image research has been extended in different directions. On one hand, practitioners in the field of visual communication continue to assert that any applied project constitutes research, even in the absence of a verbal evaluation of the visual message. On the other hand, the practice-led approach to image research within the academic context of visual communication has shifted towards more concrete applications.

For example, some projects explore which types of images are most effective in social counseling to explain complex processes (Parpan-Blaser, Imhof & López Grüninger, 2021), which kinds of images support language recovery in aphasia patients (Reymond et al. 2022), or which image-generation settings are best suited for participatory urban planning processes (Renner et al. 2026, in print) to foster dialogue. These projects intend to develop communicable outcomes that can be shared within the community of visual communication designers or with a broader public. They aim to describe best practices or provide recommendations for other projects with similar goals. Their objective is to contribute to the visual literacy of a wider audience. To evaluate images developed to address a research question, they employ empirical methods

ranging from eye tracking to questionnaires and surveys. They draw on approaches from psychology, sociology, anthropology, and statistics to avoid aesthetic judgments by researchers in the interdisciplinary team, even though visual communication designers are part of the project teams. These projects try hard to conform with the widespread notion that research is scientific if the results are quantifiable, reproducible, delegated to technical apparatuses, and seemingly independent of any individual judgment or interpretation.

RECAPITULATING AESTHETICS FOR DESIGNERS

The research teams of the aforementioned projects do not share Heidegger's notion of the work of art as a means to reveal the essence of an experience, and therefore, to transfer an insight to the beholder (Heidegger 2010, 133/134). The truth, as part of an aesthetic experience, is considered as subjective, unscientific or even the result of a culturally determined power relation (Adorno 1970/2013; Escobar 2018; Fry 1999/2020). But what exactly is the aesthetic experience, the aesthetic judgement, or the creation of an aesthetic object? The discourse of aesthetics is often specifically linked to the field of art, the evaluation of the beautiful or the ugly, and the aim of understanding the individual and shared affect caused by an work of art. However, even when considering the etymological roots of the Ancient Greek term *αἰσθησις*, we can challenge this narrow understanding, as the term broadly signifies *perception* and *sensation*. Plato's understanding of the beautiful is grounded in his epistemology, where the idea – derived from sensuous perception – serves as the means to escape the deceptive nature of our sensory experience (Plato 370 B.C./2010, 170; Rüegg, 2–15 1999; Nietzsche 2010, 60–72; Heidegger 2010, 118–129). For Plato, some objects make the idea appear more clearly than others, and he considers these objects beautiful. The Platonic solids, based on mathematical principles, are beautiful in this

sense, but not the affect caused by a work of art or an object of design (Böhme 1995/2022). Since the idea is the only means to attain truth, and the object that points to the idea is considered beautiful, the beautiful is equated with the truth and the good. However, we no longer share this equation today. For example, we have learned from practices such as graphology or physiognomy that a person's beautiful or ugly appearance does not represent their character (see also Böhme 1995/2022, 197–201).

Although the Ancient Greek philosophers addressed the question of the beautiful, aesthetics as a philosophical discipline was introduced by Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten in his dissertation *Philosophical Contemplation on Some Requirements of a Poem* (Baumgarten 1735). Immanuel Kant, who was aware of Baumgarten's work, published his famous *Critique of Judgement* in 1790 (Kant 1790/2018). In his complex argumentation, Kant describes that an object can be *pleasing* to an individual but the *beautiful* as the sensation of disinterested pleasure, is a sensation that can be shared. What is surprising, however, is Kant's description of this sensation of disinterested pleasure as a means of cognition. He argues that processes of imagination, triggered by the beautiful object in view, spark the interaction with the intellect (Kant 1790/2018, 91; Schubach 2022, 174; Böhme 1995/2022, 293). In this approach, sensation, as a continuous process, is not guided by ideas, concepts, or language. However, by focusing on sensation, the interaction with the intellect can become playful, allowing for unexpected inferences. This can be seen as a first step in overcoming Platonism, as Nietzsche described it in his aphorism *How the 'True World' finally became a fable* (Nietzsche 2010; Heidegger 2010). Nietzsche recapitulates four historical epochs of Western thought before adding two additional epochs through his own work. He highlights the enduring influence of Plato's ideas, which persisted in the epochs of Western philosophy following Plato: Platonism, Enlightenment, and German Idealism. All four periods before Nietzsche, according to him, represent the continuation

of a hierarchical order between sensuous and conceptual thought – the super sensuous, in Nietzsche’s terminology. In the fifth epoch, Nietzsche’s first contribution, he calls for the inversion of this hierarchy. According to his early philosophy, the sensuous should be placed above the super sensuous, and he abolishes the very possibility of attaining truth. In the sixth phase of philosophy, Nietzsche’s second contribution, he calls for the complete abandonment of the hierarchy between the sensuous and the super sensuous. Rather than a hierarchy, he describes the need for a continuous exchange between the sensuous and the super sensuous on an equal level. The process of creating a work of art is, for Nietzsche, also closely related to the sensuous and the super sensuous. On one hand, there is the Dionysian drunkenness – the sensuous, intuitive making and reacting in a medium. On the other hand, there is the strategic and controlled Apollonian contemplation, which is sparked by the outcome of the Dionysian and frames its intuition as well (Menke 2022, 37). With this revision of the relationship between the sensuous and conceptual inferences, Nietzsche shifted the focus of aesthetic evaluation as a means of ontology and paved the way for an epistemology of the arts.

Later reflections by John Dewey describe the aesthetic experience as a process in which a deviation from what we immediately know and can interpret is perceived (Dewey 1934/1980). The pleasure lies in the process of interpretation, which begins with a deviation from what we already know, recognize, or label (Dewey 1934/1980, 53). This initial deviation carries the promise of leading to a meaningful interpretation. It is no longer just the beautiful in modern art that triggers this process in the beholder. Dewey also equates the process of the beholder engaging with a work of art with the process the artist undergoes to arrive at the deviation necessary for an aesthetic experience (Dewey 1934/1980, 48).

Jean-François Lyotard has extended this restriction to art and describes the graphic artist as someone who creates

art for the street. In his view, the graphic artist is constantly searching for an aesthetic experience through a deviation that intrigues, surprises, or shocks the beholder in order to capture attention. The ephemeral aesthetic effect that an object of visual communication intends to achieve in the beholder is tied to a specific historical moment and context in which it appears as such (Lyotard 1997, 41). The effect of a novel object of visual communication in society cannot be predicted by interpolating visual messages that have had this effect in the past. The “black beast” – the audience, in Lyotard’s words – is unpredictable (Lyotard 1997, 42/43).

A much stronger focus on the connection between art, the cultural industry, society, and its institutions is the subject of Theodor W. Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory*, published in 1970, one year after his death (Adorno 1970/2013). In a society permeated by an ideological framework, the cultural industry and its institutions are also shaped by the structure of the ideology. Art, even though it is influenced by the societal context, can serve as an utopian mirror that reflects the true being of a society. Art thus differs from merely serving the ideology, decorating, or entertaining, and instead takes a political approach. In this role, aesthetics becomes a means of ontology and provides a critical lens on the inherent mechanisms of society (Adorno 1970/2013, 31–34; Paddison 1987, 355). Adorno also equates philosophy and art in their ability to create an utopian counterpoint through their distinct approaches (Adorno 1970/2013; Paddison 1987, 357).

The New Aesthetics, developed by Gernot Böhme in the 1990s, also builds on a pressing issue of concern (Böhme 1995/2022). The ecological crisis, in which people are again threatened physically through overcrowded agglomerations, pollution, severe weather, droughts, and lost crops, calls for the design of environments where homeostasis can be restored. As nature has disappeared, the need to design atmospheres with acceptable conditions for living beings has become an urgent issue (Böhme 1995/2022, 13/14). With this foundation, the New Aesthetics definitively frees the dis-

course from its exclusivity in the context of art and does not devalue applied art as decoration, entertainment, or service to an ideology. Architecture, product design, scenography, visual communication, and art are at the center of the creation of atmospheres as environments suited for being in the world.

GROUNDING AESTHETIC EVALUATION IN THE CONCEPTS OF AESTHETIC THEORY

The roughly summarized positions of the aesthetic discourse presented here are not intended as a contribution to philosophical discourse. However, this summary brings together arguments regarding whether or not aesthetic judgment should be included in research projects employing a practice-led image research methodology.

We can recapitulate the following key findings relevant to this argument:

- (1) The beautiful is not the truth (Böhme 1995/2022, 197–201).
- (2) The relationship between the sensuous and the conceptual is not hierarchical but should exist in continuous exchange. Aesthetic experience sparks interaction with the intellect—understood as conscious, conceptual thought. This aligns with recent cognitive science models that describe a dispositional space and an image space interacting continuously **4**.
- (3) Aesthetic experience, characterized by intrigue, surprise, or even shock, extends the field of visual phenomena beyond beauty and beyond the context of art. The fact that our entire environment today must be designed necessitates a new understanding of practices that are responsible for addressing our senses in daily life.
- (4) The critical approach to aesthetic theory highlights the impossibility of escaping the ideological context that shapes society and its institutions. Therefore, individual aesthetic evaluation is also embedded within cultural, political, and economic frameworks, with the potential to reflect its situatedness (Haraway 1988).

BEYOND THESE FIVE MANIFESTO-LIKE STATEMENTS,
WE CAN REFINER THEM FURTHER FOR THE FIELD OF
VISUAL COMMUNICATION DESIGN AND PRACTICE-LED
IMAGE RESEARCH.

The critical approach to aesthetics developed by Adorno (1970/2013), on one hand, would not grant applied arts the potential to unveil the ideological mechanisms of society and its institutions (Wallenstein 2021, 117). From this perspective, the practice of visual communication merely provides a service within a capitalist environment or contributes to the spectacle of entertainment. On the other hand, Lyotard, situated in a postmodern world, distinguishes between the graphic artist – who is in continuous search of deviations that intrigue and surprise – and the strategic planner, who creates objects of propaganda. In Lyotard's understanding, propaganda relies on messages already known to be effective in capturing attention and seducing the masses (Lyotard 1997, 43).

In contrast, the graphic artist, though part of a cultural context, must conform to certain cultural restrictions while simultaneously introducing a specific deviation from the already seen, thereby opening space for individual interpretation. This creates an opportunity to reflect the intrinsic mechanisms of the world. Through the continuous search for deviation, visual communication – through the work of the graphic artist – aims to offer the beholder a new and unexpected perspective on a subject. Ideally, the multivocality of interpretations contributes to the democratic formation of individual opinions (Arendt 1958/2010, 213; Tavani 2013, 467). In this sense, we can argue that aesthetic interpretation within visual communication practice plays a vital role in fostering a diverse and democratic society.

Having established the argument for aesthetic evaluation in practice, we can now turn to practice-led image research. As the New Aesthetics has emphasized, design practices serve as a context in which material (analog or

digital) constellations – those that create the atmosphere of an environment – are continuously tested and intuitively evaluated. Aesthetic experience is not an inherent quality of an object but rather something that occurs between an object and its beholder. Consequently, the variables influencing atmosphere are both the objects themselves and the audience perceiving them. Böhme describes atmospheres and their quasi-objective character as follows:

Atmospheres, to be sure, are not things. They do not exist as entities which remain identical over time; nevertheless, even after a temporal interruption they can be recognized as the same, through their character. Moreover, although they are always perceived only in subjective experience – as a taste or a smell, for example, to return to Tellenbach – it is possible to communicate about them intersubjectively. We can discuss with one another what kind of atmosphere prevails in a room. This teaches us that there is an inter-subjectivity which is not grounded in an identical object. We are accustomed, through the predominant scientific mode of thinking, to assume that inter-subjectivity is grounded in objectivity, that detection of the presence and determinateness of something is independent of subjective perception and can be delegated to an apparatus. Contrary to this, however, the quasi-objectivity of atmospheres is demonstrated by the fact that we can communicate about them in language. Of course, this communication has its preconditions: an audience which is to experience a stage set in roughly the same way must have a certain homogeneity, that is to say, a certain mode of perception must have been instilled in it through cultural socialization. Nevertheless, independently of the culture-relative character of atmospheres, their quasi-objective status is preserved (Böhme, 1995/2017, 15).

Even though the term *atmospheres* might seem problematic at first glance, the quoted paragraph provides a solid foundation for understanding how images create meaning from the practice-led perspective of visual communication.

The atmosphere, the aesthetic experience, or any meaning an image can generate lies between the visual object and the beholder, whose perception is shaped by their cultural context and individual experience. Since we cannot alter the beholder, the practice of visual communication offers its expertise in modifying the visual object to evaluate the audience's response.

We can now describe two key contributions that aesthetic evaluation can provide in a practice-led image research project:

In the process of image design, the designer is not merely materializing mental images but engaging in an aesthetic process that is inherently part of a cultural context. This occurs through *intra-action* (Barad 2007, 132–185) with the material (Dewey 1934/1980, 48; Ingold 2013, 126–141). Through this dynamic interaction, aesthetic (intuitive) image generation unfolds its potential by sparking a dialogue with analytical evaluation on a conceptual level. In the creation of image variations, unexpected visual outcomes emerge.

The designer is also the first to evaluate these image variations within the process of intuitive image creation, where they are immersed *in* the image (Boehm 2019, 23–31). However, as someone embedded in a cultural context, the designer can also step back and be *apart* from the image (Boehm 2019, 23–31). This dual perspective allows the designer to formulate a hypothesis about how a visual message might be understood by the public (Lyotard 1997, 40). In this role, the designer employs aesthetic evaluation to conduct a comparative analysis, providing a hermeneutic interpretation and a linguistic description of the meaning conveyed by one image variation in relation to another.

With this dual approach to aesthetic evaluation, practice-led image research can fully realize its potential to contribute to the field of image research while maintaining an awareness of the situated nature of its aesthetic assessment.

NOTE

1 Boehm, G. (1994). Die Wiederkehr der Bilder. In: Was ist ein Bild?, edited by Gottfried Boehm, München: Fink, 1994, 11–38.

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2 Boehm G., Budelacci O., Di Monte G., Renner M. (2015): *Face and Identity*. München, DE: Wilhelm Fink.

3 Renner, M. (2019): Word and Image. In Search of Unseen Images, in: Oxvig H., Bäcklund J., Renner M., Sjøberg M. (eds.), *What Images Do*, Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, pp. 89–108.

4 “The image space is that in which images of all sensory types occur explicitly. [...] The dispositional space is that in which dispositions contain the knowledge base and the mechanisms with which images can be constructed from recall, with which movements can be generated, and with which the processing of images can be facilitated”. (Damasio, A. 1999, 331)

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