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Visual Analogy (review)

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VISUAL ANALOGY

by Barbara Maria Stafford. MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, U.S.A., 1999. 219 pp. Cloth. ISBN: 0-262-19421-X.

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There is no mention in this book of Friedrich Froebel, the founder of kindergarten, who might have (or should have) been mentioned because the book's subject—visual analogy, or, as Stafford defines it, the perception of similarity-in-difference—is the subject of the second educational toy (or “gift,” as Froebelians call it) that Froebel presented to children. The toy consisted of three simple shapes: A sphere, cube and cylinder. The sphere represented unity, the cube diversity, and the cylinder (which is spherical from one angle, square from another) was a synthesis of the two, a reconciliation of opposites. That simple toy, as Norman Brosterman said in *Inventing Kindergarten*, was “the dialectic incarnate—Hegel for tots,” for it taught children about analogical seeing, about similarity-in-difference and, as Froebel himself put it, that “all consequences lie dormant in their antecedents.”

This new book by the author of *Good Looking*, *Artful Science* and *Body Criticism* (she teaches art history at the University of Chicago) is a densely written but richly illustrated plea for the restoration of analogy (the perception of someone or something as like what it is not) in art and non-art visual forms, and also in everything else that we do. As a culture, we withstand the damaging daily effects of “an explosion of discontinuous happenings,” writes Stafford, brought on in part by the emphasis on “personal statements, irreducibly distinctive subjects, and contradictory opinions.” At the beginning of the new millennium, the “diversification of diversity” (David Hollinger) and the postmodern assault on analogical reasoning have left us “incapable of speaking across differences.”

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