

## 2. Herbert Read

Prof Kenneth G. Hay  
University of Leeds, UK

# Herbert Edward Read



- b.4 December 1893-  
12 June 1968 in Muscoates, N.  
Yorkshire
- art historian, poet, literary critic and  
philosopher,
- Numerous influential books on Art,  
education and anarchism.
- Co-founder of the **Institute of  
Contemporary Arts** (London). As  
well as being a prominent English  
anarchist, he was one of the earliest  
English writers to take notice of  
existentialism.

# Herber Read - early life



H.Read, Green Howards, DSO, MC

- Studies law/economics at Leeds University interrupted by WW1
- During the war, Read founded the journal “Arts and Letters” with Frank Rutter, one of the first literary periodicals to publish work by T. S. Eliot.

# Read's literary milieu



T.S.Eliot in 1934, Photo by Lady Ottoline Morrell



Dame Edith Sitwell photo by Cecil Beaton, 1962

- While on leave in London during the War, he came into contact with key figures of London's literary and artistic circles such as **T. S. Eliot**, **Edith Sitwell**, **Ezra Pound** and **Wyndham Lewis**.
- After 1918, he continued his career as a poet and literary critic.
- From 1923 he contributed regularly to T. S. Eliot's journal 'Criterion'.
- He published with **Leonard and Virginia Woolf's** 'Hogarth Press' and became literary adviser to Heinemann and Routledge and Kegan Paul in 1937.

# Read's literary milieu



Eric Gill, "Christ driving the Moneychangers from the Temple" (1923)



Marianne Moore. Photograph: Esther Bubley/Time & Life Pictures/Getty Images



Eric Gill as a young man. Ca. 1908

- In the 1930s, Read befriended **Mulk Raj Anand** and, met with **Eric Gill** and **Stanley Morrison** to talk about art. Gill, the inventor of Gill Sans Typeface amongst others, artist, printmaker and sculptor executed a large stone relief for Leeds University (1923).
- Read also befriended Sri Lankan poet, **M. J. Tambimuttu**, the founder-editor of 'Poetry London'.
- Read contributed to the first edition of "Poetry London" (1939), Tambimuttu's "Poetry in Wartime" (1942) and to the "Festschrift for **Marianne Moore's** Seventy-Seventh Birthday" (1964), edited by Tambimuttu.

# Herbert Read - Publications



- By the 1950s and 60s, Read had established himself as a renowned critic on literature and the arts, his reputation resting on several major works. His publications total more than 1000.
- He died on 12 June 1968.

# Read's forebears: Heinrich Wölfflin (1864-1945)



- B. 1864 Winterthür
- Succeeded his teacher **Jacob Burckhardt** as Professor of art history at Basle University. Worked at Universities of Berlin (1901), Munich (1912) and Zürich (1924).
- He was interested, among other things in the transition from Classicism to Baroque, as well as in architecture, which formed the subject of his Doctoral thesis: “Prolegomena to a psychology of architecture” (1886) He also wrote: “Renaissance and baroque” (1888)
- His major text, “Principles of Art History” is fundamental to the stylistic analysis of art works, effectively inventing the language by which such analysis was carried out during the 20th-century.

# Wölfflin - Formalism



Heinrich Wölfflin  
PRINCIPLES OF ART HISTORY  
The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art

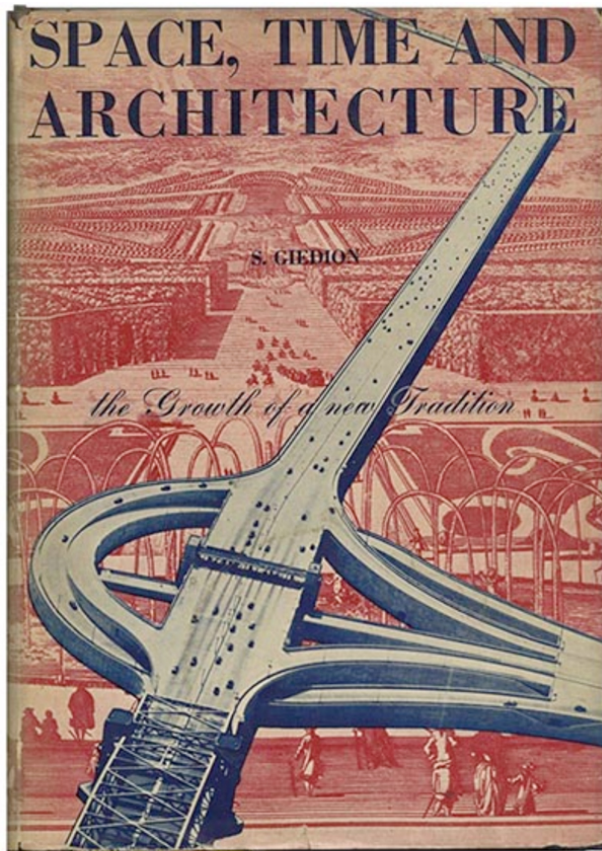
\$3.00



- Wölfflin first studied philosophy, but his thesis was in art history.
- His approach to artworks is known as **formalism** because he considered artworks as a result of their external form, ie their style.
- He was one of the first teachers to use twin slide projection in his lectures to enable direct comparison of examples side by side
- It was largely due to his analysis of Renaissance and Baroque artworks that he evolved his major work, “Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe” (“The Principles of Art History”, 1915), five pairs of opposing concepts through which he was able to describe the differences in form between Renaissance and Baroque artworks:
  - Linear and painterly;
  - Plane and Recession;
  - Closed and Open form;
  - Multiplicity and Unity;
  - Cleanness and uncleaness;



# Wölfflin - Formalism



Sigfried Giedion, "Space, Time and Architecture" (1941)

- Heinrich Wölfflin is generally considered as the first art historian in the modern conception of the term, and he occupied the first Chair of Art History, created specially for him at the University of Basel. He also taught at the Universities of Berlin, Munich and Zürich.
- His students included **Sigfried Giedion**, historian of 19th-century architecture, and author of "Space, Time and Architecture" (1941), the key text which influenced **Walter Gropius** and **Le Corbusier** and helped to define the modern movement in architecture. **Ernst Gombrich** whose "The Story of Art" became the fundamental art history book; and **Naum Gabo** (Constructivist sculptor and member of the Bauhaus).

# David Hume - Causal theory of Beauty



David Hume, (1711-1776)

- Read's aesthetic theories have their roots in the work of Scottish empiricist and sceptic **David Hume**.
- For Hume, beauty may be a quality of objects and not itself a feeling - but this quality is identified in us by the feelings it causes in us. Hume says that, "Beauty is such an order and satisfaction of parts as is fitted to give a pleasure and satisfaction to the soul..beauty is nothing but a form, which produces a pleasure, as deformity is a structure of parts, which conveys pain..".
- (Hume, "A Treatise on Human Nature", p.299)

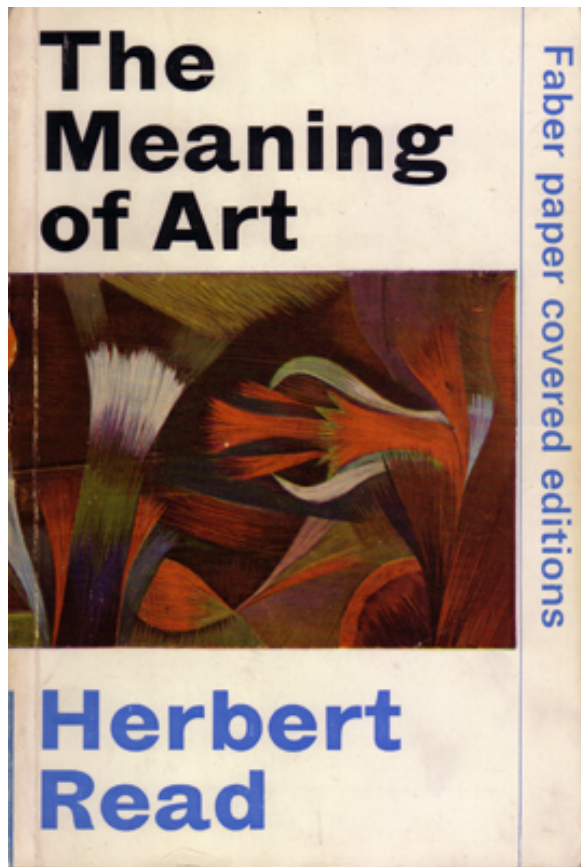
# Edmund Burke: “A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful” (1756)



Edmund Burke, Statesman, orator and author, (1729-1797)

- Burke’s “Enquiry” also contains a causal theory of Beauty:
- “By Beauty, I mean, that quality or those qualities in bodies by which they cause love, or some passion similar to it.” (“Enquiry”, p.91)

# The Meaning of Art (1931)



- In the 1930s Read reiterated a causal theory of beauty, claiming that there exist: “Pleasing forms’ which ‘satisfy our sense of beauty’ , as a matter of cause and effect” .
- Art is ‘pattern informed by sensibility’ .
- The most general law in nature is equity- the principle of balance and symmetry which guides the growth of forms along the lines of the greatest structural efficiency.
- Different works of art may possess ‘beauty’ but the term cannot be the only criterion for art - An Ivory Coast tribal idol is not ‘beautiful’ in the same way as a Greek classical sculpture, but may have other aesthetic qualities which renders it artistic. For Wittgenstein, the word ‘beauty’ is hardly helpful - he prefers terms like ‘right’ or ‘correct’ ..

# Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951)



- Wittgenstein rejects the causal theory of Beauty.
- For him, feelings of pleasure or discomfort amounted to a double statement:
- One might describe something as beautiful or ugly because one felt a pleasurable sensation caused by certain qualities of the object;
- But for Wittgenstein, aesthetic descriptions are descriptions of the objects themselves and not of their causal powers with regard to sensations. There appear to be two things going on here in the soul: discomfort at something, and knowing its cause..
- Aesthetic descriptions are descriptions of the objects themselves and not of their causal powers with regard to sensations.
- If the point of listening to a certain minuet is to get a certain effect - then any other minuet which produced this effect would do as well.

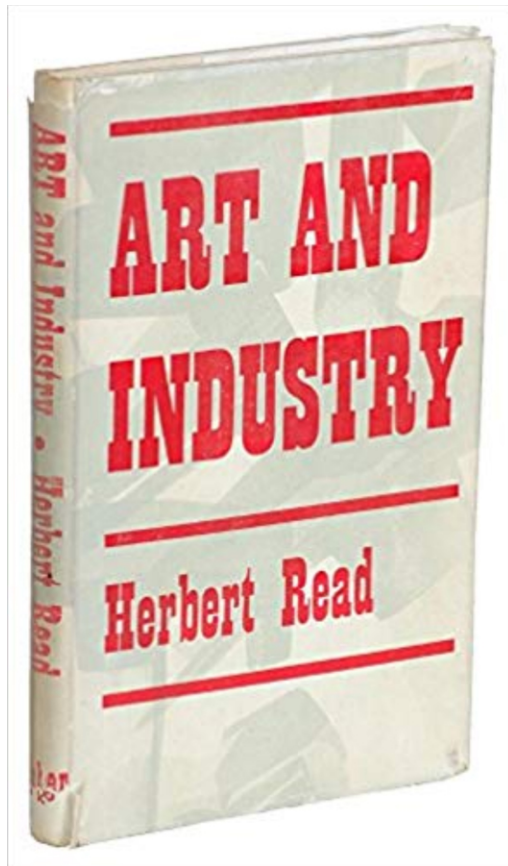
# “The Meaning of Art”



Herbert Read, founder of the Institute of Contemporary Arts. Photograph: Hulton Getty

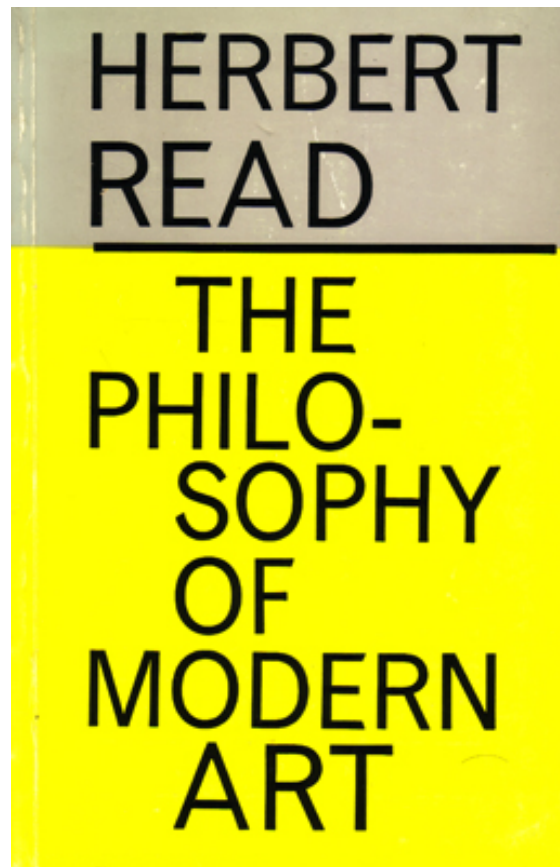
- Together with **Worringer**'s and **Wolfflin**'s theories of formal abstraction, Read was also convinced by psychological, and psychoanalytic theories, from Freud to Jung, which were simultaneously influencing the work of the Surrealists, and through them, **Henry Moore**, and **Picasso**.
- “Freud has shown one thing very clearly: that we only forget our infancy by burying it in the unconscious; and that the problems of this difficult period find their solution under a disguised form in adult life”.
- The book provides a concise history of world art from ‘primitive’ cave painting through to **Jackson Pollock**, and summarises period styles such as Gothic, Baroque, Impressionism, Expressionism, Surrealism and Tachism.

# Art and Industry (1936)



- Published in 1936, the book was seminal in the establishment of **Industrial Design** in the UK.
- Read was Director of the first design consultancy in the UK, The Design Research Unit
- Read proposes a reappraisal of industrial design which takes into account previous traditions of manufacture and craft whilst acknowledging the potentials and capacity of modern machinery. For more than a hundred years an attempt has been made to impose on the products of machinery aesthetic values which are not only irrelevant, but generally costly and harmful to efficiency.
- Previous attempts by **J. Ruskin** and **W. Morris**, used the superficial styles and mannerisms of the Renaissance tradition or ornament.
- For Read, the real problem is not to adapt machine production to the aesthetic standards of handicraft, but to think out new aesthetic standards for new methods of production.
- In other words, what is required as a preliminary to any practical solution of the division existing between art and industry is a clear understanding, not only of the processes of modern production, but also of the nature of art..

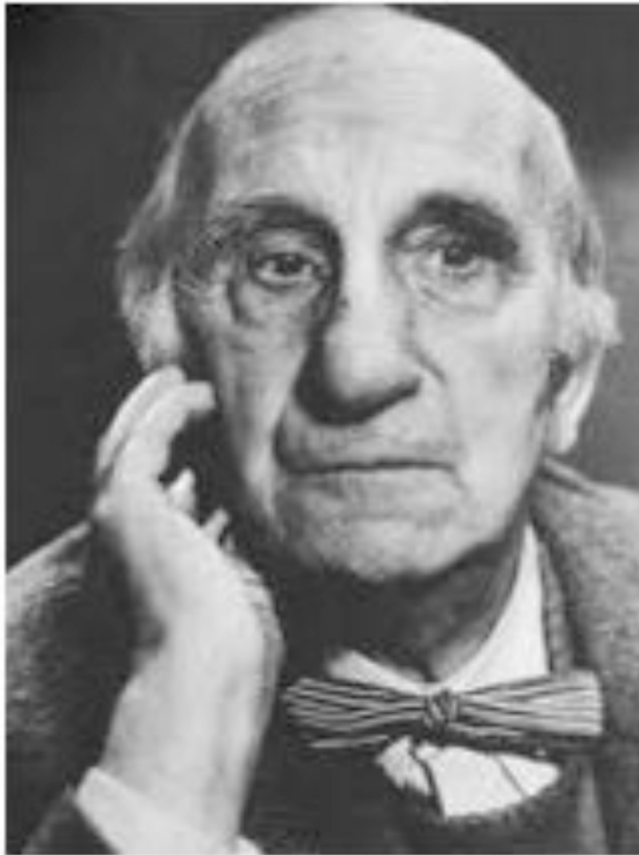
# The Philosophy of Modern Art (1952/64)



- A collection of 16 essays on modern art, humanism, realism and abstraction, Surrealism and Constructivism, as well as individual essays on **Gauguin, Picasso, Klee, Paul Nash, Henry Moore, Ben Nicholson, Naum Gabo** and **Antoine Pevsner**.
- The book helped to situate the UK modernist tradition in the context of European mainstream modernism.
- Read was one of the earliest English writers to take notice of existentialism, and was strongly influenced by proto-existentialist thinker **Max Stirner**.
- In the earlier "The Education of Free Men" (1944) Read argues that: In all things, moral and intellectual, we should act on the belief that we really possess only what we have conquered ourselves that we are made perfect by natural habits, but slaves by social conventions; and that until we have become accustomed to beauty we are not capable of truth and goodness, for by beauty we mean the principle of harmony which is the given order of the physical universe, to which we conform and live, or which we reject and die (p. 25).
- For Read Art is a 'mode of knowledge', and is 'as valuable to man as the world of philosophy or the world of science'. In 'Icon and Idea (1955) he makes the bold claim that art too expands the world 'with new facts'.
- Over time our civilisation has lost sight of art's power and purpose, and it is the function of contemporary art to restore this
- For Read, the fact that the previous functions and markets for art are now closed (magic, religion, private patronage) has the hidden benefit that artists are now free to concentrate on exploring what Read called 'the expansion of consciousness' - the conscious and unconscious domain.
- Read sees this exploration of consciousness as the real core of all art activity from Lascaux onwards.

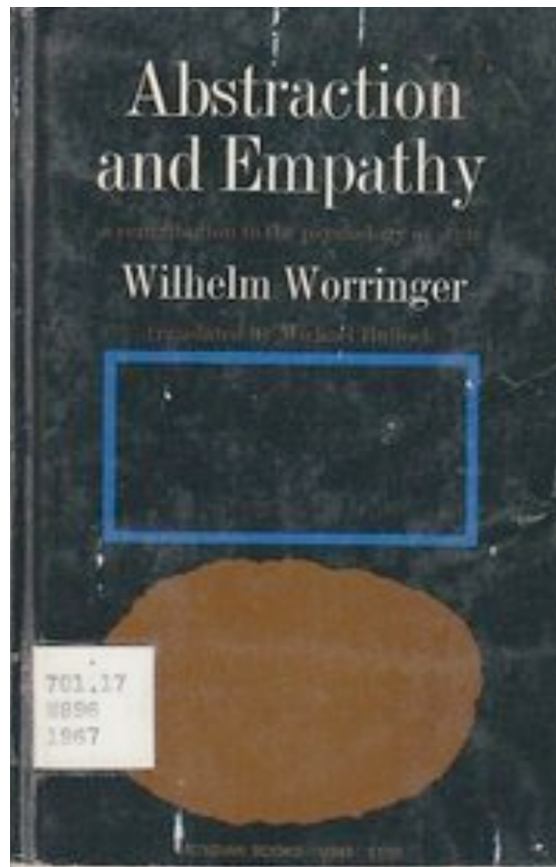


# Wilhelm Worringer (1881-1965)



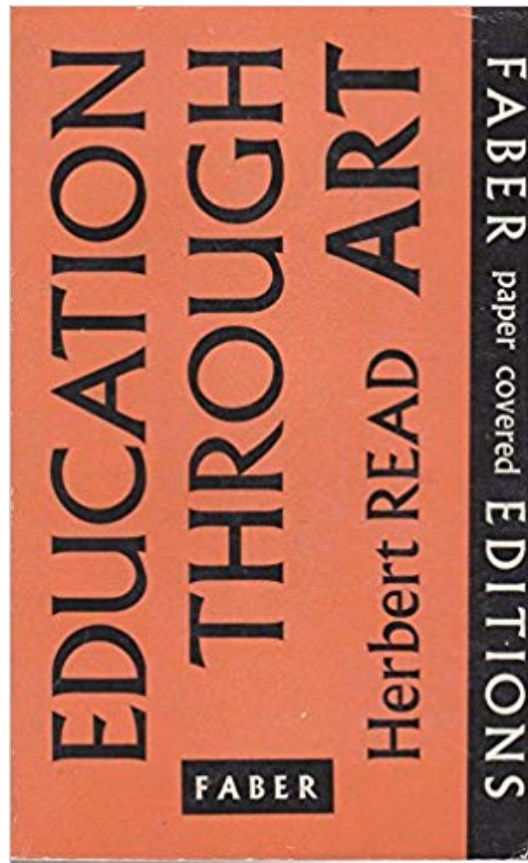
- b. Aix-la-Chapelle.
- Studied Art History under **Heinrich Rückert**, **Georg Simmel** and **Heinrich Wölfflin**. In 1907, he completed his doctoral thesis, under Artur Weese at the University of Berne, "**Abstraction an Empathy**", published in Munich in 1908.
- In 1911 he published his second major essay: The "Problem of Form in Gothic", which defined Gothic art by 'the primitive (=essential) geometric line which contained no organic expression.'
- Building on **Alois Riegl**, he was at the heart of a nascent theory of modernism in 1914 in Europe, identified, by **Otto Rank**, as 'expressionism', who saw it as integral to the development of European
- For **Gilles Deleuze et Félix Guattari**, Worringer is the first to characterise abstraction as a primary form - in nature and in the common forms of representation in all cultures
- In England, he exerted a strong influence on T. E. Hulme (1883-1917), poet et critic behind the **Vorticist** movement,
- For Read, Worringer's distinction between abstraction and empathy (feeling-into) is correlated with the introverted and extraverted attitudes observed by **C. Jung**, and provides the link between the psychological theory of types differentiated by **Jaensch** and Jung, and the function of imagery in "Education through Art"

# Worringer: “Abstraction and Empathy”



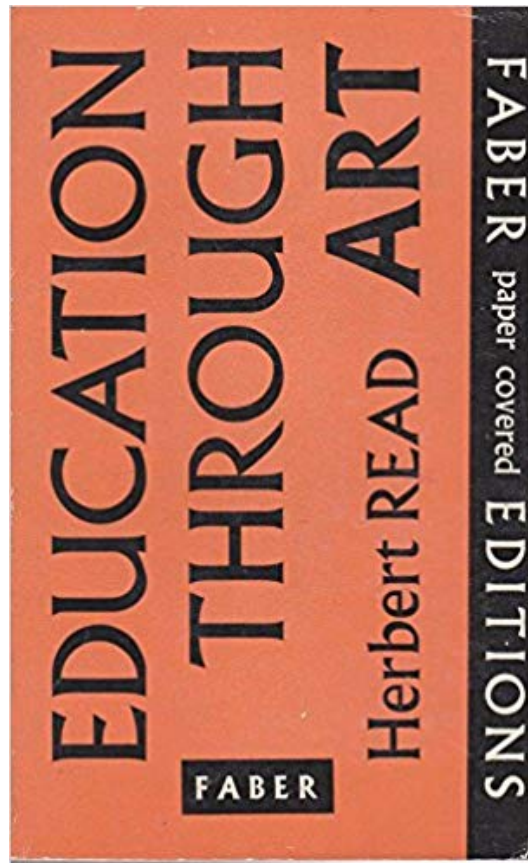
- “Abstraction and Empathy A Contribution to the Psychology of Style” (1908)
- Worringer's classic study argues that in historical periods of anxiety and uncertainty, man seeks to abstract objects from their unpredictable state and transform them into absolute, transcendental forms.
- Read found Worringer’s ideas fundamental to an understanding of the formal structure of contemporary art such as Henry Moore and Picasso, where the ‘recognisable’ or realist elements were subordinated to abstract/formal expression.
- Read became interested in children’s drawings after having been invited to curate an exhibition to tour neutral countries during the war. Because it was deemed too dangerous to transport established works across the Atlantic, Read chose the work of children instead, and Read became unexpectedly moved by their expressive power and emotional content.

# “Education through Art” (1961)



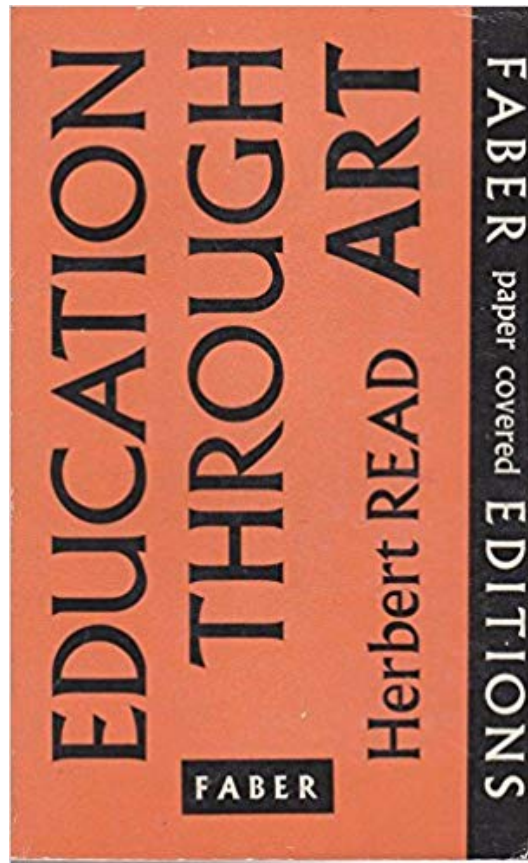
- One result was this book., which advocates the use of artistic expression as the foundation of education, based on sociological, psychological, and philosophical grounds.
- Aims simply to translate **Plato**'s original idea into contemporary terms
- The 'delay' in following Plato's lead has been caused by subsequent misunderstandings about what art is and what the rôle of education is.
- On the latter; there are two opinions: that education should train the student to be what s/he is (innately/individualistic); the other is that it should train them to be what they are not (for society's ends).
- Only **Schiller** so far has understood and reiterated Plato's plea.
- A libertarian conception of education sees its purpose to develop the uniqueness, the social consciousness or reciprocity of the individual.
- For sure, we are all genetically unique, and this uniqueness may be of small or greater value to the community into which we are born: "It may be only a unique way of speaking or of smiling...or it may be a unique way of seeing, thinking, of inventing, of expressing mind or emotion - and in that case, one man's individuality may be of incalculable benefit to the whole of humanity." (p.5)
- Uniqueness, however, is of no use in isolation, and the task of education is to channel this uniqueness towards the social unity.

# “Education through Art” (1961)



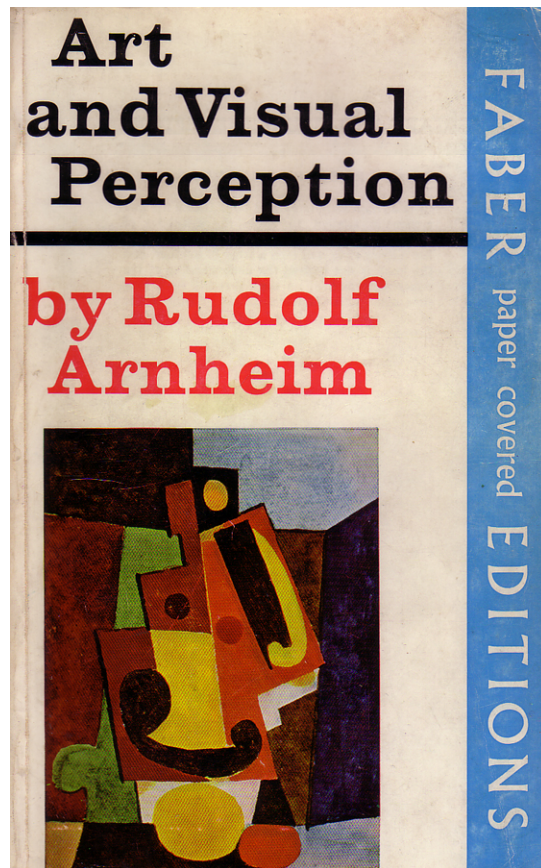
- To this extent, education also has a moral purpose - to differentiate between 'good' and 'bad' or 'useful for society' and 'not useful/harmful for society'
- Except that this implies direction 'from a centre' / point of authority, which Read is anxious to avoid.
- Instead he argues that the encouragement of the positive aspect, inevitably eliminates the negative. Ie if children are encouraged towards the positive direction, they will have no interest in the opposite.
- "Freedom.. is a state of being with positive characteristics..to be developed in all their self-sufficiency" (p.6) - We avoid hate, by loving.
- **Plato**: "Avoid compulsion, and let your children's lessons take the form of play. This will also help you to see what they are naturally fitted for" (Republic, VII, 536).
- Rousseau also established freedom as the guiding principle of Education, and after him, **John Dewey** and **Edmond Holmes** integrated the theory of education with a democratic conception of society.
- Read adds his own concern for psychological 'orientation' as a key goal of education: to enable the individual psyche of the student to find its positive place in the societal whole; which is to be attained by attention to a broad aesthetic education (in diverse media - writing, music, art, creativity)
- "The education of those senses upon which consciousness, and ultimately the intelligence and judgment of the human individual, are based" (p.7)
- It is only in so far as these senses are brought into harmonious and habitual relationship with the external world that an integrated personality is built up" p.7)

# “Education through Art” (1961)



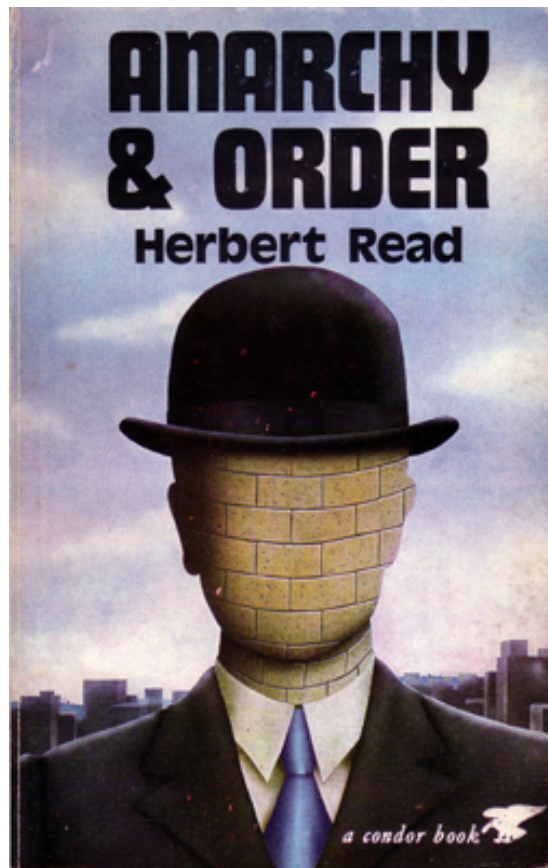
- Taking his lead from **Freud, Jung** and **Gestalt Psychology**, Read sees the unconscious ‘somatic’ level and the subconscious as two important well-springs of experience, images and ideas which are usually neglected, but which need to be tapped into if a holistic education is to be achieved.
- The five senses are the locus of six types of knowledge and experience, (Visual, Touch, Ear, Muscles, Speech, Thought) and correspond to four main functions of our mental processes: Sensation, (Design), Intuition, (Music/Dance), Feeling (Poetry/ Drama) and Thought (Craft). (This idea corresponds loosely to that of Dewey, who spoke of our various ‘Instincts’ - to communicate, dance, sing, draw etc..)
- Importantly, Read does not distinguish science from art and sees the artificial boundaries erected between them as counter-productive: “Art is the representation, science the explanation - of the same reality.”
- As all aspects of life are experienced through these above processes, Read argues that: “The aim of education is therefore the creation of artists - of people efficient in the various modes of expression”

# “Education through Art” (1961)



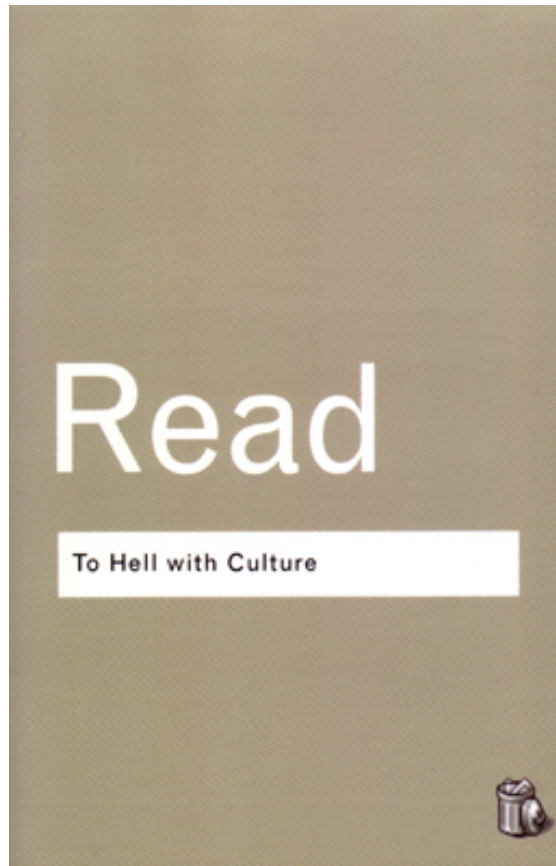
- For an understanding of Gestalt Psychology, Read points us to **Wolfgang Koehler**'s “The Place of Value in a World of Facts” (1940), and **Rudolph Arnheim**'s “Art and Visual Perception” (1954).
- For Read, Gestalt Psychology explains why one form is preferred to others, and why, form, as against chaos, exists at all.
- In subsequent chapters, Read discusses the definition of art as a form-making activity, driven by the impulse to create and involving **perception** and **imagination**.
- In Temperament and Expression, Read rejects a unified concept of ‘human nature’ in favour of one which addresses different ‘character types’, as revealed by the child’s innate modes of plastic expression. (**E.Kretschner** and **W.H.Sheldon**, **E.R.F.Jaensch** and **C.Jung**). He also relates these types to the impulses motivating ancient and Modern Art (p.97)
- In The Art Of Children, Read explores expression through play, which encourages spontaneity and inspiration in problem solving, and traces the developmental stages of children’s drawing from early scribbling to the beginnings of symbolic representation
- The rest of the book discusses the Unconscious, art teaching, discipline and morality, the teacher, the environment of the school, concluding with a restatement of the importance of a holistic/ aesthetic education for the proper development of society at large.

# Anarchy and Order (1974)



- If the individual is a unit in a corporate mass, his life is not merely brutish and short, but dull and mechanical.
- To realize that new world we must prefer the values of freedom and equality above all other values - above personal wealth, technical power and nationalism.
- The assumption is that the right kind of society is an organic being not merely analogous to an organic being, but actually a living structure with appetites and digestions, instincts and passions, intelligence and reason.
- The farther a society progresses, the more clearly the individual becomes the antithesis of the group
- Morality, as has often been pointed out, is antecedent to religion-it even exists in a rudimentary form among animals.

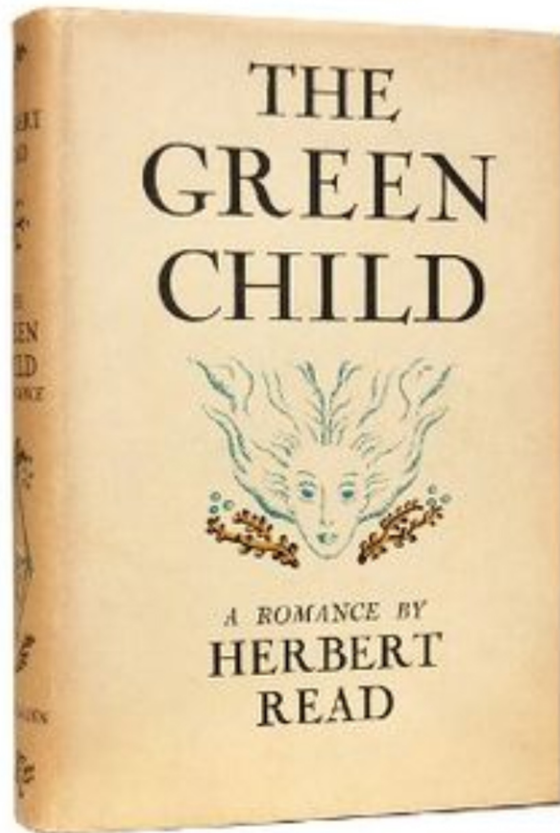
# “To Hell with Culture” (1963)



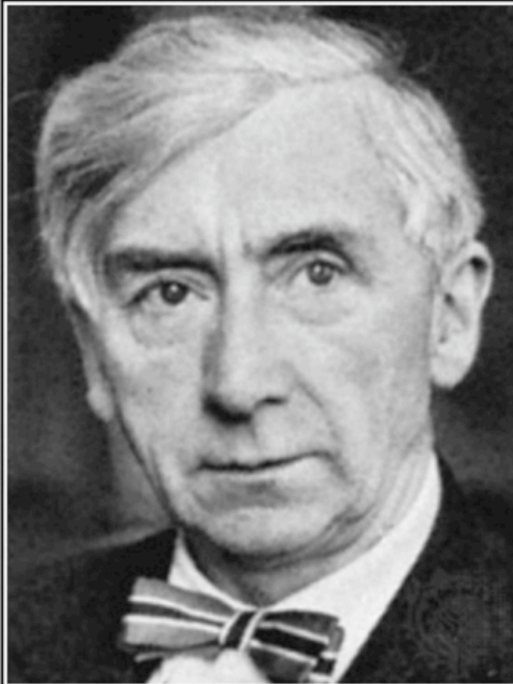
- “It does not seem that the contradiction which exists between the aristocratic function of art and the democratic structure of modern society can ever be resolved”.
- The, at times controversial, book tackles a wide range of topics from revolutionary art to pornography.
- Read challenges accepted wisdom and subverts any supposed voice of authority in favour of a free-thinking and fresh approach to politics and culture.
- Only by questioning ‘received wisdom; says Read, can we appreciate the art that arises from, “the unpolitical manifestation of the human spirit.”



# The Green Child (1935)



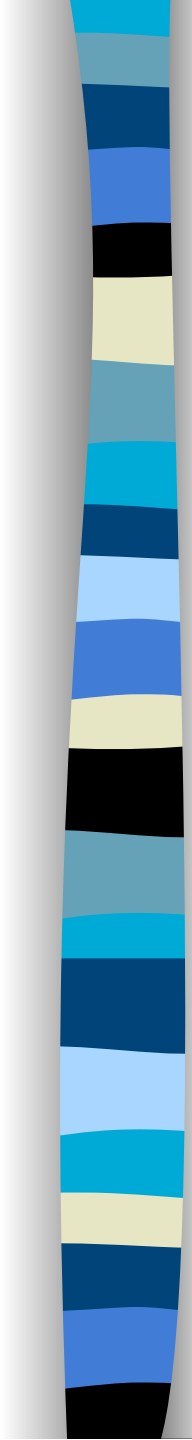
- His only work of fiction, "The Green Child," was published in 1935 and defies easy classification.
- Non-linear in structure, it is divided into three parts, each distinct enough to be its own book. All three parts end with the suggested death of Olivero, (president of an unnamed South American country), symbolising his passing into another realm of life, or consciousness.
- In the first part, Olivero returns to the English village of his childhood. All is unchanged, except for the stream, which now appears to run uphill. He follows it up to its mouth, where he discovers a woman being tortured by a sadistic husband; from her skin colour, he recognises her as one of two "green children" who had turned up in the village on the day he left. He secures her release and she leads him below the surface of the water, into the labyrinth of her lost people.
- The second part is a memoir of Olivero's adventures in South America and his imprisonment, political ascension and subsequent stagnation of his leadership, prompting him to fake his own death.
- The third part explores the subterranean Utopia into which Olivero and the green child descend. In this world, time and reality are replaced by four "ledges" of meaning. The highest is meditation, and Olivero begins to prepare his body (once more) for death.



But all categories of art, idealistic or realistic, surrealistic or constructivist (a new form of idealism) must satisfy a simple test (or they are in no sense works of art): they must persist as objects of contemplation.

— *Herbert Read* —

AZ QUOTES



“The worth of a civilization or a culture is not valued in the terms of its material wealth or military power, but by the quality and achievements of its representative individuals - its philosophers, its poets and its artists”.