



Gabriele Münnix: *Das Bild vom Bild (The Image of the Image), Bildsemiotik und Bildphänomenologie in interkultureller Perspektive*

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This astonishingly learned monograph by the prolific philosopher Gabriele Münnix takes on the encyclopedic task of providing a contrastive account of discourses on visual culture in a wide variety of religious and intellectual traditions. The focus is on Western cultures in the enlarged sense, which includes Byzantine, Persian, and Arab cultures. A brief, but crucial foray into Indian and East Asian spiritual traditions makes the study truly Eurasian in scope.

The book is divided into four sections, focused respectively on (1) the main conceptual motifs, (2) world religions, (3) European philosophy, and (4) synthetic conclusions. The book's title "The Image of the Image" (*Das Bild vom Bild*) contains a *plöce*, i.e., a lexical repetition with difference, since it explores different cultures' notions (or "images") of what "images" mean—from artistic and iconographic ones to visual experience in general and even to "verbal images" as found in metaphors. To make matters even more complex, the German word *Bild* can be translated as *image* or *picture* in English, a split which reveals a tension at the core of discourses on visuality. For Plato, the Greek word for "image," εἶδος, refers to mental pictures, including the kind of abstractions to which no physical image can do justice. The kernel of the work's philosophical problem is thus evoked in the German word's polysemy. To organize her large and multifarious range of sources, Münnix must first confront the fact that "cultures" are no longer self-contained entities in the twenty-first century. In the age of global online media, the Gadamerian fusion of subjective horizons now occurs all but automatically, without much hermeneutic work. Münnix is admirably cautious about

deriving grand, sweeping statements about culture from her case studies.

After the conceptual introduction, the book's second section begins by drawing our attention to the fact that the well-known monotheistic anxieties about images have a historically contingent basis in several passages in the Torah banning idolatry. Theoretically, polytheistic religions could just as easily have restricted visual representations of divinities more stringently than monotheistic ones since both types of religious tradition produce images of the divine while also describing the divine as unrepresentable at other times. Münnix devotes a subsection, for instance, to the Late Hellenistic writer Philon's philosophical negotiations between Jewish and Roman laws on the topic. Philon's ban on images of the divine finds its biblical basis in the Golden Calf incident in *Exodus*, which remains relevant to a society living alongside idol-worshippers neighbors. Thus, while Jewish Romans had developed the habit of taking circuitous routes through cities to avoid even seeing statues of Roman gods, Philon declares that gratitude for the living conditions under Pax Romana justifies a tolerance for the omnipresence of their idols.

In third- to tenth-century Anatolia, the political regimes of the Eastern Roman Empire were often defined by their stance on the use of icons depicting the saints and the Holy Family (comparable to politicians' stances on abortion laws in the contemporary United States). Byzantine history is marked by alternations between regimes with iconophilic and iconoclastic positions when new emperors succeeded to the throne. Such emperors could quickly change the religious landscape by appointing bishops who shared their views on religious iconography, as Constantine V. did in 754. The Second Council of Nicea in 787 was historically decisive for the status of images in Christianity globally. It was here that images were first explained as a "bible for the poor" (*biblia pauperum*), a notion that would inspire the future history of Christian art and architecture.

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As Münnix moves on to discuss modern European Christianity, she first discusses the openness of Catholicism towards imagery, which reached its height in the Renaissance, when images of biblical figures were crafted to the same standards of beauty as the Greek sculptures, which had indeed served as idols. However, the association of these precious art objects with the Church's extensive accumulation of wealth provided ammunition for the purist and iconoclastic tendencies of the Reformation. The Swiss Reformation was particularly aggressive in calling for the destruction of images, which led to many domestic acts of vandalism in places otherwise known as peaceful, like Geneva and Zurich. Destroying Catholic images in Churches became a routine part of the violence by Protestant armies during the Thirty Years' War.

The section on Islam begins with general background on the religion's origins, its emphasis on the unity of God, and the reasons for the split between Shiite and Sunni factions in a quarrel regarding succession at the height of the Caliphate in the eighth century (less than a hundred years after the religion's founding). The author then goes on to explain that the religious basis for a ban on images had its strongest sources in the Hadith, which she summarizes concisely in three points: (1) "the sensual world is separated from the divine truth by an unbridgeable gulf. The former is mere appearance and deception and thus not worth depicting, while the divine is not representable." (2) One of God's names is "the painter," a reference to the understanding that only God is entitled to create images; (3) art objects are luxury goods and possessing them is unbecoming of a pious Muslim. (This final point recalls the Protestant case against the art owned and commissioned by the Church.)

An extended and impressively researched discussion then emerges about the competing theories of vision by Al-Kindī, Al-Fārābī, and Al-Hazen. Al-Kindī drew heavily on Plotinus's theory of light as divine emanation, whereas Al-Hazen saw the divine meaning of light as beginning at the moment of reception by the eye. With the rise of Sufi mysticism, thinkers like Ibn Arabi and Al-Ghazālī initiated a philosophical criticism of the earlier generation of philosophers' positive assessment of vision. Sufi thinkers remained marginal among Muslim intellectuals precisely because they rejected worldliness (including the visual world) so radically. Münnix explains that the enchanting ideal of ego-transcending love expounded by Rumi is not the only legacy of Sufism: fundamentalist political Islam movements in Turkey (Hizmet, the organization now famously linked to the attempted coup in 2017), Egypt (the Muslim Brotherhood), and Pakistan (*ichwan al-muslimin*) also have their roots in the radical rejection of the world which is a part of Sufi mysticism. Versions of a religion that ban images, unsurprisingly, tend to be the more moralistic ones even if such moralism is in tension with Rumi's advocacy for a transcendent mindset beyond the

familiar distinctions of I and you, God and mortal, and good and evil.

The discussion of modern and contemporary Islam is centered on the challenge of restricting graphic representations in a globalized world. Only the most fundamentalist versions of political Islam (as in Saudi Arabia) could still call for a ban on all kinds of images, even, for instance, the little soccer figurines on table football games. The section about Islam ends abruptly by touching on current events, like the fury over the *Charlie Hebdo* cartoon ridiculing Muhammed and the destruction of the Bamiyam Buddhas by the Islamic State. Its judicious conclusion is that the debate on the heretical nature of images is one both within Islam and within Christianity—not just an intercultural debate—and that the intercultural and intracultural dialogue should continue with vigor in light of this complexity. There is surely nothing to object to in this call for a more nuanced approach.

The discussion of Indian spiritual and cultural history shows a similarly robust engagement with scholarship—although the preponderance of traditional European historians among her sources precludes deeper engagement with a post-colonial lens. The conclusion of the long religious-historical section is that, while Indian religion has never had a ban on images, the Upanishads also refer to a spiritual truth beyond concepts, words, and images—just like the Christian and Jewish mystical traditions. Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism also have moments of rejecting the visual in favor of the supersensory—even though these have often been ignored in practice without great upheaval. Nevertheless, an aesthetics of negation emerged alongside intellectual justifications for rejecting the visual—like Nagarjuna's emphasis on "emptiness" in Mahayana Buddhism—which finds its clearest expression in Chinese and Japanese landscape painting with large spaces of blank canvas, the spareness of Zen gardens, and minimalist Japanese interior design. The odd justification for images of the Buddha is not omitted: the fact that Buddha representations are mere images reminds the adherent that the body of the Buddha is *not* the Buddha-nature.

The long section on religious visual culture ends with the idea that the anxiety about images evident in the major monotheistic traditions centers on a different axis to that of the East Asian traditions, which are less prone to separate the viewer as subject from the art object, but rather consider art to provide a means of access to a transcendent reality. The tension will play out over the rest of the book: certain forms of spirituality elevate the image as continuous with truth while analytical models tend to reduce images to signifiers, which point not to "the truth" but to mental constructs. Rather than arguing along the lines of the philosophical anthropologists (and some contemporary ethnographers) that rationalistic cultures think differently than mythically oriented ones, Münnix discovers surprising points of overlap, such as the problematic of the "icon" in the philosophical discourse on signification.

The equally voluminous third section of the book provides a thorough introduction to recent European and American theories of signification. The opening segments provide a historical preamble to secular ideas about vision, beginning with the view (by Hans Jonas and others) that humans have always distinguished themselves from other animals by creating images, especially images of themselves, which reflect their interest in their own existence and its meaning. The Platonic legacy, however, renders problematic such love of self-duplication: images deceive-despite vision's status as Plato's favorite metaphor for knowledge. In careful and patient discussions of Magritte, Wittgenstein, and Bergson, it emerges that images are rarely just representations, but also function to initiate reflection on the relationship between seeing and believing and between seeing and doing, as well as other ways in which the visual is integrated into the rest of human experience. The emergence of the concept of the "sign" becomes a pivotal moment in this history since the visibility of a sign is subordinate to its signaling function. Contexts of use dynamically expand signs' function. After an exhaustive introduction to Charles Sanders Peirce's theory of signification and an equally exhaustive study of Nelson Goodman's art historical theory of signification follows, Umberto Eco's work on the indeterminacy of signs is handled with equal detail and thoroughness.

A treatment of the phenomenology of vision maintains the text-based approach, in which works are discussed extensively on their own terms before their relationship to the central problematic of visibility is foregrounded. Here Edmund Husserl's famous "intuition of essence" is analyzed as a kind of inward vision. Other topics that are discussed in this context include Heidegger's relationship to Zen, Merleau-Ponty's work with Husserl, and Sartre's relation to Heidegger. Each of these is treated at substantial length. Moreover, this section ties in with the second section's conclusion by sharpening the point that Western discourses—secular or religious—tend to cement the subject-object duality even when they call it into question.

The final section undertakes a synthesis of the various cultural currents. It begins by developing Gottfried Boehm's concept of "iconic difference" as art's version of Heidegger's ontological difference: it relates to art's capacity to empty visual images of their assigned role as signifiers. The similarity between the Daoist rejection of dualism and Derrida's

deconstruction becomes the basis for a concluding discussion about the latent commensurability of highly disparate visual cultures. As a parting gesture, Münnix acknowledges that many postcolonial cultures do not separate the form of images from their psychological effects as sharply as postmodern Western ones do, and that intercultural dialogue ought to take such differences into consideration. The technocratic notion of images as mere objects is an odd exception—even within Western cultural attitudes.

The book succeeds in being accessible without sacrificing scholarly rigor. The high-powered nature of the discourse together with the very detailed treatment of the subject matter means that this is no popularizing book, but at the same time its didactic precision informs while opening a dialogue across disciplines (of which the book spans many). Any work that addresses such a wide range of topics is bound to treat some of them more cursorily than others: there is more to read about Peirce's theory of signs, for instance, than about Daoist aesthetics even though the latter appears more important to her concluding argument. That said, the book has a tightly wound internal logic, and its primary effect is to remind readers that news cycles and talking points severely distort every culture's position in public debates about the status and regulation of images.

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