

Gabriele Münnix

Image Bans and Intercultural Image Philosophy - How to Reconcile Image Semioticians and Image Phenomenologists

Why is a philosophy of pictures and images, as you will see, situated between philosophy of art and religious philosophy, also an intercultural topic?

You might remember the controversy about the Muhammad cartoons and its violent consequences („Charlie Hebdo“, Samuel Paty), but the discussions in the so-called „West“ were mainly on freedom of the press and art, and unfortunately not about the various and different pictorial traditions in many cultures which were violated.

For we can distinguish – also in history, even in ancient times – image friendly and iconoclastic currents in many cultures. What is so dangerous in pictures? What is their nature?

Besides we have today a parallel controversy in the philosophy of pictures and images which so far has not been connected to the very old and often culturally rooted religious traditions and their attitude towards pictures and images, which even in more secular times are still at work. I wanted to connect both controversies by offering a possible solution to the philosophical debate against this background.

What is this topical controversy in the philosophy of images and pictures about?

1. Image Phenomenology and Image Semiotics

The current dispute about image phenomenology or image semiotics has deep roots and is not the first image dispute in which different positions of image philosophy have clashed. I am convinced that the iconoclastic currents of the major world religions are not without impact in this topical dispute, Even in more secular times traditional attitudes still have their impact.

Are images and pictures signs of the represented, or is there some sort of „artificial presence“ within the representation?

Image semioticians are convinced that images and pictures are only signs of the represented which can be depicted in words, thoughts and pictures. Thus pictures are embedded into a general theory of signs and have to be *read*, their meaning has to be concluded.

Image phenomenologists concentrate on the perception of what seems to be present in the picture, for instance a person or a landscape, to which they think to have direct access. And this suggestive real presence may lead to identify the representation with the depicted person or object behind.

We know that Kant had a painting of Rousseau hanging above his desk, who always looked over Kant's shoulder, so to speak, as he worked. It is this suggestive real presence of the person depicted in the picture which was fought against as dangerous by many great religions, a kind of pictorial magic that makes us believe that the person or thing depicted could be present in a picture in some way. For religious pictures we can always observe influences of negative theology and mysticism and conceptions of a necessarily hidden God or unaccessible living being that are closely linked to the respective (iconoclastic) image traditions. The necessarily inadequate picture, and not God himself might be worshipped. This is why efforts have been taken to interpret pictures and images as mere signs of the depicted, and this symbolic level prevents the identification of the representation and the represented.

This has had an impact on the modern controversy: Semioticians and phenomenologists hold different views on the pictorial so that today we have a new debate about how to interpret images and pictures. I have investigated the theories of three image semioticians (Peirce, Goodman and Eco) as well as of three image phenomenologists (Husserl, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty) and have found that the cultural background of the performing artist normally plays no role in discussing the various conceptions. But we can find strong influences of image cultures from various religions backgrounds even in secular times. For image semioticians, the apparent real presence of the depicted is an inadmissible identification of two levels that must be strictly separated. The depiction is seen as a sign of the depicted, as a signifier that can only refer to a primarily existing signified of whatever kind. If archetype and image are inadmissibly conflated, no distance is placed between them, the presence in the image or even the mere emanation of a certain being into the image can thus be interpreted as the resurgence of pagan ideas. An entire development of symbolisation processes would thus be shelved. A semiotic theory of the pictorial embeds pictures into a general theory of signs, together with linguistic signs for instance, and we have to conclude their reference, their meaning. On the other hand for image phenomenologists this disguises the specific nature of pictures in which the artist reveals how he/she sees things: which is a phenomenon of expression. We see through his/her eyes, symbolisation is not necessary; it would only disturb the direct effect of an image and its impression.

2. A new proposition to image theory

Both parties, semioticians and phenomenologists, distinguish three dimensions of the pictorial, which they interpret differently. The representational image carrier is to be distinguished from the actual image or picture, the representation itself, and the latter refers to the represented, e.g. a real person or a landscape that was the archetype for the image. This depicted original is normally invisible

to the viewer in other places, but the artist can make it visible for others in other places, thus creating a sort of artificial presence.

So by transferring Austin's „speech acts“ to pictures I have added a fourth dimension to the classical image triangle: that of the presenting person behind the performing act, and here pictorial traditions and styles of representation and image bans (for instance avoiding depictions of living beings) come into play.

After all, it is precisely the conflict over presence or sign that has not only determined theological and philosophical positions on the image from time immemorial and was fought over physical "images" of the divine, but was and is also the basis of three Eucharist disputes. Presence or sign?

And this of course influenced attitudes towards pictures in general. Is there some sort of presence? And why should this be avoided?

3. Image Bans

a)

Judaism was the first monotheistic religion that had to distance itself from the surrounding pagan image practices: a true God had to be greater than all false or rather falsifying images. The biblical prohibition of images is already found in the second of the ten commandments, "Thou shalt not make unto thee any image", which has become tradition-forming, but has also been immediately transgressed when Moses came down from Mount Sinai where he found the Israelites worshipping a self-made golden calf. Pictures of God were not possible: Not only is God immeasurable and cannot be depicted, but he/she is also inexpressible, any image would be an inadmissible diminution. God's presence is indicated by symbolic effects, such as the burning bush or a pillar of fire that guides the Israelites on their way.

Image worship (avodah zara) was strictly forbidden and one of the three mortal sins. Two uprisings against the Romans, who wanted to erect a statue of the emperor in the Jerusalem Temple, were bloodily suppressed, the 2nd Temple and with it the whole of Jerusalem were levelled to the ground, and the Roman province was now called Palestine, which the Jews were no longer allowed to enter. This was interpreted as divine punishment for occasional transgressions of the ban on images and could only reinforce it. Judaism, however, through the prohibition of images, consistently developed into a culture of listening. And in Jewish mysticism signs were used to imagine the powers of a hidden God.

b)

In Christianity this negative theology was always suspected of being heretic although there always have been mystics and negative theologians as well. However, Christianity, with its belief in an incarnation of the divine in human form, had a different basis for the question of images, just as it is the case in Hinduism. But St Paul, possibly inspired by Plato's ban on mimesis, had warned

against the veneration of images in his letters; and the Byzantine iconoclastic controversy subsequently led to the mass destruction of pictures. However, inspired by Neoplatonism, a different solution to the question of images had been found later: Images were now no longer regarded as "mere" appearances and therefore as false and inadmissible, but as *divine* appearances which was decisive for orthodox icon painting. Plotinus' doctrine of the emanation of the divine into the world meant that although images were regarded as shadows in Plato's sense, they were also connected to this divine and therefore shared in it. So the Second Council of Nicaea in 787 recognised images as **permissible**, which gave Christian religious art a tremendous boost. However, the iconoclastic currents in Christianity were not settled with the decision of Nicaea, but broke out again in full during the Reformation. An iconoclasm swept through the Flemish provinces, which were under Spanish sovereignty at the time. Pictures were destroyed everywhere, and this continued in Germany, France, Belgium and England, and even in Switzerland. God, it was said, is only present in the sacrament, and not in pictures. So within Christianity we can observe different attitudes towards pictures and images.

c)

Even more radical than Judaism was, of course, Islam. Already Sura 2 ("The Cow") tells the story of the golden calf, which, as a work of man, may not be worshipped under penalty of punishment; and it is part of the founding myth of this religion that Muhammad, when he wanted to pray in the Kaaba, first had to cleanse the place of idols.

However, the ban on depiction goes even further here and generally prohibits the depiction of living things.

A transcendent God who reveals himself only through the word, without any incarnation, must elude any attempt at representation. There were indeed images, e.g. from pre-Islamic painting traditions, and even depictions of Muhammad, who was then marked with a veil over his face. Shiite heterodoxy was more tolerant of images than Sunni orthodoxy. Above all, however, "mussavvir", one of the 99 names of God (meaning painter, creator), was God alone, and elevating oneself to this divine creative status was tantamount to the blasphemous sin of "shirk" and would lead to polytheism. (Photographing or filming was not considered a creative but a mechanical process, however, which is why various fatwas permit it.)

Geometric ornaments as a symbol of divine lawfulness became style-forming; and above all, a highly artificial calligraphy developed. Plotinus' "Hen" was influential insofar as the Neoplatonic doctrine of emanation allowed God to be interpreted as a "dator formarum", which contributed to the incredible richness of an imageless art.

It was only with the advent of portrait photography that portraits became acceptable to many Muslims – just as they did in Judaism. Of course, there are

not only regional, fundamentalist and liberal positions (e.g. among the Alevis), but also historical developments.

Today, there are pictures and images everywhere in the Muslim world. But what is depicted and how, remains a neuralgic point.

4. A solution to the conflict between sign and presence

A proposed solution to both controversies should therefore take into account the different culturally rooted pictorial traditions, as otherwise new potential for conflict in the question of images can lead not only to prejudice- just as the very skilfully staged IS-propaganda accused the „Godless West“ of a general idolatry - but also to more violent actions.

However, I believe that a solution to the philosophical conflict between semioticians and phenomenologists that takes into account different image traditions can be developed from Derrida's different sign concept.

His deconstructive reading of the dichotomy between signifiant and signifié in de Saussure brings about a hidden Platonism, a two-world theory in de Saussure's conceptual pair "signifiant/signifié", in which the ontologically paramount signified is only reflected in the (material) sign. A reversal of hierarchy follows: one must start from the signifier, and this allows phenomenal access.

Derrida is committed to the idea of negative theology and is therefore sensitive to the aniconic currents of the major religions: Constant withdrawal - as with the Tao, for example - enables an (undogmatic!) metaphysics of absence. This opens up for a new sign concept: We can speak of a whole chain of signifiers, which in turn are signifieds, because they continue to refer to other signs, which have to be interpreted again. This also does justice to today's multimediality. They all refer to the elusive and intangible ultimate signified, which can therefore only be experienced approximately and is only accessible in its traces which we can follow.

Derrida can thus be read both as an image phenomenologist and as an image semiotician. He has nothing against pictures, but he does not believe that they can represent any truth, they are but mere traces of the represented.

Especially today, such a concept makes sense because it takes into account the medial diversity of all possible image and expression phenomena, with a wealth of references also among each other.

It must be added that this does not only refer to religious images of the divine. It also applies to existence as a whole, which – with all our images and concepts - we cannot grasp in its essence. Reality and truth elude us, especially in post-factual times. The philosophy of absence thus brings about an undogmatic metaphysics that is particularly relevant for intercultural discourse: no being of any kind is presupposed that would be only reflected in images and signs. And this opens up possibilities for better understanding.

(for many more details and all references see
Gabriele Münnix, Das Bild vom Bild. Bildsemiotik und Bildphänomenologie in
interkultureller Perspektive, Alber Freiburg 2029, open access:
<https://www.muennix.de/index.php/veroeffentlichungen>