

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.7313679

Topics: BOOK REVIEWS

Category: HUMANITIES

**Review of Gabriele Münnix: Das Bild vom Bild: Bildsemiotik  
und Bildphänomenologie in interkultureller Perspektive.  
Freiburg: Alber/München, 2019. 680 p. ISBN 9783495488546.**

**Riccardo Pozzo**

Department of History, Humanities and Society, Tor Vergata University of Rome – via Columbia 1, 00133  
Roma, Italy, ([riccardo.pozzo@uniroma2.it](mailto:riccardo.pozzo@uniroma2.it))

Received: 27/10/2022

Accepted: 09/11/2022

---

**ABSTRACT**

Images shape how we perceive reality, how we think and feel, and how we live together. Gabriele Münnix shows that cultural traditions play an essential role in these processes. Her book is about providing an overview of the different ways of dealing with images. She presents authoritative approaches to the philosophy of images such as those of C. S. Peirce, Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Nelson Goodman, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Umberto Eco, and of others. What is new in her analysis is the inclusion of the intercultural perspective, which makes a new approach to the controversies about the nature of the image as signs or as presence possible that can also be effective in establishing a relation between philosophy of religion and undogmatic metaphysics.

---

**KEYWORDS:** *Comparative Philosophy, History of Philosophy, Reflective Society*

---

**SIGNIFICANT STATEMENT**

This book delves into an issue of the highest relevance. If it is true that images are constitutive of our understanding of culture, it is also true that we need to make an effort to accept constitutive images of other cultures. There is a potential conflict in projecting one's self-evident facts unquestioningly into other people's and taking them for granted there. To generalize sweeping statements is not helpful and can reinforce prejudices inappropriately and unnecessarily. To avoid any potential of conflict, Gabriele Münnix pledges for abandoning cultural essentialism—as if cultures were implied by the essential traits defining the spirit of a people (Volksgeist)—in favor of both the dynamical notion of culture that was introduced by Ernst Cassirer and the Humean notion of familiar similarity (Familienähnlichkeit) popularized by Ludwig Wittgenstein. The result is a comprehensive demonstration that in the future, with more knowledge about culturally different

imprints, intercultural discourses on images can be conducted to perceive better what is intolerable in the image as the limit of what can be depicted in the image.

## MAIN TEXT

This 680-pages strong research outcome comprises an introduction, four parts and a conclusion. Its starting point were the dramatic events occurred in January 2014 around Charlie Hebdo: the Mohammed cartoons, the ban on the images behind them issued by Islamic authorities, and their violent outcomes. So far, we are acquainted with two solutions to the controversy: images either are mere signs or they are effectively present. Neither of these, however, are acceptable today, for they have been formulated unilaterally from the Western perspective. Hence, the objective of Münnix to develop a new proposal on the semiosis and the phenomenology of images that holds also from an intercultural perspective.

The introduction is about the cultural war on images (*Kulturkampf um Bilder*). Münnix refuses cultural essentialism. She considers the arguments laid out by Ulrich Beck, Amartya Sen, and François Jullien. She eventually adopts Cassirer's dynamical cultural concepts (*dynamische Kulturbegriffe*) and Wittgenstein's life forms (*Lebensformen*). Her attention remains focused on the structural elements of culture. Cassirer was the first to define the human being in terms of culture. Long before the human being had discovered forms of social organization, s/he had attempted to organize feelings, desires, and thoughts. Such organizations and systematizations are contained in language, myth, religion, and art. In image theory, there is a dispute between semioticians, who see images as signs that have to be read, and phenomenologists, for whom images are, first of all, objects of perception that have to be looked at. The issue is religiously charged. The question of sign or presence is also relevant to various disputes and representations of the divine (impossible in Judaism and Islam).

The five chapters of part two are about the role played by images in major world religions such as Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. The discussion is also about the non-role of images, as required first by Judaism, then by the iconoclastic movements within Christianity, and again about the ban of images in Islam, to end with some considerations on iconic and aniconic symbolism in the religions of the Far East.

Part three is dedicated to philosophical wars on images. Here Münnix considers topics related to image semiotics and image phenomenology, illustrated by Peirce, Husserl, Sartre, Goodman, Merleau-Ponty, and Eco. In the era of digital convergence, images no longer seem to be solely destined for the classic places of dissemination (museums, libraries, archives, festivals, theaters, exhibitions) or traditional mass media (the radio, print, cinema, TV). However, users are confronted with an increasingly broad spectrum of new media (the web, social networks, video games, virtual reality) that provide the general public and historians with a digital archive of potentially infinite images and historical sources.

In part four, the role of images is developed from positions of the philosophy of difference, represented by Heidegger, Foucault, and Derrida. Münnix lays at the basis Heidegger's critique of ontotheology and Derrida's notion of the otherness within signs to develop a theory of the image as a trace, in which the depicted is not present in any way, but only referred to, due to the danger of idolatry.

Münnix takes up standpoints proposed by philosophers such as Maurycy Straszewski, Heinz Kimmerle, Ram Adar Mall, Franz Martin Wimmer, Souleymane Bachir Diagne, Chilla Bulbeck, and Maria Lugones (Burik et al. 2022) who, from the early decades of the 20th century, have called with increasing insistence for a confrontation of European philosophers with the philosophies of other regions of the world. Comparative philosophy at the Bologna World Congress of Philosophy in 1911. However, it was not until the Düsseldorf World Congress of 1978 that intercultural philosophy started to be spread globally, as a reaction to Heidegger's destruction of metaphysics and Derrida's deconstruction. Since then, comparative philosophy has undergone a considerable, when also tortuous, development. Currently, given the need of overcoming eurocentrism, implementing decolonialization, and defeating racism, comparative philosophy is more than ever at the center of attention (Elberfeld 2021).

It is essential to highlight that the book contributes to intercultural hermeneutics and, thus, to preventing violent extremist behavior, such as the one originated by the images posted by Charlie Hebdo. Violent extremists feel empowered to change or break the establishment. To resist violence, Münnix argues, one must enter into a dialogue with its perpetrators. To do so, one must leave the comfort zone, not make accusations of racism, fascism, etc., and converse with people. In this context, we should refer to the ideas of existential communication that Karl Jaspers had put forward. The condition for the possibility of such communication is what Jaspers calls “philosophical faith” –holding oneself in a state of existential uncertainty, accepting one’s vulnerability and presence in a specific limited situation, and at the same time transcending this limitation with the interlocutor (Jaspers 1948). Remarkably, Jaspers addressed his compatriots not only in books and articles (as academic thinkers usually do) but also through lectures on radio and television, hence with images too. For Jaspers, the question of the possibilities of implementing existential communication was always at the center. We must learn to talk to each other in such a way that it is not just a matter of expressing an opinion on a particular subject, but above all, listening to what the other person is saying and being willing to change one’s position and look at things in a new way. Noticing commonalities in contradictory positions is more important than fixing mutually exclusive parts and holding on to one’s own opinion, finally acknowledging that there is no point in continuing the conversation.

The book concludes with some media-critical considerations that constitute the basis for a new understanding of an interculturally acceptable discourse on images. In museums, suggests Münnix, we should start to look at pictures with an intercultural standpoint in mind. Culture and art offer non-authoritarian and self-regulated fields for interaction, reflection, and change. Images enable reflection and generate cultural innovation, which is about spaces of exchange where citizens share experiences while appropriating common goods (Pozzo 2021). Think of public institutions such as libraries, museums, science centers, and other places where co-creation activities around images occur. The last word should go to the negative history of women in the history of philosophy. In the wake of the recent projects expressed by Ruth Hagenhuber and Lisa Shapiro, Münnix’s book is about constructing a postcolonial or rather decolonial feminism with an increasingly concrete look at the role of women in non-European philosophies as was plastically exemplified by the *Calendar of Women Philosophers*, edited by Sigridur Thorgeirsdottir on behalf of the International Association of Women Philosophers and presented to the participants of the Beijing World Congress of Philosophy of 2018.

## REFERENCES

- Burik, S, Smid, P & Weber, P (eds.). (2022). *Comparative Philosophy: Contemporary Practices and Future Possibilities*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Elberfeld, R (2021). *Dekoloniales Philosophieren: Versuch über philosophische Verantwortung und Kritik im Horizont der europäischen Expansion*. Hildesheim/Zürich/New York: Olms.
- Jaspers, K (1948). *Der philosophische Glaube*. Zürich: Artemis.
- Pozzo, R. (2021). *History of Philosophy and the Reflective Society*. Berlin/New York: De Gruyter.