

Re-enchantment and Iconoclasm in an Age of Images

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Images are a particularly strong form of enchantment. They captivate us by means of a mysterious double effect, oscillating between visual immediacy and their clear status as illusion. At least since antiquity, the nearly magical, delusional potential of images has been an issue of serious concern. (Perhaps it was so even in the caves of Lascaux, where images of bison sprang to life, animated by prehistoric fire). Before modern societies were captivated by motion pictures, then television, then the ever-expanding array of iPhones, iPads, and computers that now capture our gaze, Plato likened our human condition to imprisonment in a cave of flickering images (*eidola*): a shadow world of appearances removed from the sunlit reality of the world of true Forms that lay outside.¹ In this primal image, Plato seems to have anticipated a significant feature of our contemporary milieu: the thoroughgoing mediation of information and experience through images and image-rendering screens.

Philosophy, Plato argued, was the only means of escape from the delusional enchantment of the image-world. Disenchantment, which could be achieved only through exposure to the potentially blinding light outside the cave, was vital to the welfare of the citizens trapped within.

The Iconic Turn

Many centuries later, in his *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), Ludwig Wittgenstein, who survived both the trenches and a prison camp in World War I, described our epistemic condition in similar metaphoric terms: “A picture held us captive.”²

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Right: A projection by Zhang Xinyu and Liang Hong of the tallest Buddha in Bamiyan Valley, Afghanistan, June 2015. The Bamiyan Buddhas were destroyed by the Taliban in 2001; © Zhang Xinyu/Xinhua Press/Corbis.



By *picture*, Wittgenstein meant the “picture” of language. Our imprisonment was our inability to get outside it, or beyond it, even in our philosophical critique. But the critical task of philosophy was not escape to another realm. It was, instead, to make visible the limits of our rational confinement, as beings inescapably bounded by language. What lay beyond was a domain inaccessible to philosophy: the ineffable realm of the “mystical” (*mystisch*).³

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The reflection upon language as fundamental to the human condition—the “linguistic turn” inaugurated by Wittgenstein and others—was crucial to the intellectual landscape of the twentieth century. In our own century, that ground has been transformed by what has been called the “pictorial turn,” and more recently the “iconic turn.”⁴ What does this signify? It has been said that the vast digitization and global interconnection of images has created an environment that operates in ancient, iconic fashion. In other words, images increasingly function

not simply as visual representations. They also actively mediate distant persons and worlds, rendering them virtually, luminously “present.” Whether as avatars of the self or sites of spectacular display, images have never been more lifelike, more enchanting, than they are today. It would seem, then, that our task is once again to disenchant them: to free ourselves from their grip through a critical, philosophical iconoclasm.

But is there a brighter, ideal world outside the shadow world of images, as Plato argued—or are we inescapably part of the picture?

Images as Visual Terrorism

In order to grapple with the iconic turn and the distinctive challenges it poses, we might begin by noting some of its more paradoxical features. Despite the unprecedented proliferation of images in contemporary culture, certain of them still affect us with great force. Consider the searing image of passenger planes striking the Twin Towers. In coming to symbolize the fall of an American icon, the World Trade Center, this image of iconoclasm has itself become “iconic.” Or take the empty niches of the two great Buddhas at Bamiyan, destroyed by the Taliban—iconic absences that powerfully evoke the statues’ former presence. Another paradox is that in an age of sophisticated, technological, and “secular” advance, ancient concerns and language regarding old forms of enchantment, notably idolatry, have retaken center stage in global affairs. Much like the old wars of religion that shook and shaped early modern Europe, the new wars are increasingly fought on the ground of the image: Not only do adversaries contest the relationship between the image and the sacred; they also destroy images as “idolatrous” objects, or deploy images in acts of religious violence, strategically publicizing these acts through mass media. In the modern “society of the spectacle,” as French theorist and filmmaker Guy Debord has argued, spectacle is capitalized to such a degree that everything becomes image.⁵

As the archaic power of images is transformed by new technologies that hold us in thrall, images have become a primary weapon of terror, a form of visual terrorism. Like apparitions, they intrude unbidden upon the visual field of laptops and communication devices so as to merge with the flow of consciousness or perception, much like the flickering images on the wall of Plato's cave. The decapitation of statues and the beheading of living people go hand in hand, each reifying the other, their images blurring and merging into one spectacular nightmare.

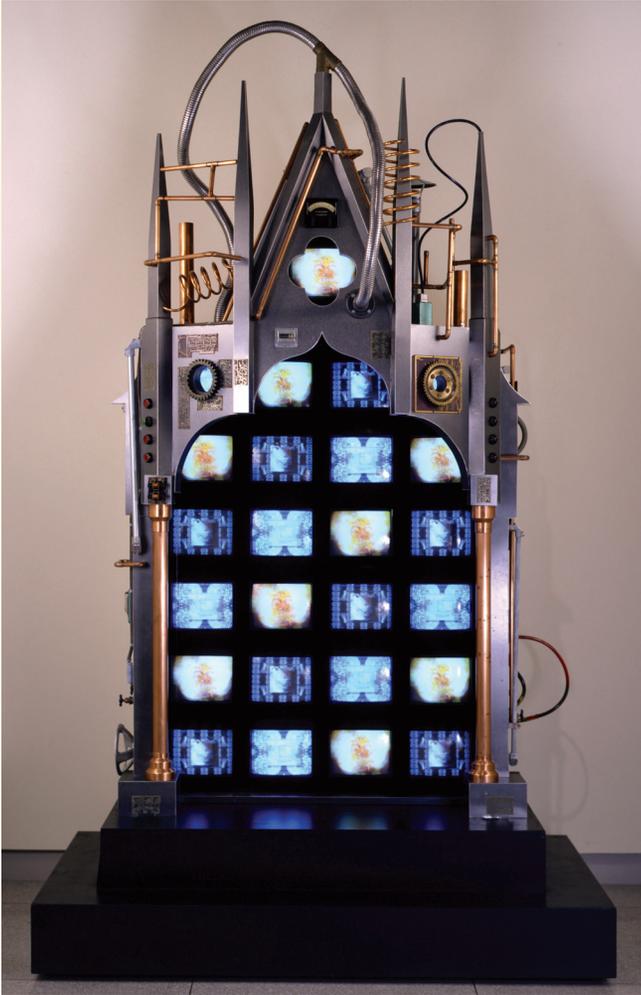
Yet, clearly, images also hold the potential for transcendence and positive transformation. They re-present the world in remarkable ways, transporting us beyond the cave-like confines of our physical and imaginative limitations. Far from being epistemically or ethically bankrupt, art and aesthetic perception can illumine otherwise-unrecognized dimensions of the world and ourselves, prompting much-needed reflection upon our place within it. And although we no longer bend at the knee, as Hegel once said, before the altar of art, the idea of art as a locus of the sacred—as a privileged site of epiphanic revelation and transcendent mystery—is widely held across cultures. Through art, the memory of cultures and civilizations long past is preserved—as is the possibility of understanding and experiencing them across time and history. This is brought into tragic clarity by the destruction of globally revered monuments by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and other radical groups. As hammers and dynamite destroy irreplaceable artifacts and religious shrines, our common humanity seems at stake.

To Re-enchant or Disenchant?

From the biblical story of man made in the image of God to the iconoclasm of ISIS, the history of our complex relationship with images is bound up with dialectics of enchantment and disenchantment: the sacralization of images and their subsequent destruction on the grounds that they are empty, illusory, and corrupting. The image was Janus-faced from the beginning: a potentially transcendent “icon”—with Christ as the exemplary *eikon* of the invisible God—or a troubling “idol,” a golden calf invested with delusory meaning. “Enlightenment,” a key concept in early Western modernity that also has resonance in Eastern religions, has long been formulated in imagistic terms: principally as the destruction of idols, whether external or internal. Yet for all our efforts to free ourselves from the enchantment of images, every age continues to re-enchant them. Max Weber's characterization of modernity as *die Entzauberung der Welt*—the elimination of magic from the world—describes not an end-state, as Weber himself supposed it did, but a phase in what seems to be a historically recurring dynamic.

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The question of whether to re-enchant or disenchant the image has become increasingly fraught. For centuries, the West has claimed the disenchanting method of “critique” as its intellectual and moral weapon against irrationality and religious



Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC/Art Resource, NY.

Technology, 1991, by Nam June Paik (1932–2006).

superstition. The Protestant Reformation was only the first in a series of iconoclams, material and ideological, that gave rise to the so-called secular society and its freedoms. Now, as iconoclasm has been appropriated as a global strategy, and so brutally realized by ISIS and other extremist groups, the West is left in something of a quandary. In certain thought-provoking respects, the Islamist critique of idolatry replays, to the letter, arguments central to the West’s own drama of reformation and modernization. For example, in justifying the eradication of the Buddhas of Bamiyan—an important precedent for the image wars now being prosecuted by ISIS—the Taliban spoke in terms that might have been lifted straight from the homilies of the sixteenth-century Protestant reformers. If the statues, they argued, were empty idols—mere stones—why the uproar about their

destruction? The value accorded these artifacts by the international community was plausibly criticized as outweighing any concern for the desperate humanitarian conditions in the region. By bestowing such significance upon artifacts, the West effectively affirmed for the Taliban the statues’ idolatrous potential, and in so doing revealed its own, secularized form of image-enchantment.

Recovering the Infinite Within the Immanent

As the philosopher Bruno Latour reminds us, iconoclasts are those who destroy with the belief that a utopian order lies behind or beyond the structures they shatter.⁶ But as ISIS threatens to eradicate entire cultures and the monumental images by which they are remembered, it seems that the former iconoclasts of the West are now the ones to

stay the hammer's blow. We want again to re-enchant the world, perhaps now with the urgent sense that it is the *only* world. We want to claim that art bears the sacred for the ages, and that stones can speak across time and historical distance, to preserve our common humanity for as long as humans survive.

Perhaps we are, in this moment, more like Wittgenstein than Plato. In describing Wittgenstein's view of the world, Michael Saler examines the idea of "disenchanted enchantment." By this Saler means to capture Wittgenstein's belief that "critical reason and imaginative wonder could co-exist."⁷ In demarcating the limits of rationality, philosophy does not imprison us in the proverbial "iron cage" lamented by Weber. Rather, it frees us from it, not through escape to another realm in the Platonic sense but through the recognition that the world is infinitely more complex, contingent, and various than any partial description or explanation of it. In an ancient sense, philosophy begins, but also should end, with wonder.

In his meditation on the value of such a stance, Saler praises the potential of the Internet to foster a Wittgensteinian form of secular transcendence: the "Fictionalist recovery of the infinite within the immanent," founded upon the awe that flows from recognition of our limited grasp of infinity's many dimensions. As a space of imaginary realms and the communities dedicated to them, the Internet would indeed seem to hold the promise of re-enchanting the world by means of an "infinite outlook." Yet we might be cautious in making the Internet our primary realm of wonder and commitment. Much as Wittgenstein required of philosophy that it seek to understand the hidden limits of its confinement, we should consider critically the invisible constraints of the seemingly "limitless" Internet. To return again to the metaphor of Plato's cave: The fictive image-domains of the Internet, while potentially infinite, are but a pale reflection of a robust, physical, and—in many significant respects—infinitely more complicated world of human persons, objects, and interpersonal relations. Consider, for example, the growing cultural phenomenon of people who prefer sexual and other relationships with virtual images to relationships with actual people.⁸ Should we praise those who choose to spend much of their lives sequestered within a virtual reality? Or should we instead recognize this shift as one of the pressing ethical challenges of our newly re-enchanted image world?

While the realm of the imagination is a space of freedom to be prized, we should also acknowledge that, historically, it has also been a place of retreat, particularly under conditions in which freedom is extremely constrained. Thus, the prisoner under torture imagines being in another body or place. In a parallel way, virtual images now enable such imaginative escape, and to a degree and an extent never before imagined. Whether this is progress or regress remains to be seen; the image always was Janus-faced. Last year, when the Spanish government enacted measures sharply curbing freedom of expression and the public right to protest, imaginative citizens responded by projecting holograms

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that marched outside the parliament in their stead.⁹ More recently, the empty niche of one of the mighty, ancient Buddhas was set aglow, the statue reconstituted by the miracle of laser technology.¹⁰ Is this is our new era of “enlightenment”? And if it is, are we masters of the infinite—or prisoners of the cave?

Endnotes

- ¹ Republic, *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, eds. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, Bollingen Series LXXI (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), 747–49.
- ² Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophische Untersuchungen* (Philosophical Investigations), trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte, fourth edition (Chichester, West Sussex, England/ Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 54.
- ³ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. C. K. Ogden, intro. Bertrand Russell (London, England: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1922), 90.
- ⁴ Gottfried Boehm and W. J. T. Mitchell, “Pictorial versus Iconic Turn: Two Letters,” *Culture, Theory and Critique* 50, 2–3 (2009): 103–21.
- ⁵ Guy Debord, *La Société du spectacle*, troisième édition (Paris, France: Les Éditions Gallimard, 1992), 21.
- ⁶ Bruno Latour, “An Attempt at a ‘Compositionist Manifesto,’” *New Literary History* 41 (2010), 475.
- ⁷ Michael Saler, “Rethinking Secularism: Modernity, Enchantment, and Fictionalism,” *The Immanent Frame*, December 20, 2013; <http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2013/12/20/modernity-enchantment-and-fictionalism/>.
- ⁸ Anita Rani reports on the existence of this phenomenon in Japan in “The Japanese Men Who Prefer Virtual Girlfriends to Sex,” *BBC News*, October 24, 2013; <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-24614830>.
- ⁹ Zachary D. Boren, “Spain’s Hologram Protest: Thousands Join Virtual March in Madrid against New Gag Law,” *The Independent* (United Kingdom), April 12, 2015; <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/spains-hologram-protest-thousands-join-virtual-march-in-madrid-against-new-gag-law-10170650.html>.
- ¹⁰ Edward Delman, “Afghanistan’s Buddhas Rise Again,” *The Atlantic*, June 10, 2015; <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/06/3d-buddhas-afghanistan/395576/>.