

23 MÄNIFESTE ZU BILDAKT UND VERKÖRPERUNG

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DE GRUYTER

ICONOCLASM

I.

To attack an image is to acknowledge its power.

To destroy it is to eliminate the life that is believed to inhere in it, either in what it shows or in how it is made.

To make an image lifeless is to acknowledge the life it contains.

But what does it mean to say an image has life in it? That it partakes of the life of the represented? That it has a kind of intangible vitality in and of itself, making vitality less of a metaphor than critics and theorists of representation like to think?

To remove the mouth of an image is to eliminate its power to speak; to remove its eyes is to deprive it of its ability to see or to look back at one.

These are all ways of speaking about images that teeter on the edge of metaphor. The images don't actually speak; they are not actually animated by eyes, or corrugator or superciliary muscles. They are representations of eyes and muscles – and the degree of liveliness perceived in them depends quite precisely on how (or how well) they are painted or sculpted. These marks of what we habitually call vitality in an image are what gives them the appearance of life, life so real that they force embodied responses on us, right up to and including destroying them.

From this arises the great paradox of iconoclasm: to be hostile to an image is to be enamored of it, and to acknowledge its thrall. Iconoclasm testifies to the struggle to resist the life the iconoclast – and the rest of us – attribute to it; it is the most adequate response to the desire it evokes (the image never gives us fully what we need, so we do away with it). To destroy an image is to acknowledge the attribution of a life that is even more magical than the power of loving and desiring another person. It is to acknowledge a love so intense that its clutches cannot be escaped until the work is destroyed.

This, fundamentally, is what joins pornographic with religious imagery, and gives propaganda by image its power.

But this is still too simply put. The question remains: what gives the metaphor of the living image its force, the metaphor for life that is felt in the bones of the viewers? It is the fact that the body in the image is more than just a painted body, that it is made with the force of the movements of living muscle. The movements of the maker in the very making of the image are then re-embodied in the viewer. This is what activates feeling in the living body of the spectator; representation actually gives body to the viewer. It is not just that those bodies there, those often flat bodies there, are imbued, indeed embodied, with corporeality, but that they embody us, in the most active of senses. We now know more, of course: it is not just that when we look at an image we feel it is as if it were alive, but that the neural substrates, the cortical and subcortical correlates of these feelings, are exactly the same as if the images were indeed living actors.

But what of non-figurative art, the bulk, after all, of what passes for art amongst sophisticates in our time, of conceptual art, of abstract art, of all art that does not actually seem to have a figure of someone in it? It is not just because of the figure in the picture, sculpture, printed photo or digital image that the image evokes embodied responses predicated on the perception, conscious or unconscious, of figurative similarity, of feeling that we smile as that figure smiles, that we frown or cry as she does, that our flesh and limbs respond or react in the same way that that figure there does. It is because these movements are transmitted to and reemerge in us.

Indeed it is the evidence of abstraction rather than figural similitude (however abstract all figuration may ultimately be) that provides a key to the paradox. For in the end it turns out to be no paradox, but a biological reality. In other words, it is the ways in which the superciliary and corrugator muscles are shown, or the corners of the mouth, or the contraction of the zygomatic muscles that initiates imitation in the viewer and at the very least sight of such expressive movement produces a sensation of emulation, or even, in some cases, a copying that in and of itself generates some form of similar motion. In any case it elicits the forms of inward simulation that help viewers better feel the emotions the maker of the image wishes to generate, or to have viewers grasp or understand what gives it life. We understand the stroke that produces that image, just as we understand the stroke that animates – that plunges – into a slashed *Concetto Spaziale* by Luca Fontana, not by metaphor, but by biological actuality, by the arousal of the very neural correlates that would be activated if we ourselves were engaged in producing that stroke, or if we felt the wound in our bones.¹

1 David Freedberg/Vittorio Gallese: Motion, Emotion and Empathy in Esthetic Experience, in: Trends in Cognitive Science 11/5 (2007), pp. 197–203; Cristina Berchio et al.: Abstract Art and Cortical Motor Activation: an EEG Study, in: Frontiers in Human Neuroscience 7/5 (2012). On

This is the real meaning, as Horst Bredekamp has so eloquently shown, not of the agency of images as so vaguely bandied about in our time, but of the *Bildakt* (→ *Bildakt*).² This is the reality of the metaphor that speaks of the life in images: it is precisely not metaphorical, not just cognitive, but automatic and actual. This is no manner of speaking, as one might think after centuries of theorizing about the as-if aspects of images, of how imitation works, of the illusions of reality. For imitation must now be thought of in two ways: not just the imitation of what the maker sees and reproduces, but the viewer's inward imitation of what she sees and that attenuates the metaphors of representation by restoring them to the biology of the body and the senses.³ It is this that joins *Bildakt* to *Bildersturm* – even in the age of digitization.

2.

Iconoclasm gives the lie to the modish fear of discovering recurrences across history. These are not fantastic discoveries, mere inventions or constructions of seeming realities. Recurrent features of iconoclastic action, thought and theory survive through all contextual variations of practice and performance (as when ISIS's staged acts of iconoclasm depend both on the shock of image-destruction and on the possibilities of reproduction, in this case on the virtual immortality of digital reproducibility). And these recurrences arise directly from the biological and neurological substrates that underlie the persistence of the will to destroy what is, after all, not real presence but representation. Such terms phase and fade in and out, as if in slow motion, of all theologies, whether iconic or aniconic, monotheistic or poly-

the feeling in oneself of the cuts or wounds seen in the body of another, see also my *Movement, Embodiment, Emotion*, in: Thierry Dufrenne/Anne C. Taylor (eds.): *Cannibalismes, Disciplinares, Quand l'histoire de l'art et l'anthropologie se rencontrent*, Paris 2009, pp. 37–61, and David Freedberg: *Vision's Reach: Studies in Art and Neuroscience* (forthcoming), in which all such issues are discussed at greater length.

2 Horst Bredekamp: *Theorie des Bildakts*. Frankfurter Adorno-Vorlesungen 2007, Berlin 2010.

3 For imitation as inward imitation of what one sees through embodied simulation, see Vittorio Gallese: *Embodied Simulation: From Neurons to Phenomenal Experience*, in: *Phenomenology and Cognitive Science* 4 (2005), pp. 23–48, followed by Gallese/Freedberg: *Motion, Emotion and Empathy* (as fn. 1) and David Freedberg: *Empathy, Motion and Emotion*, in: Klaus Herding/Antje Krause Wahl (eds.): *Wie sich Gefühle Ausdruck verschaffen: Emotionen in Nahsicht*, Berlin 2007, pp. 17–51. For a further exemplification and discussion, see David Freedberg: *Memory in Art: History and the Neuroscience of Response*, in: Suzanne Nalbanatian/Paul M. Matthews/James L. McClelland (eds.): *The Memory Process: Neuroscientific and Humanistic Perspectives*, Cambridge, MA 2011, pp. 337–358, and Freedberg: *Movement, Embodiment, Emotion* (as fn. 1).

theistic, with one jealous god terrified of the idols of others, or many terrified of only one.

The continuities were long scanted – and in some quarters still are, to our peril, as in the recent and current depredations in the Near and Middle East. ISIS destroys the images of the gods as if to drain them of their lives, yet at the same time perpetuates images whose message via effective horror is predicated on the awareness that every image contains the reality of a life within it. That effectiveness springs from the ways in which mere representation evokes and reproduces, literally not metaphorically, the mutilated body within the tolerant as well as the intolerant beholder, *volens nolens*.

And so, iconoclasm has become one of the urgent and most discussed topics of our time. To some extent ISIS has made it so, with its awareness not just of the effectiveness of dissemination by digital means, but even more because of the fact that the power of images is nowhere more trenchantly exemplified than by the destruction of images. It exploits this effect by the techniques of digital reproducibility and pulls out every theological stop – including the suspicion of live images of other gods – in its all-too blatant stagings of image destruction. Few have made more trenchant use of the reproduction of horrors to the body enabled by the age of digital reproducibility. From the torture scenes of Abu Ghraib to the slicing off of heads across Iraq and Syria seems only a small step. To see the films of ISIS's iconoclastic work in Mosul, Nineveh and Palmyra is to feel the destruction of the life in images – all the while hearing the sermonizing, fake and real, about the false gods they represent – in one's bones. Every crash causes an interoceptive reaction that is barely tolerable; every attack on eyes or flesh a feeling of a poke or a lance; every sewing up of the mouth an all-too real sense of silencing; every mutilation of the face the very horror of images which only their obliteration can annihilate. Often it seems that no amount of reproduction can diminish these effects of shock. The aura of the image, despite all efforts to "Benjaminize" it away, remains. When I first began working on images in 1969, the only other art historians working on the topic – beside the Byzantinists, by whom the subject was long studied⁴ – were those amongst the loose collection of Warburg-admiring scholars in the Hamburg group around Martin Warnke and Horst Bredekamp.⁵ Few theorized it better than Bredekamp, especially

4 Cf. David Freedberg: *Iconoclasts and their Motives* (Second Horst Gerson Memorial Lecture, University of Groningen), Maarssen 1985 (reprinted in: Public, Toronto 1993). The literature has now become vast indeed, but even in 1969 it was substantial and served as a model for all my own researches. For me, a crucial stimulus was this remarkable essay by Ernst Kitzinger: *The Cult of Images in the Age before Iconoclasm*, in: *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 8 (1954), pp. 83–150.

5 Well represented in: Martin Warnke (ed.): *Bildersturm: Die Zerstörung des Kunstwerks*, Munich 1973.

in his inexplicably forgotten early book *Kunst als Medium Sozialer Konflikte*:⁶ autonomy then seemed impossible in the light of the political dimensions of propaganda and destruction (just as in the case of ISIS).

3.

In those days, colleagues protested my work on iconoclasm, saying that art history was supposed to record and describe what survived, not what was lost. Art History had, most of them insisted, to do with creativity, beauty and form, not with destruction, violence and the deformation that follows in the wake of iconoclasm – as if form were somehow ideal, detached from the body, related to spirit not to the kinds of embodied responses that subtend not just action but imagination itself. The idea that the will and impulse to destroy works of art often provide precise testimony to what art actually means to people, from love and desire to hate, anger and resentment, did not seem to occur to the vast majority of my interlocutors at the time. The notion that anyone should do research on the history of image destruction, or on the history of images that no longer existed, that were so gone that they could no longer be studied visually was regarded as anathema, testimony to what was wild and barbaric in the human spirit, outside civilization and culture and having nothing to do with the realm of academic inquiry or art. In these times, we are forced to reflect on such positions again.

But at the end of the 1960s, despite the rise of the social history of art, things were still very different. The connections between censorship and iconoclasm remained barely touched. Awareness of the degree to which censorship phases into iconoclasm, in which actions like the poking out of the eyes or the sewing up of the mouth could turn into more ferocious forms that were rightly termed iconoclastic, went unexplored. The phenomenological continuities were consistently scanted, though it was clear that many iconoclastic phenomena that seem to be recurrent spring from the conflation of image and prototype – the belief or feeling that the represented body is in the image, or that the image is somehow animated by what is shown on or in it. Viewers react accordingly, and iconoclasts do so as if to put paid to the sense of life or liveliness in what after all is merely dead material.

In the end, this paradox too becomes intolerable. A vast range of religious, political and juridical positions on images are predicated on such feelings. *Damnatio Memoriae* and executions *in effigie* all depend on them. To take life from an image, as all the old theory went, was to show that one had power over what, in the

6 Horst Bredekamp: *Kunst als Medium sozialer Konflikte: Bilderkämpfe von der Spätantike bis zur Hussitenrevolution*, Berlin 1975.

end, was absent. In cases of *damnatio memoriae*, to insult the image was to insult the prototype. Even if one makes allowances for the inevitable local distinctions and variations, in almost all cultures one finds a clear connection between the iconoclastic act itself and the perception of an image – or images in general – as somehow living. Images that are made of inanimate material – wood and stone, as the Reformation critics succinctly put it – are believed or felt to have a life in them that belies their very materiality. This arouses varying degrees of perplexity and fear that in turn may lead to assault and destruction, as if to prove the iconoclasts' power of the paradoxical, anomalous and threatening life within those images, to show that those images are really dead, that they have indeed no power to fight back. Yet even mutilation and modification often strengthen rather than deaden the image; to wound it often turns out to strengthen its effects, rather than suppressing them – to the increased fury of the iconoclast.

The extent to which theologies of images draw on these psychological and phenomenological aspects of response cannot be overestimated. To scant the theological bases of iconoclasm would be to fail to capture essential aspects of the ways in which the ontology of images plays itself out in society. It is not just a matter of the frequent insistence that the god in the image – or whatever is divine or holy in it – is uncircumscribable, or unique (and therefore intolerant of rivals, especially in represented form; or that the power of animation rests with god himself, not humans, as most powerfully in the Hadith). It is also the realization that being merely inanimate or merely of wood and stone, image powers can be disabled by the removal, mutilation or total destruction of those parts of the body that most clearly indicate their vitality. Hence, therefore, blinding by elimination of the eyes, enforced muteness by debuccalization, removal of smell and hearing by denasalization or mutilation of ears or limbs.

From the proclamations of the radical Protestant reformers to the performative theologies of ISIS's destroyers of images, theological motivations often join conveniently with political ones. The second commandment, the disapprovals in the Hadith, the many variations of the commitment to the idea of the uncircumscribability of the divine, the relationship between theological and political – all these may merge with more overtly political claims and beliefs, such as the doctrine that the emperor is where his image is or – closely related to the latter – that the prototype resides in the image. And over and over again one finds the use and the blatant exploitation of image assault, mutilation and destruction for purposes both of publicity or propaganda. Most sinisterly and significantly of all, often the attacks on images are accompanied by assaults on the so-called "servants of images". Now as then, the killing of images accompanies the killing of humans, while that very continuity, from the life in an image to life in reality, is exploited for the purposes of the most gruesome propaganda.

Finally, conflation of image and prototype also underlies the many varieties of juridical insults to images, from the destruction or mutilation of images as forms of *damnatio memoriae* to insulting the person represented on the image, or visiting condign punishment upon him or her for alleged crimes, whether criminal, civil or political (particularly for flight or treason).⁷ If you couldn't capture him and kill him, you could always kill his image. To censor was to mutilate, damage, and in the end to destroy. You could damage what the image represented by damaging its representation; you could similarly insult the prototype by insulting its representation. To take out Erasmus' eyes in a reformation book is both to insult him and to demonstrate his powerlessness. Censorship persistently becomes iconoclasm.⁸

The work of Warnke and Bredekamp set the tone for a social history that engaged with iconoclasm directly, rather than scanting it. By the early 1980s Dario Gamboni was also working in this area too.⁹ The removal of images of the old regimes all across Eastern Europe after 1989 and the so-called "culture wars" of the 1990s in the United States awakened more interest in studying both iconoclasm and censorship.¹⁰ From then on the spate of interest in both historical and contemporary iconoclasm grew steadily.

But the fuller implications were rarely drawn out. The old detached, ironizing, anti-empathetic forms of art history persisted. The proponents of disinterest as the basic criterion of art, beauty and esthetic pleasure remained hegemonic – as if the perception of visual forms could ever be disembodied or without embodied consequence and causation. Nietzsche's sarcasm about Kant's approach to the body in art and in responses to it remained unheeded.¹¹ What the cognitive neurosciences and theories of the *Bildakt* have by now made clear is the degree to which form itself is not simply a matter of disembodied creation, as if such making could ever be disembodied or without embodied consequence or causation. It is rooted in the movements of the body, the course of the blood, the breath of the soul as much as of the lungs: the body, blood and breath of both maker and beholder.

Sophisticated art history could not bring itself to admit how every engagement with the visual arts begins in forms of motor and tactile involvement with

7 David Freedberg: *From Defamation to Mutilation: Gender Politics and Reason of State in South Africa*, in: Carolin Behrmann (ed.): *Images of Shame. Infamy, Defamation and the Ethics of oeconomia*, Berlin 2016, pp. 193–216.

8 David Freedberg: *The Fear of Art: How Censorship becomes Iconoclasm*, in: *Social Research* 83/1 (2016), pp. 67–99.

9 As in Dario Gamboni: *The Destruction of Art, Iconoclasm and Vandalism since the French Revolution*, London 1997.

10 David Freedberg: *Censorship Revisited*, in: *Res* 21 (1992), pp. 5–11, outlines the initial stages of these discussions that underlay the culture wars.

11 As for example in *The Genealogy of Morals*, III, section 6.

everything seen. Even if imagination were detached from its material roots in the body and from the neural substrate of motor and sensory responses – an almost unimaginable position now – the proponents of such views would have to reckon with the ways in which detachment ensues from impulse and automaticity, and with the pleasures, releases and frustrations that ensue from engagement and empathy – even empathetic inclination – in the first place.¹² This is what underlies both the love and hate of images. That is one philosophical reason for engaging with the problems of iconoclasm and censorship; but now, especially in the wake of ISIS's destructions in the Middle and Near East, the topic has become urgent and immediate. Even if the scale of those destructions were not without precedent, a history of art and a history of images without an examination of iconoclasm would only be half a history. Perhaps more than any other aspect of the social history of art, iconoclasm provides clear and tragic access to ways of understanding the life of images and the actions with which they are both made and endowed.

12 See not only Freedberg/Gallese: *Motion, Emotion and Empathy* (as fn. 1), but also our response to the critique by Alessandro Pignocchi and Roberto Casati: *Mirror and Canonical Neurons are not Constitutive of Aesthetic Response*, in: *Trends in Cognitive Science* 11/10 (2007), p. 410, in Vittorio Gallese/David Freedberg: *Mirror and Canonical Neurons are Crucial Elements in Esthetic Response*, in: *Trends in Cognitive Science* 11/10 (2007), p. 411, and Freedberg: *Empathy, Motion and Emotion* (as fn. 3), as well as now, for example, David Freedberg: *From Absorption to Judgement: Empathy in Aesthetic Response*, in: Vanessa Lux/Sigrid Weigel (eds.): *Empathy: Epistemic Problems and Cultural-Historical Perspectives of a Cross-Disciplinary Concept*, London 2017.