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The Fear of Art: How Censorship Becomes Iconoclasm

EVERY ACT OF CENSORSHIP IS ALSO AN ACT OF ICONOCLASM. TOGETHER they constitute one of the oldest paradoxes of image making and of figuration. To make an image is both to want it and to fear it. The more it is desired, the more it seems *contra naturam*, and so is feared. It often has a vitality that is startlingly at odds with its materiality and its concept. To parse individual episodes of censorship and iconoclasm is to uncover the roots of both the fear of images and the fear of art.

Every act of censorship, every iconoclastic act provides clues to the social use and function of images. No clearer illustrations of the social dimensions of images are to be found than in the histories of iconoclasm and censorship—and, more particularly, where they meet. They powerfully illustrate the junction between the cultural and the political; they show the way the esthetic becomes more social; and how the psychological and social intersect in motivating responses to images.¹ The transformation of even mild efforts toward censorship into more destructive acts of mutilation, damage, and elimination illustrates clearly how the fear of images and of art drives our relations with culture, complicating them at every stage and occasionally resolving them.

But there is an underlying paradox. Fear of art and love of art are two sides of the same coin. To invest too much emotionally in an object is to invite disappointment, dissatisfaction, and a sense of thwarted expectation—hence, for example, the constant attacks on

representations of political leaders who fail to deliver, or on images perceived to be arousing, whether in pornography or in art (or in both, where they overlap).

To censor or destroy a work is to testify to its hold over its public. It is to acknowledge the work's seductiveness (whether sexual or political or both) and to admit that what should not have power actually does. It is the attempt to ensure that dead material, or the product of a long-dead hand, cannot be perceived as being invested with life and animacy. Often this may be seen in the degrees of anxiety that underlie the escalation of hostility toward a work, from the adjustment or suppression of superficial elements within it to physical excision and obliteration.

The history of images is arguably the history of their ability to arouse love and fear. As the ancient topos runs, they make the absent present (as famously in Alberti's fundamental 1966 treatise on Renaissance painting). In the case of acts of antipathy, their ability to make a hated person seem present (whether by embodiment or simply by trickery) is even more striking. The mere fact of censorship and iconoclasm vividly bears witness to this. Time and again, the cancellation and destruction of the idolatrous image (however so conceived) exemplifies the basic antinomy inherent in images.

But views of art have changed.² We live in times in which art is no longer a matter of manual or representational skill, nor the production of a physical object. Art has come to be defined by the degree to which it satisfies an *idea* of art, and by its evocation of an ironic esthetic state that is supposedly detached from the physicality or the emotions it arouses. The implicit—and occasionally quite explicit—claim is that the work is precisely not alive (even in the face of mimetic deception), and that emotions, interest, and the physical body itself are necessarily excluded from esthetic judgements upon it.

The prevailing question of art today, then, is whether it is fundamentally separate from the power of images. Underlying the fear of works of art is the notion that they are somehow *more* than art, that they are what they represent—even in the case of nonfigurative im-

agery—and are therefore dangerous. Though many artists—perhaps most notably and vulgarly Jeff Koons—play with just this dichotomy, the preponderant intellectual and philosophical response is that art is separated from the mere effects of what it represents; yet every case of iconoclasm shows that the work, even the conceptual work, is no more than the image (or the image of the image) that embodies it—even in the case of abstract imagery. Just blotting an abstract work with a removable stain shows that it has no enduring power, either as an image or as a work of art. With such acts, the notion of art as idea alone takes a beating.

In the end, those who seek to censor and destroy art testify to its power, whether the work is seen as a symbol of something hated or disliked, or simply as a vessel of form. Whatever the censors say in justification of what they do, their actions give lie to the claim that the esthetic status of a work of art is radically different from that of other, more ordinary images or forms of representation. Even what are taken to be the purely formal and stylistic dimensions of artworks have emotional and bodily effects that insidiously resist both external and internal control.

All forms of antipathy toward art provide evidence of what it means to its viewers. Within every work of art lies a meaningful body, a form of materiality that belies its allegedly immaterial status or its claims to transcendence. The work does not exist in the realm of pure spirit; it nags at the body. Every visual representation, indeed every imagined representation, entrains the inescapable bodily consequences of looking (or, more precisely, the activation of the neural substrate of bodily responses that ensue upon sight). When these play out in ways that are regarded as unfitting or indecorous, the elements in a work that elicit sensual responses, or are felt to facilitate them, must be removed, covered over, or changed—just as the sixteenth-century critics of Michelangelo's paintings in the Sistine Chapel argued, both on iconographic and stylistic grounds or when the president of Iran recently visited the Capitoline Museum in Rome and the

nudes were hidden beneath boxes (Kirchgaessner 2016). In this way the censors seek to control art itself.

No one doubts the social and political motivations of iconoclasm and censorship. Most analyses emphasize the historical dimensions of individual episodes over more general psychological factors in responses to images. The claim can always be made—as it often is—that no psychological response is independent of its historical context—indeed, that each such response is the product of a specific historical formation. But given the commonality of psychological responses across contexts, cultures, and individual episodes, a more complex question may be framed. It begins by seeking to establish how such basic levels of response may be formulated, and then examines the ways in which they are modified by the particularities of social and political contexts.

The fundamental argument of this paper—against current fashion, in which vision, action, and repression are so insistently historicized—is that only this approach allows us to understand the actual differences between individual episodes. The present claim, in other words, is that in order to understand difference one must first attempt to identify similarity as responsibly and as free of partiality and solipsistic prejudice as possible. This also involves acknowledging how much we incline to identify similarities before difference anyway.

DRIVING THE USE OF IMAGES ACROSS CULTURES AND LONG chronological spans are deep psychological factors that have their roots in specifiable neural relationships between vision, movement, and embodiment. They are relationships that are especially critical for iconoclasm, since they coincide with many grounds of the fears to which iconoclastic acts testify: that the dead image moves, that the eyes bear witness to the lifelike powers of the image, that there is somehow a body in that image—even an abstract one.

What we learn from the analysis of the neural substrate of responses to images is that these fears, recorded *ad infinitum* across the

history of iconoclasm, are neither vacuous nor superstitious nor illusory. They are responses that subtend difference. From them we learn to understand more clearly why the attribution of sensorimotor capacities to visual images remains insistent across cultures, why powers of the body never fail to be attributed, against reason, to dead material (see Freedberg and Gallese 2007). No wonder that the scriptures of many religions are joined in their fear of representation; no wonder that in making images that appear to be alive their makers are thought to be blasphemous in their emulation of what is properly divine power alone; no wonder that this apparent investment of life in an image leads to the idolatry that so provokes iconoclasts. The iconoclast aims to make sure that what is dead has no chance of revival, whether in body or in spirit, and to show that in the end the image does *not* have the kinds of powers that transcend its material and that lead to seduction, desire, and worship.

These are paradigmatic and exemplary attitudes that reflect the deepest ontology of images. They also enable the better understanding of the diversity and intensity of local modifications of the will to modify or destroy.

Take the case of the woodcut portrait of the great irenic thinker of the Reformation period, Desiderius Erasmus, in the copy of Sebastian Münster's 1550 *Cosmographia Universalis* illustrated in figure 1.³ His eyes are poked out, his mouth crossed out, and his face crisscrossed by a large double X. These actions are visited upon the portrait with extraordinary force. If we did not know that they were made by a censor—as in any number of works by Erasmus or containing references to him—we would think that these marks, these efforts at excision and obliteration, were made by someone who had a personal grudge against him (it is almost always as if they were personally attacking his bodily being) or perhaps out of fear that the image might be—or might become—alive.

The censors may have struck out the offending words in books by Erasmus or others, but to attack a portrait of someone often seems more immediately forceful than any elimination of the written or

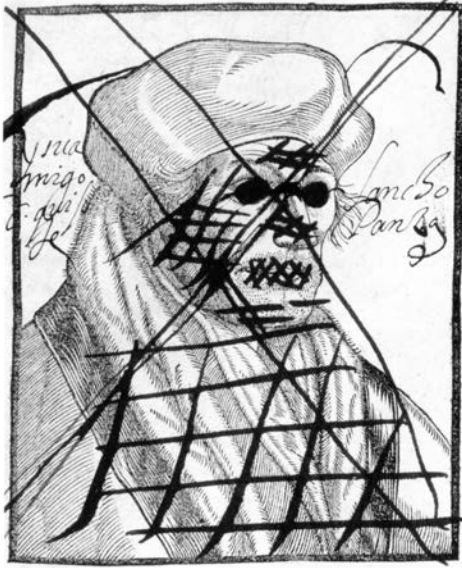


Figure 1. Anonymous after Hans Holbein the Younger, *Portrait of Desiderius Erasmus*, 1550, woodcut; defacing and inscription: pen and black ink. In Sebastian Münster, *Cosmographia Universalis*, Basel, Henric Petri, 1550. Photograph by the author.



Figure 2. Defaced sign of King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa of Bahrain, shown during a demonstration in Manama, Bahrain, February 15, 2011. Photograph by the author.

printed word. It is more impressive to its viewers, perhaps more satisfying to its attackers, because it assails the body itself—and in the process affects viewers viscerally too. The woodcut in Münster's *Cosmographia* is strong to begin with, but its impact is magnified by the violence of the assault on the face alone. The effect on viewers of this damaged image seems palpable. It is not just one's sense in one's own body of that attack, it is that one seems to feel the force of the very actions behind it.

The crossing-out of face and torso is shocking enough, but to most viewers it is the poking-out of the eyes that has the most visceral impact. These are modes of censorship and *ad personam* assault—the elimination of represented eyes above all, to a lesser extent the obliteration of the mouth—that occur across the centuries. There is no end to the number of images in the history of art and images that are disapproved of for one reason or another and have their eyes taken out, as if to deprive them of the very indices of their vitality. The visual crossing out or excision of the mouth has an equally similar psychological motivation—to seal up or simply remove the organ of speaking. In each case the powers of the body attributed to the image, that which gives it the life that appears to inhere in the image, must be halted and forever rendered ineffective.

It is in this context of the similar traces of action on an image and the psychological constancies they betray that we may better understand the differences between the sixteenth-century assault on the image of Erasmus in Münster's *Cosmographia* and the twenty-first century ones, during the Arab Spring of 2011 on the posters of the King of Bahrain, illustrated in figure 2. Neither the manual strategies of censorship and cancellation nor the foci of obliteration seem to have changed much in four and half centuries.

In examples such as these it is almost as if the actions of the censor, official or unofficial, phase directly into much repeated forms of iconoclasm (see Freedberg 1985). Of course, there are subtle differences in this transition, and they are instructive. We shall come to them later.

In the meantime, let us look at a series of cases of attacks on the eyes and sometimes the mouths, in which the degree of vehemence of assault varies significantly from case to case. Even in the present comparison, for example, it is clear that the image of King Hamad ibn 'Isa Al Khalifa has been much less ferociously attacked than that of Erasmus, with the poking out the eyes replaced by a couple of light crisscrosses, the mouth hardly sealed up at all.

In the portrait by the sixteenth-century artist Dirk Jacobsz of his father, the painter Jacob Cornelisz van Oostanen, and his wife, now in the Toledo (Ohio) Museum of Art, recent cleaning and restoration revealed that it too had been assaulted in the eyes and mouth. But here the cuts were relatively delicate—barely two light slashes for each eye, a light cross over the mouth (Toledo (Ohio) Museum of Art 1960, 7). The same is true of Mantegna's great martyrdom of St. Christopher in the Church of the Eremitani chapel in Padua (commissioned in 1448 and completed in 1457), where the eyes of the chief figure holding up the foot of the slain saint appear to have only one cut across each; the same again for the soldiers in Matteo di Giovanni's 1488 version of his *Massacre of the Innocents* in the Museo di Capodimonte in Naples. It is as if, paradoxically and unusually, the iconoclasts, though wishing to deprive these offenders of their sight (or of the most telling physiognomic signs of their vitality), also recognized the value of the art in these works and so restrained themselves from any more forceful assault. Here again one begins to grasp the ambivalence that lies behind many an act of iconoclasm—the mostly tacit ambivalence, in such instances, about the relationship between the power of the image and the quality of the art that produced it.

But most of the time the examples are more violent. In the 1504 *Polyptych of the Seven Works of Mercy* by the Master of Alkmaar (now in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam), the eyes of the protagonist of the scene of *Clothing the Poor* were hacked out with a vehemence that left deep gashes in the wood support of this painted body (see figure 3 here, as well as figures 16 and 17 in Freedberg 1985). Since the work had been restored at an early stage—perhaps shortly after it was at-



Figure 3. Master of Alkmaar, *Seven Works of Mercy*, detail of *The Clothing of the Poor*, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. Photograph by the author.

tacked—these effects only became apparent in the course of a recent conservation project, before they were skillfully covered up yet again.

These are grievous cuts indeed. They are assaults on our own sense of embodiment, assaults that shock us in seemingly inexplicable ways. To see these wounds to the panel, even in a photograph, is to have so great a sense of shock at the insult to it that one almost wants to clap one's own hand across one's eyes, as if to protect them from a similar fate, as if we ourselves, spectators from another world, feel the imminent threat of just such a danger—from where exactly we would not know. But we do, or at least could speculate. We now know that some of the same cortical topographies are activated in viewers of such insults to the bodies of others as they would be in

reality, though obviously to a lesser degree. It is more than likely that the topographically relevant areas of the somatosensory cortex are also likely to be activated at the sight of such punctures and incisions (see the now classic experiments by Keysers et al. 2004).⁴

Over and over again, censorship and iconoclasm testify to the threat that seems to be posed by the anomaly of thinking that life—a living body—exists in the image made of dead material. Its ability to come alive—or or be enlivened—seems inescapable. Underlying all these acts is the effort to silence the image, to make clear that it is not alive and will not speak, see or act again.

Such acts attempt to show that the image is not to be feared because in the end it is not what it *seems* to be but only what it physically is: neither spirit nor art, just lines or shapes on or in inert surfaces. To expose all this, to bring it to the fore, may take a gesture that is either cool or extravagant, casually controlled or violent. But such attempts to prove that neither an image nor art has the powers attributed to them rarely achieve their goal. On the contrary, they show, paradoxically, that images are indeed to be feared. This is why censorship and iconoclasm are the most expressive of all symptoms of the fear of art.

THE APPARENT SIMILARITIES BETWEEN THE FOCI AND TECHNIQUES OF iconoclasm and the psychological motivations they reveal offer some the most striking constancies across the *longue durée* of both censorship and iconoclasm. At the same time, in most (but not all) cases it is possible to situate such immediate responses, or rather, such immediate symptoms of the fear of images, in their particular contexts. But it is precisely in the dialectic between habitual behavior, rooted in automatic responses to images, and the particularities of context that the significant and most telling differences between individual cases begin to emerge.

Sebastian Münster's *Cosmographia*, for example, is only one of the many books by Erasmus, or featuring him, that were censored in the sixteenth century, even before the first *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* of 1559, the great list of censored books that would soon be piled up

and burned, anticipating all such events in the future. Both famous and notorious for remaining a Catholic while sympathizing with notions that were then regarded as too close for comfort to the Reformation leaders (Luther in particular), Erasmus's theologically borderline interpretations constantly irritated the Catholic authorities even though—or perhaps because—he was close to Luther but in the end stepped away from the brink of open conversion.⁵

The portrait in the *Cosmographia* (Figure 1) would have been a strong one even uncensored, but here, with the marks of obliteration and excision so clearly visited upon it, it is even stronger. Just to look at it is to feel the aggression behind the attack, licensed by the ecclesiastical authority itself, however spontaneous such acts may sometimes have been. Indeed, throughout the history of iconoclasm the borderline between spontaneous and deliberate (or organized) expressions of antipathy is often hard to distinguish both analytically and historically.

Enough has already been said about the eyes as the target of iconoclastic acts, and about their mutilation or elimination as a way of dealing with the apprehension and fear that the image might be alive; but the effort to seal up the mouth in this image, as in many others, requires further comment. Such efforts are often made as if to prevent it from saying anything further, from revealing, *mutatis mutandis*, the true self of the speaker. It is not sufficient to know how he looks; to know him best one must know his writings and his words.

In the age of Erasmus there was hardly a more common topos about the relationship between pictures and words than the one that exhorted the viewers of portraits to remember that it was the writings of the sitter that conveyed the better picture of him—"his writings show the better part," ran the inscription on Dürer's famous 1526 engraving of Erasmus at his desk. This topos that the man is better revealed by what he says than how he looks was taken up by both writers and imagemakers throughout the centuries.

In the next century, when challenged to make a portrait speak, Rembrandt turned the theme on its head to indicate that even a flat

etching or painting could speak (or at least could seem to do so).⁶ In doing so he marshaled all the resources of his art to make clear that his sitter seemed to be speaking—as notably in his portraits of the Mennonite preacher Cornelis Claes Anslo (see Emmens 1956). All this, of course, was perfectly consistent with the general Protestant emphasis on the primacy of word over image, logos over visual revelation. No wonder, then, that the censor and iconoclast has to make doubly sure to close up the real organ of speech by sewing it up, or even destroying it, so that it may never utter a further word again—so deep runs the fear of the potential operationality of the image!⁷

Image, then, was surface; words and speech were inwardness and depth. Words conveyed the inner soul of men and women better than mere outward appearance. The divine was ultimately incapable of representation except through words, certainly not by painting or sculpture. This, at least, was the general Protestant doctrine. It varied from skepticism about representation in visual form to hostility to it. The word as superior testimony to the divine became a keystone of Protestantism, and pictures were scanted, removed, or desecrated. This whole extended topos—the superiority of words over images as testimonies to character, soul, and the divine—thus offered a way of avoiding the reality of the power of images. It had a history that terminated in the removal of pictures from Christian places of worship and the whitewashing of their walls, as we know, ironically enough, from the spectacular portrayals, by several of Rembrandt's contemporaries, of church interiors bare of paintings, including the great masterpieces of the genre by Pieter Jansz. Saenredam.

The attacks on the posters of the King of Bahrain, so apparently similar to those on the Erasmus woodcut, are differently imbricated. The impulse to mutilate the posters seems to have been fed by different and more local streams of antipathy. Here the aim seems less to take out the man himself or to suppress his living presence than to indicate with these strokes that he's gone, the tyrant's gone, he's *out*—hence the rather less ferocious attack on the king than on Erasmus. It may still be taken as testimony to the basic fear of the pos-

sibility of life in an image, but there is clearly less anxiety here about the potential liveliness of the king or the inherence of his body in the image. The strokes are less vehement. The reason for the difference may be purely psychopathological, but the motivation for this attack seems less to eliminate the bodily self than to scratch out his image and announce his irrelevance. The action acquires the basic metaphoricity of the image itself.

This distinction between assault on the person and announcement through image may be a fine one, but it silently articulates the ancient Roman and Byzantine notion that the emperor is present where his image is; take away his image and he is not. It is as if this fundamental doctrine of late antiquity were here taken up in Muslim culture. It's a two-edged doctrine—on the one hand it bespeaks the inherence of the body in the image; on the other it denies it. One could perhaps say that the signs of cancellation on the image of the King of Bahrain (Figure 2) are indeed an implied assault on his person, but in the end this is an attack that seems more of a cancellation of an image than of a body.

In fact, it is impossible in such contexts to overlook the deep-rooted resistance, repeatedly articulated in the hadith, to representation of the living body and to the potential for enlivenment that lies within all images. Mere humans cannot make a living being; only God can. The artist arrives in heaven and God commands him to breathe real life into the image he has made; he fails and is cast down. The prophet himself forbade his daughter from playing with dolls.⁸ Even in these contemporary posters of the King of Bahrain, one finds the usual confluence of motivations—theological as well as social and political. Each of these is predicated on psychological constants, such as the desire to eliminate that which is too lifelike, but each is likewise inflected by local circumstance.

PORNOGRAPHY, OR ALLEGED PORNOGRAPHY, REMAINS ONE OF THE MOST frequent targets of censorship. In it we see how the embodiment of the visual meets with politics and society, and how censorship phases

into iconoclasm. The examples are legion, far too many to mention. Pudenda are covered over, nude bodies clothed or simply scratched away, even hair, a common enough marker of sensuality from ancient times to modern, is scratched out. Ancient statues of nudes are mutilated or smashed because they are pagan idols (see Buddensieg 1965) or because they are nude; so too are their printed copies in later ages—as, for example, in the furious lines of erasure that crisscross prints such as those of the naked *Venus Combing Her Hair* by Giulio Romano (illustrated in Freedberg 1989, 363, fig. 167). In such cases, as in that of Louis d'Orleans's knifing of Correggio's *Leda and the Swan*, now in Berlin (Freedberg 1985), and in the elimination of the faces in a whole series of prints of Bellocq's now famous photographs of New Orleans prostitutes—where it is as if the objects of desire must be reduced to anonymity and that which arouses illicit or intolerable sensuality mutilated—individual psychopathology meets the fear of the body in the image (see in particular Sontag and Szarkowskin in Bellocq 1996).⁹ It is all the more seductive because—especially in the case of portable prints and photographs, but also in the public presence of pictures in public galleries—it is so available a body, and so mysteriously effective, in its very substitutionality, in arousing desire.

A now classic case of the confluence of politics and pornography is that of Velazquez's *Rokeby Venus* in the National Gallery in London. A dramatic and still shocking photograph shows the deep slashes made in 1914 by a supporter of the suffragist campaign in the back of the reclining female figure (Freedberg 1989, 410–11). It is shocking because it continues to have the capacity to arouse in viewers the feeling of a physical response that greatly magnifies the sense of direct attack on the apparent flesh of this painted figure. The sense of insult the viewer is likely to feel may be further compounded by the fact that this is so beautifully painted a body as well.

But here too politics phased into a concern about pornography, just as in the ancient world and in the American “culture wars” of the 1980s and 1990s. When Mary Richardson was apprehended after hacking at the back of the *Rokeby Venus* in 1914, she made it clear that

she did so in order to draw publicity (a frequent claim made by iconoclasts) to the suffragist cause. But when, 40 years later, she was asked why she had attacked the painting, she claimed that she was offended by the way in which “men visitors gaped at the naked back of the Venus all day long” (Freedberg 1989, 409–12). As is so often the case, the allegedly licentious nature of a painting became a useful pretext for a politically motivated attack.¹⁰

AT EVERY POINT IN THE ANALYSIS OF THIS TOPIC, IT IS CRITICAL TO EXAMINE the dialectic relationship between underlying response and contemporary necessities, pretexts, and motivations. In the case of iconoclasm and censorship, it is easy to see the cross-cultural similarities, while the local modifiers turn out to be much more elusive.

When the giant Buddhas of Bamiyan were blown up in March 2001, the faces were the first elements in these statues to go—although it is still not known whether they were deliberately targeted or the casualties of more random effects of the explosions. The possibility of the targeting of faces or specific facial features is much enhanced in the context of Taliban activity against the idols of another religion (a charge that is made in one form or another throughout the Christian Reformation and reappears almost every time Daesh produces one of its videos showing the destruction of images) and the suppression of women’s faces in Taliban society. The underlying fear remains that of liveliness and sensuality, in this case further provoked by the fact that these giant statues of heathen gods were carved into all too immobile rock. When questioned about the purpose of these attacks, one Taliban mullah noted that they were destroyed as idols of a false religion; another responded by saying that the aim was simply to gain publicity for their cause and the sufferings of their people and children (e.g. Freedberg 2001; Flood 2002). The same old pretexts! Not infrequently, the iconoclast is precisely aware of the publicity that will accrue from what he does, and the more dramatic and more famous the target, the better (see Freedberg 1985 for further examples).

The charge that the images of one religion are the pagan idols of another recurred in any number of forms in the classic premodern case of iconoclasm: the war against religious images that began with the Protestant Reformation and reached its apogée in the series of iconoclastic episodes in the Netherlands between 1566 and 1575 that marked the initial years of the revolt against Spain. Images were idols because they did not show the true God. Both esthetically undistinguished images and great works of art were attributed salvific and healing powers that could only be the province of God alone, not mere representations of him. Neither God nor Christ, Virgin nor saint was inherent in their images. For most of the Protestant religions, God could not be shown in material or circumscribable form at all.

To avoid these and other dangers (such as the abusive use of images in festivals and in more licentious contexts), censorship and interdiction ensued. Noncanonical stories and noncanonical saints were forbidden. The conflation of the first and second commandments (“I am the Lord thy God; thou shalt have no images before me....Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image or any likeness of anything. . . .”) made clear the relationship between monotheism, idolatry, and image making; their separation made the veto on figuration almost absolute (Exodus 20, 1–3; and see Stirm 1977, 374; Freedberg 1976, 123; Freedberg 1989, 3). And most of the censorial interventions against the representation of the true God terminated in iconoclasm. If God was shown, he was most often painted right out.

The motives for iconoclasm varied from theological concerns to a number of other motivations that could be extracted from the theological ones, including the charge that the money spent on artistic monuments adorning the churches and chapels of both rich and poor was better spent, as Luther himself (and St. Bernard long before him) said, on the true images of God, the poor. The Reformation theologians’ repeated claim that images were merely pieces of deadwood and stone, and so could not be efficacious, was ironically at odds with those of their followers, who insisted on destroying images, effec-

tively proving, as we have seen in other cases, that they feared exactly what they asserted to be inert or false. On the one hand, therefore, the iconoclasts' actions could come across as wild bravado (why destroy what one knows to be innocuous?). On the other it was as good a way as any of ensuring that images were seen and perceived to be truly dead—and therefore ineffective. It was also, of course, a means of ensuring that images would no longer be available for idolatry and all the superstitious practices they entrained.

THE BELIEF THAT IMAGES ARE EMBODIED, THE PROJECTION INTO OR perception of life in them, the sense of the inherence of the represented in the representation, the perception of animation in what is basically static—all this came together in the assault on the body of the image.

When iconoclastic rioters broke into Antwerp Cathedral on the night of August 21–22, 1566 (see figure 4), they destroyed every image they could find, whether the polyptychs on the altars, pictures and sculptures on the walls, stained glass windows, or even illustrations in books. They tossed prayerbooks on the fires, ripped embroideries from the chasubles and copes, and attacked priests associated with this idolatrous cult. The vigor and violence of this episode are extreme symptoms of the many ways in which theological motives drew on the underlying fears codified, so to speak, in the mysterious cult of images, to which, in Protestant eyes, the Catholic use and worship of images so vividly and all too seductively testified. Both sides turned to similarities with Old Testament evidence for idolatrous image cults, as in the case of Nebuchadnezzar's Baal, and the furious iconoclasm wrought not so much by Abraham or Moses (in the case of Laban's idols or the Golden Calf respectively) but by the Old Testament and kings such as Josiah and Hezekiah (in order to lay waste either to the idols of Babylon or those worshipped by their compatriots). What is more, they used the still relatively new medium of print-making to make polemical allusions to contemporary iconoclasm;



Figure 4. Frans Hogenberg, *The Iconoclastic Riot of August 20, 1566*, etching, 1583. From Michael Eytzinger, *De Leone Belgico*, Cologne, Hogenberg, 1583. Photograph by the author.

these provide suggestive visual evidence for the constants of action and behavior that underlie many of the forms both of motivation and of movement.

Maarten van Heemskerck's 1567 design for the engraving of the *Destruction of the Temples of Ashtoreth and Chemosh* (in the series of the *History of Josiah*) was clearly intended to allude to contemporary discussions of idolatrous image worship, if not to iconoclasm itself.¹¹ It showed the pulling down of high, out-of-reach images by pairs of ropes in a way that both reflected contemporary iconoclastic actions (see figure 5; see also Freedberg 1976, 1986)¹² and anticipated the same way of taking down of modern monuments—as in the removal of the equestrian statue of the Shah in Teheran in 1980 (illustrated in Freedberg 1989, 391, fig. 179) and statues of Lenin all over Eastern Europe in the early 1990s. In these cases, of course, the chief motivation was different: the images must be removed because the leader must



Figure 5. Phillips Galle after Maarten van Heemskerck, *The Destruction of the Houses of Ashtaroth and Chemosh*, p. 5 of the series *The History of Josiah*, 1569, engraving. Photograph by the author.

be removed; the images can no longer be present because the leader is no longer present. But what is striking is the persistence of the same forms of these actions across different motivations and aims.

The raising of a hammer or pickaxe to strike the plinths of statues, or to knock them down, can be seen in almost wholly identical muscular actions in the sixteenth-century prints and the contemporary photographs. Excellent instances may be found in the print of the *Destruction of Bel* by Maarten van Heemskerck in the *Bel and the Dragon* series and in a Reuters shot of one of the smashers at work on the statue of Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein in Baghdad's Firdos Square in 2003. What is critical in these apparent continuities is to acknowledge the relatively limited number of ways in which humans can raise a hammer to strike, a knife to attack, a rope to pull down a high statues, and so on.



Figure 6. Cornelis Cort after Maarten van Heemskerck, *The Destruction of Bel*, page 6 of the series *The History of Bel and the Dragon*, 1564, published 1565, engraving. Photograph by the author.

The removal of the statue of Saddam Hussein in Firdos Square provides a number of striking instances of these similarities and constraints—as well as a significant, if obvious, caveat. Several of the forms of hostility that are visited on this statue may be found in earlier representations of the removal and toppling to the ground of the statue of a tyrant. While the beating of his face (the huge head of the statue now lying on the ground) with the soles of the shoes may well reflect a particularly Islamic form of insult (soles of shoes to flesh, face, or just the picture of someone), one of the most striking recurrences here is the way in which a young man pisses into the mouth of the statue—the ultimate expression of disdain (and possibly also of the worthlessness of the words that came out of Saddam’s mouth). But almost exactly the same form of insult is visited by a putto on the

broken head of an ancient statue that lies on the ground in Maarten van Heemskerck's 1565 print of the *Destruction of Bel* (from the *History of Bel and the Dragon* series; see figure 6). He does so because sculptures such as these had long been regarded as insulting to Christianity, not so much because they were idolatrous or licentious figures but because they were images of pagan gods (Buddensieg 1965).

While social and cultural context may well determine forms of treatment, the variety of destructive action is constrained by the sheer limits of bodily possibility (as in the case of hands raised to strike with fist or hammer). Time and again, contextual modulation meets the limits of the possibility of bodily movement and proprioception—hence the apparent recurrence of gestural formulae both for action and for emotion across history.

One of the recurrent issues in the analysis of many iconoclastic episodes is the relationship between deliberate and spontaneous attack, whether in the case of individuals or of crowds. When in April 2003 I wrote an article for the *Wall Street Journal* about the removal and destruction of Hussein's statue in Firdos Square, I did so on the basis of the published accounts and photographs in the days after that event, and framed my discussion in terms of both the apparently spontaneous feelings of antipathy toward Saddam and his image and the Muslim resistance to figuration, particularly of a hated leader. But a few days later it became clear that the photos published in the *Journal* had been cropped in such a way as to eliminate the presence of American Marines at the scene and thus prevent their active role in organizing the attack from spoiling the effect of popular and spontaneous antipathy toward Saddam. Their absolutely open presence at the scene itself was deliberately left out of the picture (literally and figuratively). It was a perfect illustration of Judith Butler's dictum that "Framing presupposes decisions or practices that leave substantial losses outside the frame" (Butler 2009, 75). I had framed my discussion on the basis of the framing of a scene that was deliberately misleading.

As images become more widely available, more easily reproducible, and more accessible than ever before, their power increases

and iconoclasm becomes ever more frequent and widespread. Daesh now uses images to maximum effect, well knowing that the horror of the executions they portray will achieve wide dissemination. At the same time, its soldiers engage in the destruction of the great art works of Mesopotamia—from Nimrud and Mosul to Palmyra and beyond—to gain further publicity for their cause. They use theological pretexts for what they do (these are the idols of godless religions, they testify to the idolatry of the past, and so on), but know that whether circulated or eliminated, both images and their destruction have the capacity to convey messages that are predicated upon the arousal of the deepest fantasies and fears.

Let me conclude with a recent South African episode that offers a dramatic and instructive example of how swiftly official censorship can become, or manipulated to become, public iconoclasm. It highlights several of the issues we have been discussing so far, including the difficulty of unravelling the relationships between planned and spontaneous acts, insult and freedom of expression, autochthony and constitutionality, and perhaps above all the difficulty of dissociating pornography from politics. It vividly illustrates why the fear of art is always predicated on the power of images or on the metaphysical images conveyed by style or by content.

In 2012, Brett Murray painted a portrait of the South African President, Jacob Zuma. It was a strong image by any reckoning, painted predominantly in unnuanced red, yellow, and black, showing Zuma striding forward with his right arm raised and his penis hanging from his open trousers. Modelled on Victor Ivanov's famous 1967 poster of Lenin, it was clearly a fiercely satirical work that alluded to Zuma's well-known sexual appetites, his many wives, and the several sexual scandals in which he had been involved, including the alleged rape of the daughter of a friend.¹³ The painting was entitled *The Spear of Africa*, unsubtly referring not only not only to its explicit sexual dimension but also, punningly, to the Umkhonto we Sizwe, Spear of the Nation, the name of the armed wing of the ruling African National Congress (ANC) party during its long period of exile. By any estimate, it was an inflammatory image.

Needless to say, Zuma, his family, and then the ANC took out lawsuits attempting to ban *The Spear* from being reproduced in the press and from being shown at the Goodman Gallery in Johannesburg. The suits were based largely on the grounds of its alleged insult to presidential dignity, which, it would often be argued, trumped the new South African constitution's firm and declared commitment to freedom of artistic expression. The response from Zuma's political associates and ministers, and even from the minister of justice himself, was that the painting presented so offensive an image that it was not art at all.

Lawsuits had already been taken against the political cartoonist Zapiro (Jonathan Shapiro) in an effort to suppress several of his recent cartoons satirizing Zuma's sexual appetites, and in particular the president's well-known dismissal of a question about how he had managed to avoid AIDS (a sensitive enough issue in South Africa) by responding that he always showered afterward. One of these cartoons showed a shower growing out of his groin in place of a penis; two others, still more acerbically, showed him with the shower growing out of his head, about to assault "Lady Justice" lying blindfolded and held to the ground by representatives of the ANC and the unions, with the scales of justice cast beside her—in other words, the justice embodied in South African's postapartheid constitution. "Go for it boss," says his supporters in one of these cartoons; in another, Zuma responds, "But before we start, I just want to say how much we respect you," as he moves to rape her. It is hardly surprising that the ANC should have striven to ban such images from circulation and public display.

Despite the protests and the impending lawsuit, the picture went up in the Goodman Gallery. People began to distribute digital images of the picture on their cell phones, which spread like wildfire across the country. It was reproduced in the *City Press*, despite threats to the editor and further injunctions both by the ANC and Zuma and his family. The cries of insults to presidential dignity multiplied. At that point, to my and to many others' astonishment, large numbers of women gathered in support of a man who—to say the least—had insulted their *own* dignity, repeatedly. His sexual behavior and anti-

feminism was well known throughout South Africa. Yet women demonstrated in his favor and took another line. “We say no to abusive artistic expression” read one poster; “President Zuma has a right to Human Dignity and Privacy” read another, reflecting the heated public discussion then taking place about whether artistic license could be allowed to abuse the president.

But how to account for these protests against the painting from the very people who one might legitimately have thought would approve of it? Of course the exposure of the male organ could be regarded as indecent, but one might have thought that the point of the satire would be well taken.

Though much of the controversy seemed to revolve around the relative prioritization of presidential dignity and constitutionally guaranteed freedom of speech, there were clearly much deeper issues at stake. To begin with, the whole affair took place at the time of the election (or reelection) for the leader of the ANC, who would become the de facto president of South Africa again. At this critical juncture, the controversy over Brett Murray’s painting enabled the ANC to organize public demonstrations of support for Zuma himself, in which alleged pornography became ever more deeply a matter of *Realpolitik*.

At the time of this episode, I happened to be in South Africa, returning to my place of birth after a more than 40-year absence. I was angered by the ANC’s efforts to close down the *City Press* and to prevent the picture from being on public display or shown in a gallery. Then some of my old school friends, still members of the ANC or the South African Communist party, indignantly rejected my indignation, on the grounds that they felt that Murray’s painting was an allusion to the old libel about the superior sexual appetites and prowess of black males. On these grounds alone, they—and many others—felt that the picture deserved not only the opprobrium that it had aroused, but also that it should be destroyed. Several left-wing columnists, both white and black, wrote against what seemed to be the majority sentiment, on precisely these grounds (Schutte 2012). At first sight my position—and those of all the liberals—was perfectly

politically correct; in this other—to me unexpected—light, it was clearly quite politically incorrect.

It was in the context of this cliché about black sexuality that the women protesters were provided with a further and deeper motive: “Polygamy is my culture as much as abortion and sodomy is yours” ran another of the posters. Using the pretext of the ancient calumny, the ANC organized widespread female opposition to the picture, in favor of a man who in his sexual relations with women could hardly have been described as anything but sexist. But such a conclusion could now be dismissed as a typical set of white man’s prejudices.

There was yet a further irony as gender politics met with the use of sexual satire for political purposes in a way that could not have been anticipated. Zuma and his government were planning to reinstitute the old tribal courts. It was clear that in several critical respects these would run counter to the new national constitution of which South Africans were then so proud. Among the issues at stake, as many feminists in South Africa of all races noted, was that women’s rights in the tribal courts were far more restricted than those in the new constitution, and that judges at the tribal courts were more likely to take more traditional male-dominated approaches to sexual and gender issues. And yet the women who protested the picture did so in support of a man who in his personal life demonstrated nothing but disdain for women and in his political life was about to reestablish courts that would subvert some of the same women’s rights assured under the new constitution. The irony was plain to all.

A few months before the controversy erupted, I had been invited to give a lecture about iconoclasm and censorship at the University of Stellenbosch. The occasion for the invitation was the Fine Arts faculty’s perplexity about a number of recent attacks on contemporary public art, sculptures above all, in various locations in the town. Their surprise was even greater because several students had written to the press in support of the attacks, partly on the grounds that the right place for works of art was in museums and galleries, not in public spaces. Their fear of art was manifest in the desire to keep it within the safe confines of private or institutional space.

By May 4, 2012, when my lecture took place, the controversy about *The Spear of Africa* was in full spate. I had no option but to conclude my talk with a brief discussion of it, and warned that my studies of censorship suggested that cases like it often turned into full-blown assaults on art.

As soon as I sat down, a student rose and, waving her cellphone, announced “The picture has just been attacked.” The pictures on her cellphone coincided with several images later made public. A well-dressed white man, subsequently identified as 59-year-old Barend La Grange, had walked into the gallery with a pot of paint and paintbrush, put a great red cross first over Zuma’s penis, and then his face; barely had he concluded when a much younger black man, Lowie Mabokela, entered, and threw a whole can of black paint at the work. It was effectively destroyed, though in fact the usual happened—the obliteration of the offending body part, first; the elimination of the face, second; and then the violent assault on the whole body. The white man was politely arrested; the black man—as many noted—was manhandled to the ground, handcuffed, and taken into custody.

Though each of the assailants provided their own motives for attacking the picture (La Grange’s related to his shame at the insult to the black president; Mabokela to his irritation with the inferior quality of the work as art), it never became clear whether they had acted of their own accord or whether they too had been set up to make so public—and publicly recorded—an attack on such an insulting and pornographic work of art (if it could be called that, said many).

For a while the Goodman Gallery closed its doors, but the lawsuit proceeded. Shortly after he took the stand, the ANC’s advocate burst into tears as he set out their case. The Committee of Young Communists announced that the defacing of the portrait was people’s justice, and that the attackers should be awarded the Order of Ikhamanga, usually assigned to excellence in the arts, journalism, and sport, for bravery. Slowly, both *City Press* and the gallery gave way. On May 28, 2012, the editor of the paper removed the picture from the paper’s website, apologized to one of Zuma’s daughters, and

wrote “the Spear is down. Out of care and as an olive branch to play a small role in helping turn around a tough moment, I have decided to take down the image.” The power of images could hardly have been more clearly manifest. “When we published an art review which featured the Spear as one image, I could not have anticipated that it would snowball into a moment of such absolute rage and pain,” she continued. “Of course, the image is coming down from fear too.... The atmosphere is like a tinderbox: *City Press* copies went up in flames on Saturday. I don’t want any more newspapers burnt in anger. . . .” And so on.¹⁴

The secretary general of the ANC and the owner of the Goodman Gallery met to announce that the ANC would withdraw its case if the gallery agreed not to display *The Spear* any longer. At a press conference on May 30, the gallery and the ANC announced a deal that would include the removal of the painting from the gallery’s website as well. The ANC case against the gallery and the call for a boycott of *City Press* were dropped, the gallery subsequently denied that it had agreed to remove the image. Also on May 30, the Film and Publications Board rejected all jurisdictional arguments and age-rated the picture to 16+.

The defamation case against Zapiro sputtered on for a few more months and then petered out with damages reduced from 5 million rand to zero, but with the requirement that the cartoon should be accompanied by an advisory warning.

“The row has been good for business at the gallery,” noted *The Guardian* (Smith 2012). How much the value of the work rises, even in its damaged state, remains to be seen.

The picture is not seeable anymore in its earlier state. When I was asked to write an article on the destruction of the painting in the leading—liberal—South African art journal (Freedberg 2012), I was not allowed to publish the original version of the picture on the grounds that the government had forbidden its circulation and publication.

The fate of *The Spear* forms part of a long history of fear and antipathy to images. It also testifies plainly to an acknowledgement of their powers. The age-old emotions it stirred up mobilized thousands of people. But in a reversal of the usual assault on an image as an assault on the person it represents, the metaphorical attack on Zuma (in the form of a painting) led to an assault on the painting itself. The further reversal, of course, is that the assailants of the picture did so not out of antipathy to its subject but in support of him and—against art itself and the freedom of creative expression.

This episode clearly demonstrates the oscillation between the constancies that underlie the fear of art and the differences that arise from the ways in which that fear is modulated and exploited under particular social and political circumstances and pressures. But each of the many motives for censorship and iconoclasm testify, above all, to the impossibility of escaping them.

NOTES

1. That is, more social than its intersubjective constitution necessitates. The only exception may be in those rare cases where iconoclasm and censorship are the consequence of individual psychoses (for an initial survey, see Freedberg 1985). But even these have begun to multiply exponentially, pressured, no doubt, by religious impulses. Even here it could be argued that the bulk of such disturbances are predicated on sensitivity to social context, content, or implication—however perversely conceived.
2. Whereas the constitution of images has not. The fraught nature of images, torn between objectivity and subjectivity, between flatness and fleshliness, between what seems alive but cannot be (except in the case of automata) produces continuities of response.
3. As in the copy of Sebastian Münster, *Cosmographia Universalis* (Basel: Heinrich Petri), p. 130 in the Biblioteca Nacional in Madrid, inv. R/33638. This is the copy illustrated in van der Coelen, Bol, and Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen (2008, 86, no. 16): 4.

4. Though in the case of punctures to the eyes no such experiments have yet been conducted. They could be in the case of works of representational art such as these; but they could obviously not be in reality (except in the case, for example, of having subjects watch injections to the eyes, perhaps).
5. The irony is that Erasmus himself worried a great deal about the dangers and misuse of images (see, for example, Freedberg 1971, 1988, among many others).
6. Thus aligning the *topos* with the other ancient one of the degree of verisimilitude in a work being such that it even seemed to speak (or low, as in the case of the classical sculptor Myron's cow).
7. Indeed, in all these contexts it is worth remembering those many cultures, particularly ancient ones such as the Babylonian and Egyptian, in which the formal insertion of the eyes and the ceremonial opening of the mouth are ritualized acts of putting into operation powers that more closely approximate to the particular forms of life collectively desired from it.
8. It hardly needs to be noted that even so, as we know from the earliest days of Muslim visual culture, this resistance does not always play out in abstention from images of the body; on the contrary, as in places like Qusayr 'Amra and Khirbat al-Mafjar.
9. The general consensus now is that these faces were obliterated by Bellocq himself, on the plates themselves; but whether his motive was to protect the identity of his models is an open question—it may well have had to do with other more fetishistic motives or fearful concerns about the sensuality of the very models he photographed.
10. See also the discussion of the assault on the portrait of Jacob Zuma later in this essay.
11. As in the case of the similarly interesting series showing the destruction of the idols set up by Queen Athaliah, illustrated in Saunder (1978–9, figures 7–10).
12. One need only compare these illustrations with, say, the more or less contemporaneous print by Frans Hogenberg in Michael Aitzinger's 1583 *De Leone Belgico* showing the 1566 image-breaking in Antwerp

Cathedral and the later ones by Frans Luyken to see the similarities of action throughout.

13. It may also have been modelled on Robert Mapplethorpe's famous image of a *Man in a Polyester Suit*, one of several images by the artist that during the American culture wars of the early 1990s were subject to repeated efforts to at suppression.
14. Ferial Haffajee's original apology is no longer available on the *City Press* website, but is quoted in several sources, such as de Waal (2012).

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