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Global Image¹

I. Defining the Image

As prehistoric cave paintings indicate, the image is one of the oldest human cultural techniques. It would appear to be found in all human cultures in various forms, and plays a crucial role in many religions—including in the Christian creation myth: “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him” (Genesis 1, 27). On account of its crucial significance, the image has been considered by Hans Jonas as a defining anthropological feature of human beings, and can at the very least be regarded as a foundational medium.²

Images not only play a crucial role in religion and in what Western cultures have termed ‘art,’ but also in the spheres of science and technology, medicine, entertainment, public administration (e.g. photographs in identity cards), economics, games and other everyday or magical practices, and so on. The ubiquity of images makes it impossible even to give an approximative account of this diachronic and synchronic—let alone global—diversity within the confines of an encyclopaedia entry. Furthermore, the literature on different kinds of images and their significance, along with the practices and technical processes with which they are associated, has become increasingly vast, particularly since the ‘pictorial turn’ in cultural studies around 1992 and the emergence of an independent field of ‘visual studies.’³ An overview of these developments is provided in the 2014 collection, edited by Stephan Günzel and Dieter Mersch, *Bild: Ein interdisziplinäres Handbuch* [*The Image: An Interdisciplinary Handbook*].⁴

The great diversity of the phenomena termed ‘images’ and the wide range of their applications has thus far hindered the elaboration of a universally accepted conception of the image.⁵

¹ My thanks to Anna Brus and Götz Bachmann for their valuable comments.

² Cf. Hans Jonas, “Homo Pictor and the Differentia of Man,” in: *Social Research*, vol. 29, no. 2 (Summer 1962), pp. 201-220 and Jochen Venus, “Basismedien: Bild, Klang, Text, Zahl, Geste,” in: Jens Schröter (ed.), *Handbuch Medienwissenschaft*, Stuttgart: Metzler 2014, pp. 215-222.

³ Cf. e.g. William J. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representations*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1994, 462 pages; Hans Belting, *An Anthropology of Images: Picture, Medium, Body*, trans. Thomas Dunlop, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press 2011, 216 pages, and Klaus Sachs-Hombach, *Das Bild als kommunikatives Medium: Elemente einer allgemeinen Bildwissenschaft*, Cologne: von Halem 2003, 368 pages.

⁴ Cf. Stephan Günzel/Dieter Mersch (eds.), *Bild: Ein interdisziplinäres Handbuch*, Stuttgart: Metzler 2014, 491 pages.

⁵ Cf. Dieter Mersch, “Bildbegriffe und ihre Etymologien,” in Günzel/Mersch, *Bild*, pp. 1-7.

Indeed, one might even ask whether it is possible to establish a unified conception of the image that incorporates all of the relevant phenomena, or whether ‘the image’ is not rather a historically variable umbrella term for a range of entities grouped together on the basis of family resemblances (to use Wittgenstein’s terminology). Admirable attempts have nonetheless been made to provide synthetic definitions of the image; Stefan Majetschak, for instance, has proposed the following: “Ein Bild [...] ist eine in die Formungslatenzen eines beliebigen Mediums eingelassene Textur von Markierungen, die eine interne Differenzierung aufweist, welche wir unter gegebenen Kontextbedingungen als analogisch notierte Verwirklichung einer möglichen Ordnung des Sichtbaren betrachten.“ (“An image [...] is the texture of markings that, embedded in the latent form of a given medium, exhibit an internal differentiation which under certain contextual conditions can be regarded as the analogically notated realisation of a possible ordering of the visible.”⁶)

Majetschak’s formulation highlights the difficulties of giving a definition of ‘the image.’ Simple definitions are particularly problematic, and the everyday conception (shared by vulgar semiotic approaches⁷) according to which images are signs that, unlike linguistic signs, are characterised by their *resemblance* to that which they depict, does not stand up to detailed scrutiny. Two eggs, for example, resemble one another very closely, but one is not the image of the other. Following his devastating criticism of the resemblance theory, Nelson Goodman proposed a quite different approach to defining the image. Goodman characterises images (in contrast to language and writing) as symbols that belong to syntactically dense schemes (a notion reflected in Majetschak’s ‘analogisch notierten Verwirklichung’ (‘analogically notated realisation’)). What this means is that (Western) languages, unlike images, have an alphabet that defines which kinds of marks are permitted and which are not. There are the ‘characters’ A and B, for example, but there is no character between A and B (syntactic differentiation). In such languages, it must also be possible to unambiguously assign each mark to a single character; there is no mark, for example, that corresponds to both A and B (syntactic disjointness).⁸ This means that any given mark can and must be assigned to a certain character—but

⁶ Cf. Stefan Majetschak, “Bild und Sichtbarkeit: Überlegungen zu einem transdisziplinären Bildbegriff,” in: *Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft*, vol. 48, no. 1 (2003), pp. 27–45, here p. 43. Interestingly, Majetschak does not include ‘flatness’ in his definition of the image (though at the beginning of his text he mentions it a number of times)—a quality that is often included in other definitions of the image but that in light of *sculpture* is untenable (cf. Jens Schröter, *3D: History, Theory and Aesthetics of the Transplane Image*, New York: Bloomsbury 2014, 496 pages).

⁷ Which does not mean that semiotic treatments of the image are vulgar *per se*; cf. for example Roland Barthes, “The Rhetoric of the Image,” in, Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath, New York: Hill and Wang 1977, pp. 32–51.

⁸ Cf. Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols*, Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill 1968, p. 127ff. The resemblance theory is defended, for example, by Jonas, “Homo Pictor,” p. 203. With regard to Goodman, cf. Majetschak, “Bild und Sichtbarkeit,” pp. 30–37.

it makes no difference whether ‘A’ is written in green or in an exotic font, or even constructed by laying potatoes in the right way on the floor. Such an alphabetic ‘repertoire,’ however, is not applicable to images, where even the subtlest difference in the thickness of a line or the shade of a colour can be of significance. The disjunctive and differentiated symbolic scheme of writing can then be described as ‘digital,’ and the theoretically and potentially infinitely graduated syntactic scheme of the image as ‘dense’ or ‘analogue.’

A very different approach is taken by *phenomenological* theories, which place greater emphasis on the relation between the image and sight (without falling back into resemblance theories), and which, unlike semiotic approaches, do not see images as signs of (visible) objects, but as visible entities in their own right. In doing so they draw on Edmund Husserl’s phenomenological description of the perceptual process.⁹ Majetschak attempts to take this dimension into account with his reference to a ‘mögliche Ordnungen des Sichtbaren’ (‘possible ordering of the visible.’)

What the diverse Western discussions of the image have in common is that they regard images as having distinctive qualities and ‘iconic logics’ that cannot be traced back to the denotative capacities of language and writing, even if many images owe their significance to the surrounding linguistic context or textual sources (a key area of research within iconography and iconology).¹⁰

Whether or not a general definition of ‘the image’ can be given, the notion of the image can be made more precise by means of a number of internal distinctions. *Man-made* images have been distinguished, for example, from *natural* images—phenomena such as shadows or reflections.¹¹ Among man-made images, we can also draw a distinction between *technical* and *non-technical* images.¹² ‘Technical images’ generally refer to images that have been created since the invention of photography around 1839—ranging from film and television to contemporary computer-generated images. Furthermore, this distinction emerges along with that between *still* and *moving* images, i.e. images that change over time, such as cinematic and televisual images. Nevertheless, the distinction between *technical* and *non-technical* images is questionable insofar as all ‘man-made’ images are necessarily also ‘technical’ images. Yet

⁹ Cf. Lambert Wiesing, *Artificial Presence: Philosophical Studies in Image Theory*, translated by Nils F. Schott, Stanford: Stanford University Press 2010, 168 pages. Cf. also Majetschak, “Bild und Sichtbarkeit,” pp. 37–43.

¹⁰ Cf. Ekkehard Kaemmerling (ed.), *Bildende Kunst als Zeichensystem I: Ikonographie und Ikonologie. Theorien, Entwicklung, Probleme*, Cologne: Dumont 1979, 517 pages.

¹¹ Cf. Umberto Eco, “Mirrors,” in *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press 1986, pp. 202–226.

¹² Cf. e.g. Vilém Flusser, *Into the Universe of Technical Images*, trans. Nancy Ann Roth, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011, 224 pages, and Horst Bredekamp/Birgit Schneider/Vera Dünkel (eds.), *The Technical Image: A History of Styles in Scientific Imagery*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2015, 208 pages.

images can also be distinguished according to their denotative function, and in discussions of technical images a distinction is often made between *indexical and non-indexical images*. This distinction is drawn from Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotics and is concerned with whether images are causally connected to that which they depict (as in photography) or not (as in painting). A further distinction related to the denotative function of images is that between *singular and general images*, i.e. between images that represent concrete entities and those that depict a general class of entities, such as images in an encyclopaedia article on a class of objects ('horses' for example). In advertising too, images are often used in a general manner: an image of a man in a car advert, for example, is not an image of *this* man, but of men in general. Furthermore, one can also distinguish between *fictional and non-fictional* images, and so on.¹³

From a more sociological perspective, a distinction is drawn between images that belong to the domain of art, and therefore serve no purpose beyond the exhibition and reflection of their own pictorial character (at least according to the central thesis of modern aesthetics), and those that play a functional role within communicative processes (such as advertising).¹⁴ This distinction between *artistic and functional* images is also problematic, however, since in many concrete cases it cannot be clearly drawn: artistic images can also play a functional role and have been employed, for example, in the service of religious communication. Furthermore, this distinction is bound to a particular historical context: the autonomous artistic sphere, which in a certain sense is a precondition of the distinction, only emerged in the 19th century.¹⁵ Nevertheless, the rich and varied history of artistic images has brought with it an equally rich array of aesthetic theories, which have sought in manifold ways to account for the distinctive qualities of the artistic image. The image has thus often been attributed a revelatory power.¹⁶

The history of different kinds of images and the practices, design formats, theories, aesthetics, and political programmes with which they are associated is far too extensive and complex even to outline here. There are a great number of historical studies on painting, photography, film, television, and computer images, and on the functions of images in religion, art, science,

¹³ Cf. Oliver Scholz, *Bild, Darstellung, Zeichen: Philosophische Theorien bildhafter Darstellung*, Freiburg und Munich: Alber 1991, 220 pages, here pp. 25-31 and 70-72.

¹⁴ Cf. Stefan Majetschak, "Sichtvermerke: Über Unterschiede zwischen Kunst- und Gebrauchsbildern," in: Stefan Majetschak (ed.): *Bild-Zeichen: Perspektiven einer Wissenschaft vom Bild*, Munich: Fink 2003, pp. 97-121.

¹⁵ Cf. Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994, 676 pages.

¹⁶ A classic example of the attribution of a revelatory power to the image can be found in Martin Heidegger's "The Origin of the Work of Art," in: Heidegger, *Off the Beaten Track*, trans. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2002, pp. 1-56, particularly pp. 13-16.

and the mass media, to name only the most prominent fields. As the last example—the field of mass media—illustrates, images are generally not encountered in isolation, but in connection with other media such as sound or writing, with which they interact in complex ways. In addition, there are also special institutions that are devoted to archiving and presenting and/or trading images, such as museums and galleries.

II. The Global Turn

As noted at the outset, images appear to be found in almost all cultures; any engagement with the question of the image therefore needs to be both historically and interculturally nuanced. Yet this is not always the case: despite the quality of its contributions, the influential 1994 anthology edited by Gottfried Boehm, *Was ist ein Bild?* [*What is an Image?*], does not contain a single text devoted to non-European images or conceptions of images.¹⁷ This indicates a form of Eurocentrism that is problematic not only on account of its unjustified and unjustifiable exclusion of non-European images; this exclusion also risks undermining the claim to universal and global validity implied in the ontological question, *Was ist ein Bild?* How can one know what an image ‘is’ if one does not know what „andersgerichtete [...] Bildwahrnehmung“ oder welches „andere Denken bildhafter Darstellung“ (“alternative [...] perceptions of images” or what “other conceptions of pictorial representation”) exist?¹⁸ Is it not rather necessary, „bei der Verwendung solch genereller Kategorien wie [...] ‚Bild‘ [...] Rechenschaft über deren spezifisch fremdkulturelle Bedeutung“ abzulegen (“in using such gen-

¹⁷ In his Foreword, “Die Wiederkehr der Bilder” (“The Return of Images,” in: Boehm, *Was ist ein Bild?*, pp. 11–38), Boehm notes with „Blick auf außereuropäische Stammeskunst“ (“regard to non-European tribal art”) that „Die ältere und außereuropäische Bildgeschichte besitzt einen Gestaltenreichtum, der hinter dem der Moderne keineswegs zurücksteht. An orientalischen Teppichen, japanischen Teeschalen, afrikanischen Sitzen, an Faustkeilen der fernsten Frühe des Menschen usw. lässt sich bereits kritisch erproben, was Bilder sind und was sie determiniert“ (“the older, non-European history of images possesses a formal richness that in no way lags behind that of modernity. Oriental carpets, Japanese tea bowls, African chairs, hand-axes from the dawn of humanity, and so on, already allow us to critically assess what images are and what determines their nature”) (38). Nevertheless, it is unfortunate that this thesis is not followed up by a detailed discussion of non-European images over the course of the book, particularly since Boehm’s formulation raises a number of questions. *Firstly*, he only provides examples of non-European image types that are closely connected to functional objects, as though the ‘primitive’ image had not succeeded in liberating itself from a decorative role. *Secondly*, he states that these examples ‘already’ allow us to see what images are, which to a certain extent implies that non-European images are childlike, early forms of images. It is then not surprising when, a paragraph later, Boehm speaks of the „Erprobungen der Moderne“ (“experiments of modernity,”) which have „unser Wissen von den Voraussetzungen, von der Flexibilität und der Wirkungsweise, z.B. der Malerei, der Zeichenkunst oder des skulpturalen Gestaltens erheblich erweitert“ (“significantly expanded our knowledge of the preconditions, flexibility, and effects of, for example, painting, drawing, and sculpture.”) Yet instead of placing non-European art and (European) modernity (Boehm’s examples include Cézanne and Matisse) on a developmental teleology (as appears to be the case here), they could be understood simply as different but equally valid forms.

¹⁸ Iris Därmann, *Fremde Monde der Vernunft: Die ethnologische Provokation der Philosophie*, Munich: Fink 2005, p. 38 and p. 39.

eral categories as [...] ‘the image’ [...] to take into account the latter’s particular significance in other cultures”)?¹⁹ In his influential study, *The Red Fez: On Art and Possession in Africa*, the ethnologist Fritz Kramer sought to compare “the Cokwe concept of the image with the elements of Western aesthetics.”²⁰ Heike Behrend has likewise engaged with ‘wild’ film theories, that is, with theories of photography and film developed by particular African cultures.²¹ These examples are drawn from ethnology, but in recent years there have also been greater efforts²² to break away from a Eurocentric perspective within art history. These have been manifested in attempts to elaborate a ‘global art history’ that explicitly addresses the question of culturally differentiated pictorial practices and conceptions of the image.²³ Though we cannot consider the full extent of the discussion between ethnology, art history, and intercultural media studies with regard to the question of the image here, we can note a number of its central aspects:

Firstly, it has emerged that pictorial forms that were once held to be distinctly European achievements are themselves the result of a globally intertwined history, and offer no grounds for any particular Eurocentric self-satisfaction, even and especially with regard to one-point perspective.²⁴

Secondly, it is clear that the ‘canon’ of phenomena subsumed under the category ‘image’ differs in other cultures, in which a crucial role can be played by image types that do not feature in the (painting-oriented) ‘Western’ history and historiography. Very briefly, these include:

a) *Tattoos*: while Majetschak’s general definition of the image can easily account for tattoos, the latter have thus far not featured within the history of art and only very rarely with-

¹⁹ Iris Därmann, “Statt einer Einleitung, Plädoyer für eine Ethnologisierung der Kulturwissenschaft(en),” in: Iris Därmann/Christoph Jamme (eds.), *Kulturwissenschaften: Konzepte, Theorien, Autoren*, Munich: Fink 2007, pp. 7-33, here p. 18.

²⁰ Fritz Kramer, *The Red Fez: On Art and Possession in Africa*, trans. Malcolm R. Green, London: Verso 1993, 304 pages, p. 190 and passim.

²¹ Cf. Heike Behrend, “Rückkehr der gestohlenen Bilder: Ein Versuch über ‘wilde’ Filmtheorien,” in: *Anthropos*, vol. 85, no. 4/6 (1990), pp. 564-570.

²² On the relation between ethnology and art history in this respect cf. Birgit Mersmann, “Art History and the Culture of the Image: A Manifesto for Global Art History,” in: Hans G. Kippenberg and Birgit Mersmann (eds.), *The Humanities Between Global Integration and Cultural Diversity*, Berlin: de Gruyter, 2016, pp. 70-76.

²³ Cf. e.g. Monica Juneja, “Kunstgeschichte und kulturelle Differenz: Eine Einleitung,” in: *Kritische Berichte*, vol. 40, no. 2 (2012), pp. 6-12, particularly p. 10, und James Elkins, “Different Horizons for the Concept of the Image,” in: *Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft*, vol. 43, no. 1 (1998), pp. 29-46. On the question of global art history, cf. also James Elkins (ed.), *Is Art History Global?*, New York: Routledge 2007, 472 pages.

²⁴ Cf. Hans Belting, *Florence and Baghdad: Renaissance Art and Arab Science*, trans. Deborah Lucas Schneider, Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press 2011, 312 pages.

in visual studies. In other cultures, however, they have a crucial ritual and aesthetic significance, and in recent decades they have gained increasing acceptance in ‘the West.’²⁵

b) *Calligraphy*: though similar phenomena can be found in mediaeval illuminated manuscripts in Europe, calligraphy has played a far more significant role in Islamic and Asian cultures. In classical European aesthetics it is almost never mentioned. Calligraphy is situated between the image and writing, and appears to call into question this key distinction in the ‘Western’ discourse.²⁶

c) The *mask*: a mask is a non-flat (‘3D’) image, which may take the form of death masks or masks worn during folkloric festivals or carnivals (and also in Europe). But as with tattoos, masks would seem to have (had) a more prominent role in other cultures, as is indicated by the rather limited attention the mask has received in visual studies discourses.²⁷ The example of the mask also serves to highlight a key problem with European engagements with alternative kinds of images: to place a mask in a museum (to return to the question of the institution) is to tear it from its performative, intermedial context and thus precisely to overlook its spatial pictorial specificity.²⁸

Thirdly, this last point again makes clear that conceptions of the image within the European tradition are by no means universally shared. Neither the distinction between the image and writing (challenged by calligraphy), nor the assumption that an image is an entity that can be isolated from its surroundings (called into question by the mask) or that simply stands over against the observing subject (undermined by both masks and tattoos) can claim universal validity. This opposition between a subject and a pictorial object that stands before it²⁹ is by no means universally valid; indeed, it has been historically invoked precisely to devalue ‘primitive’ conceptions of the image. What has thereby been overlooked is not only that such ‘primitive peoples’ may draw on various conceptions of the image—including the ‘distanced’

²⁵ Cf. Erhard Schüttelpelz, “Unter die Haut der Globalisierung: Die Veränderungen der Körpertechnik ‘Tätowieren’ seit 1769,” in: Tobias Nanz and Bernhard Siegert (eds.), *Ex machina: Beiträge zur Geschichte der Kulturtechniken*, Weimar: VDG 2006, pp. 13-58.

²⁶ Cf. e.g. Birgit Mersmann, “Schrift-, Pinsel-, Atemzug – Ostasiatische Schriftbildlichkeit zwischen Imagination und Insription,” in: Birgit Mersmann and Martin Schulz (eds.), *Kulturen des Bildes*, Munich: Fink 2006, pp. 83-100, and Elkins, “Different Concepts,” pp. 30-34. The centrality of the distinction between the image and writing in Western culture is evident, for example, in Exodus 32, which presents the conflict between the word of God, engraved on the stone tablets, and the idol—the golden calf around which the people of Israel dance.

²⁷ Cf., however, Hans Belting, *Faces: Eine Geschichte des Gesichts*, Munich: Beck 2014, particularly p. 119: „Die westliche Kultur hat seit der Antike keine Masken mehr hervorgebracht, mit denen sie sich identifiziert hätte“ (“Since antiquity, Western culture has not produced any masks with which it has identified itself.”)

²⁸ Cf. Zoe Strother, *Inventing Masks. Agency and History in the Art of the Central Pende*, Chicago: Chicago University Press 1998. My thanks to Anna Brus for this reference.

²⁹ In terms of which Heidegger characterises the modern era as such; cf. “The Age of the World Picture,” in: Martin Heidegger, *Off the Beaten Track*, trans. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2002, pp. 57-85.

Western model—alongside one another,³⁰ but also that the European tradition itself contains important traces of ‘magical’ conceptions of the image, which have often simply been suppressed.³¹

III. Conclusion

The necessary task of avoiding the absolutisation and universalisation of European conceptions of the image is nonetheless confronted by a number of challenges. *Firstly*, however great the differences between various conceptions of the image may be, a certain degree of common ground must be assumed in order that we might compare different phenomena from different cultures as *different kinds of image* at all.³² To this extent, the universal validity of Majetschak’s very general definition of the image may potentially remain intact. *Secondly*, emphasising cultural differences should not cause us to lose sight of the fact that a global, capitalist, technological image culture is spreading across the world, and may well lead to a homogenisation of image culture in which divergent image forms would risk being lost, even if the global image culture would always have to be adapted to the local context.³³ Globality is partly an effect of images, and the exoticism of the other can blind us to the forces of globalisation. *Thirdly* and finally, however, an engagement with such fundamental categories as ‘the image’ within other cultures in the age of globality also constitutes a challenge to the notion of globality itself, which of course also affects the present project of an encyclopaedia of globality: „Die Unmöglichkeit oder Unvermeidbarkeit, niemals von einem anderen als dem eigenen Ort ausgehen und aufbrechen zu können, muß und kann nicht bedeuten, sich am konti[n]genten Ort des eigenen Hier-Seins in universaler Sicherheit zu wiegen und vor dem Einbruch fremder Daseinsauslegungen in Deckung zu bringen.“ (“The impossibility or unavoidability of ever being able to set out or depart from a context other than our own does not and cannot mean that, in the contingent context of our own existence, we should lull ourselves

³⁰ Cf. Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, *The ‘Soul’ of the Primitive*, trans. Lilian Ada Clare, London: George Allen and Unwin 1965, 351 pages, here pp. 153-157. Cf. also Därmann, *Fremde Monde der Vernunft*, p. 38 and for a critical reading of Heidegger, pp. 489-511.

³¹ One might, for example, read Roland Barthes’ notion of the ‘punctum’ along such lines; cf. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard, London: Vintage 1993, 144 pages.

³² Cf. Fritz Kramer, “Geist, Bild, Realität,” in: Miklós Szalay (ed.), *Der Sinn des Schönen: Ästhetik, Soziologie und Geschichte der afrikanischen Kunst*, Munich: Trickster 1990, pp. 33-48, here p. 33: “In their overall conceptions of the mind, the image, and reality, African and European views do nonetheless seem to converge.”

³³ Cf. Brian Larkin, *Signal and Noise: Media, Infrastructure, and Urban Culture in Nigeria*, Durham/NC: Duke University Press 2008.

into a false sense of security about its universal validity or guard ourselves against the incursion of alternative interpretations of existence.”)³⁴

³⁴ Därmann, *Fremde Monde der Vernunft*, pp. 487-488.