

## Virtual Reality – Real Visuality

# Visual Learning

Edited by András Benedek and Ágnes Veszelszki

Volume 7



PETER LANG  
EDITION

András Benedek / Ágnes Veszelszki (eds.)

# Virtual Reality – Real Visuality

Virtual, Visual, Veridical



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**Bibliographic Information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek**

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data is available in the internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>.

The publication of this volume was sponsored  
by the Gergely László Foundation, Hungary.

Printed by CPI books GmbH, Leck

ISSN 1435-845X  
ISBN 978-3-631-73104-8 (Print)  
E-ISBN 978-3-631-73105-5 (E-PDF)  
E-ISBN 978-3-631-73106-2 (EPUB)  
E-ISBN 978-3-631-73107-9 (MOBI)  
DOI 10.3726/b11592

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Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften  
Frankfurt am Main 2017  
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Peter Lang – Frankfurt am Main · Bern · Bruxelles · New York ·  
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# Contents

<i>András Benedek</i> Preface .....	7
Figurative, Virtual, Rhetorical	
<i>Zoltán Kövecses</i> A Radical View of the Literal-figurative Distinction .....	17
<i>Petra Aczél</i> Beyond Persuasion – Rhetoric in a Virtual World .....	29
<i>Eszter Deli</i> Can Images be Arguments? The Possibility of Visual Argumentation in the WWF Nature Conservancy Campaigns.....	41
Pictorial, Veridical, Cross-Cultural	
<i>Kristóf Nyíri</i> Pictorial Truth.....	51
<i>István Danka</i> The Pictorial, the Virtual and the Trivial. On Pictorial Realism and Relativism .....	59
<i>Orsolya Endrődy-Nagy</i> Images and Iconography in Cross-Cultural Context.....	67
Diagrammatic, Visual, Practical	
<i>Amirouche Moktefi</i> Diagrams as Scientific Instruments .....	81
<i>András Benedek</i> Visual Learning and Open Content Development (OCD).....	91

*György Molnár*

How Digital and Virtual Life Trapped in Visuality and  
New Media Systems Affect Teaching and the Learning Process .....101

Social, Visual, Digital

*James E. Katz –, Daniel Halpern*

Image Self-Involvement and Romantic Relationships: The Case of Selfies.....121

*Rachel A. Katz*

All About Image: Development of Visual Literacy  
through American Dating Apps.....131

*Ágnes Veszelszki*

Verbal and Visual Aggression in Trolling.....141

Apocalyptic, Real, Medial

*László Attila Hubbes*

Revolution of the Eye. The Spectacular Rhetoric of the Apocalyptic.....159

*Philipp Stoellger*

“In Images We Trust”. On Belief in Images as the Real Reality.....175

Notes on Contributors .....189

Index .....195

Philipp Stoellger

# “In Images We Trust”. On Belief in Images as the Real Reality<sup>1</sup>

## 1. Trust

We usually trust in people. Trust is normally an interpersonal relation: we trust our parents not to seduce us, but to wish our best. We trust whom we love—no love without trust. But there is also trust without love. We trust—hopefully—our colleagues not to deceive us but to be honest. This means trust can be total, as in love, and it can be partial or perspectival, when we trust someone with regard to something in particular.

Whatever trust may be, it is difficult to say ‘how to make it’. Trust-making is a mystery of social coherence. Without trust, no living together, no cohabitation or communication is possible. Trust may be a gift that we get (like recognition) and give back. Thus, it is a kind of ‘gift-exchange’ that entails a mysterious obligation: If you trust me, I have no choice but to trust you. Trust is a response to the trust of the other. The ‘origin’ of trust is earlier than we are. In a way, it is ‘prevenient’.

This means that trust is not simply made but rather given or inherited. If there are cultural heritages, trust should be on the list. And if there is no more trust given, social life becomes quite difficult. Then we need contracts and lawyers for everything: for marriage and for friendships. The pervasive ‘legalization’, the law penetrating our life may be the symptom of a problem: lack of trust.

However, I don’t want to complain about the lack of trust or moral sense but simply hint to a social paradox: trust is necessary but impossible to make. It is given, inherited and responsive. But if it is gone, the way to ‘recall’ it is a mystery. In the sphere of mistrust, trust becomes impossible but it remains a necessary impossibility, because only by this strange gift becomes social life possible. Otherwise, life would be merely ‘natural’, not a social ‘being together’ (in German, *Mitsein*).

## 2. Trust in God and Myself?

How trust works is a field of research of its own, quite a wide and open one. However, the basic idea of interpersonal trust and trust as a basic factor of social

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1 See also Stoellger 2010.

life entails some problems. If trust is given and not made, it becomes unavailable or unaffordable. So, one may search for the real root of trust and may start ‘in the beginning’, with God and may end up with ‘oneself’. ‘In God we trust’ and ‘I trust only and exclusively in myself’ are the two dominant options.

Remember Descartes’ marvellous invention, the ‘*sum cogitans*’: the one and only foundation of secure knowledge is the certainty of myself, while I am thinking. This certainty did not last very long. In Romanticism (Schlegel) or at last in Nietzsche and Freud, this basic trust in the foundational character of the ‘I’ was already disseminated. What the ‘I’ may ever have been is either too dark or too much, either too lonely or too fragile to be the basic foundation of everything. It failed in the functioning of essentialist foundationalism.

This is a kind of repetition of an older story. Once ago, we believed in God. This belief was named faith, just to mark its extraordinary character. Faith was thought to sustain the cultural world: justice and institutions, morality and mercy, society and community. It was a quite fruitful period in art, culture, economy, and society as well as in colonialism and warfare. Basic beliefs seem to *enable* us to achieve what otherwise would remain impossible. Some beliefs make the impossible possible, whether Heaven or Hell.

However, this unquestionable belief *was* questioned nevertheless and became doubtful or even suspicious. And the same story happened with the belief in ‘myself’, in the ominous ‘I’. Suspicion against deep beliefs and any trust leads to suspicion against suspicion against suspicion... There seems to be no more ground, foundation or basic belief left.

Is there anyone nowadays who really and still believes in ‘oneself’? For sure, this is a prominent thesis out of the Jurassic Park of philosophy’s history. And it is today a topic of ‘self-promotion’: of the economies of trust in yourself, either in management or in new religions. But can you ever have read Freud and Nietzsche and still really believe in yourself?

### 3. Trust in Immediacy and Media-trust

What now, what after such foundationalisms? What remained after God and ‘I’ as ‘self-evident’ beliefs? There are beliefs nevertheless but in such a plurality, fragility and transiency that no one can give or get any guarantees. The old model of basic belief and guaranteed certainty is a lovely idea, but it is gone. And even where it is still present, it is a quite postmodern revival of pre-modern options. Essentialism in times of late modernity *is* a postmodern position, like the so-called ‘radical orthodoxy’.

Essentialism and foundationalism have failed, but does that lead necessarily to pluralism and relativism? I doubt it does and I would prefer not to follow this pattern, not to revitalise this metaphysical and anti-metaphysical discourse: either essentialism or relativism. Not least because it bewitches our intelligence and belief as well. The necessary ‘brainwork’ is beyond this ‘old’ and ‘postmodern’ alternative: it is the quest for figures of the third, neither foundationalist nor essentialist.

The pragmatist traditions (like Putnam) and interpretationism (Goodman, Abel, Lenk) offered a mediation: All reality is mediated, but media are not all of reality. In our context, we might slightly transform this insight: The real is an image and the image is real, but it is not *the* real, the only reality. The reality of the image and the image of reality are two aspects of the basic *mediality* of reality. This means to proceed from symbolic realism to image-realism.

In politics as well as in economy, law, our daily life, in science and religion, we trust in images as basic media of ‘the real’ (whatever that may be). This basic trust can be understood as ‘belief in images’ or ‘image-belief’. This means we live in belief systems which are created and formed by images.

The images we live by (as explicated in my 2014 Budapest talk) are images we trust and believe in. Along the lines of Wittgenstein’s *On Certainty*, we cannot escape the basic certainties as the likewise labile and stable ground of our forms of life (Wittgenstein 1969). However, this ‘ground’ is not a hard and physical ‘real’ but rather a dynamic of mediation, as in visual communication. So, Wittgenstein should be pushed a little bit further: the ground we live on is quite more labile than stable, more image than ‘physics and mathematics’ or more mediality than immediate certainty.

One decisive failure of the ‘old’ patterns of belief is the quest for *immediacy*: The belief in God looked for an immediate vision or contact or for rational self-evidence (natural theology). Similarly to modern subjectivity, it was claimed to be infallible and really certain because of its so-called immediacy (unmittelbares Selbstbewusstsein, in German). Both quests looked for something impossible: immediacy as last grounding of all belief, certainty, and trust. In the name of a ‘real immediacy’, all mediality may be under suspicion and at last claimed to be fallible, just an artefact, not ‘nature’ or real reason. But the claimed immediacy remains an empty and broken promise.

Both options failed in the ‘condition of all possibility’: in their lack of sense for mediality, or even more, their contempt for mediality. Since the desire for and believe in immediacy was quite firm: we trust and believe in God, not in an image, not even in an image of him. Or we believe in the self-certainty of the ‘I’, not in any images or media. And so on, the story remains structurally the same. In the

name of a great immediacy, all mediality comes under suspicion—and this is as promising as deceptive.

The condition of all possibility and hence reality is mediality. The ‘Kittsteiner’ thesis of ‘media a priori’ claims that whatever and whenever we think and act, we do so under the conditions of the contemporary media. This may be plausible but one should go a little further: not the an-iconic immediacy is the basic foundation, but iconic mediality is the basic relation of all possibilities and realities. One may say where there is difference, there is mediality. But the opposite is also true: Where there is mediality, there is a difference before (whether in death or life).

#### 4. Veridiction as Appearance and Monstration

This becomes relevant regarding ‘veridiction’: the veridical is *not* an immediate authenticity but a media formation. Veridiction *appears* only in and by media, whether verbal or visual (or any other form). What is believed to be veridical is a verbal-visual appearance. On the one hand, this makes it fallible. Think of the political strategies to *show* veridiction: It becomes a political show. Or with Daniel Dayan: The appearance of veridiction becomes a monstration if it is shown in a show (Dayan 2009). The will to show, i.e. to monstration may produce monsters, either bright stars and leaders, or dark enemies. On the other hand, the mediality of veridiction makes it possible—no view from outside. The ‘view’, the appearance of veridiction is given by the media, which makes it at the same time fallible. Thus, visuality (and verballity) are the conditions of veridiction. They make it both possible and fallible.

This is embodied in the figure of the ‘witness’: a visual and verbal figure who embodies a piece of evidence, not in authentic immediacy but in all fallibility of mediality. The witness appears and shows what he has seen, but if the witness is shown and demonstrated, it becomes suspicious. Heroes or saints, for example, may embody what they witness, but shown and demonstrated, they become little monsters.

We believe in the witness, when he (or she) *appears* to be veridical. In other words, the appearance is decisive (and manipulable, as US judicial processes show). We trust in his experience and his embodiment of an event. But we never trust blindly in this visual appearance. We have to look precisely for what is shown. As a visual figure the witness becomes an image of himself and his experience, a bodily trace of an event or story. But the connection to the event is as fallible as are images and embodiments.

The witness is a figure of the third: not God or the ‘I’ myself, but an Other who claims our trust and belief. But this figure of the witness becomes part of

an institutional process. In court he or she is part of an institutional strategy of veridiction.

Thereby the witness is an example of a ‘trust-shift’: from personal interaction to institutional procedures. And this is a problem: When the witness becomes an image of himself, when this image is part of an institutional setting like a law court, what is going on there?

Beyond the interpersonal relation of trust, one may ask for institutional substitutes, and ends up in a ‘second order trust’ in institutions and structures (cf. Luhmann). In complex societies and communications, interpersonality or bodily presence do not work. But are media like institutions satisfactory substitutes? Can trust in a present witness be supplemented by papers and images, like ‘media-trust’ or can it be institutionalized? After reading Kafka’s *The Castle* or after some years at the university, almost nobody can honestly trust institutions (exceptions confirm the rule). Trust is gone and lost in this shift: the substitute is not trustworthy because institutions are not ‘trustworthy’ but at best perhaps reliable. The shift from trust to reliance is at stake. This also holds for images.

When in late modernity trust in institutions becomes more and more questionable, various supplements of interpersonal trust appear: things, machines and techniques, like my Mac or my cell-phone, my bike or my smart home. All these little fetishes we like and love, so much that we cannot imagine life without them. We get things we never needed before and they become necessary for our life.

However, there is an obvious need for the critique of trust. We do not trust institutions as substitutes; we *rely* on them at best. It’s the same with the supplements: we rely on our phone and Mac, but we do not *trust* them, especially in times of the NSA. Shall one go further and claim that there is not even reliability left but only usability or usefulness? The user doesn’t trust or rely on the media, only uses them. Thus, mere usefulness would be the pragmatic ‘rest’. What is left?

## 5. Trust in Images as Image-belief

The difference between trust and reliance becomes relevant regarding images. In many cases, we just rely on images: that they depict what they ought to, as in the case of the ID card, even if we don’t recognize ourselves anymore after some decades. But what about news and their images on TV or on the web? Do we just rely on them or do we trust their truth? Do we believe them? I guess, we do, if not without reservations, nevertheless we trust and believe them. That means ‘news images’ are quite usual and secular media of image-belief. What about medical images, like X-ray, MRT and PET? Do we only rely on them, or is there more at stake? We trust their depictive truth, and based on this trust the surgeon relies on them.

On the ground of pragmatistic reliance, there is a trust or belief: in the technique, in the image itself and in the whole structure of visual communication. And the patient? An image of one's own cancer is shocking and changes your life. So it's fair to say, it is ground-breaking and it leads to conversion. It is not only indexical and depictive (that is its referential truth), but it is also moving and monstrative. It has not only an epistemic but also an ethical and emotional impact of deepest relevance. May one call such images trust-maker? Trust in images is trust in the times of visual communication.

The main thesis is that to trust images ('image-belief') is present and vivid. It's the modality of trust in times of visual communication. We cannot help trusting images, even if we primarily trust present persons. However, such presence and presumed immediacy and authenticity are always mediated, and thereby as fallible as possible.

The decisive task, then, is the quest for the validity of such image-belief and its risks and limits. But images? Do we *believe* in images? To trust images is a form of image-belief simply because trust is a form of belief. If we trust someone, we can believe that they will not harm us. Because trust is a form of belief, trust has become a basic metaphor for religious belief, named faith. To trust in God means to believe in God (both *fides quae* and *fides qua*). Trust *is* belief because belief is trust. Whatever we may do, when we trust we believe, in a way, what we trust (at least, we believe that it is 'trustworthy').

'Image-belief' is not new: remember Egypt, the pharaoh as a visual presence of God; or remember the golden calf as the presumed presence of Yahweh; remember Rome and the image policy of Augustus and his followers: the image of Caesar *is* Caesar, as Louis Marin explicated in the *Portrait of the King* via the Logique de Port Royal (Marin 1988). Remember also Christ as the image of God and all the images of Christ and all the Saints. And so on: iconic presence is the conductive medium where visual communication is present. This is currently relevant in the 'new media' but not new.

Therefore, the problems with iconic presence (or omnipresence) are not new either. The struggles and conflicts around the image have their histories, between Rome and Byzantium, between Wittenberg and Rome, between the Reformations (Calvin, Zwingli, Luther), and reinforced during the Enlightenment and the Baroque period. As the Western tradition of Rome claimed, the image *is* a medium of presence (of God, Saints), therefore it deserves veneration but no adoration. We adore only God, but the veneration of an image leads veneration to the depicted (Christ, Mary or the saints). The image functions as an instrumental medium of presence and like a channel, conducting the presence to the venerated. This is

probably useful but quite too simple because the image as a medium of presence is not nothing, not a lifeless instrument but a living image. The distinction between the veneration and adoration of an image can be reframed: there is no *faith* in images but *belief* is allowed. This distinction is normative, not descriptive: there shall be no faith in images. But the distinction is also ‘soporific’: it calms down what can be hot and exciting, hot because faith in God and his Saints may be gone, but the belief in image is still vivid, perhaps as vivid as rarely before in history. Belief in images is belief in the realm of visual communication.

## 6. Versions of Image-belief

For the sake of orientation, I suggest distinguishing some forms of image-belief:

1. There is a general image-belief already among animals that extends not only to the *animal rationale*. A dog recognizes a dog in the mirror and barks. It effectively believes in seeing a dog barking. This is like our belief in depictions: We have the feeling to be seen when the image looks at us. What we see looks back at us (but doesn’t see us).
2. There is an anthropological image-belief, perhaps coming from the dominance of visual perception. The sensual certainty is present when we believe what we see. The natural phenomenon is that we cannot help believing ‘our eyes’ even if we criticise it afterwards. A consequence of this natural belief in what we see is the ‘witness’ in court or in religion. We believe the witness, at least when there is more than one.
3. There is a methodical image-belief addressed, for example, whenever something is shown with and by images. In teaching, for example, sometimes we try to show by images what we say. Saying and showing shall come together and the image is shown to make the students believe in what they have been told. A consequence of this method is that ‘to show’ can also mean ‘to prove’, to give evidence: in mathematics or medicine with its imaging procedures.
4. There is also a popular and media use of image-belief: for example, when brain scans are used to make us believe that someone is a criminal because they lack mirror neurons; or that God is naturally present in the brain (like in the so-called neuro-theology). One use, of course, is also advertising or strategies of ‘event-shopping’.
5. There is a political image-belief, as discussed by Marin: the image of the King. The old idea that the image of Caesar *is* Caesar. Then the image becomes a presence-maker or even more: a king-maker. Note that the second body of the king *is* an image, the effigy.

6. The political interacts with the religious image belief: that God is present in visual media, in the Torah or in Christ, in the Temple or in the cult, in (orthodox) icons or in the sacred host. Christ as an image of God is repeated and repeated in supplementary images as the embodiments of Christ.
7. Not to forget: 'dark' image-belief. I don't think here of Satanists or the like but of iconoclasts. The deep mistrust in images or even the phobia and destruction of images shows a deep belief in images, just reversed in its destructive veneration. The image-critique in enlightenment-traditions is also a consequence of this phobia. The epistemology and ontology since Kant tends to a deep scepticism about images. They are not what they show, at least, they are mere 'seeming', 'mere' appearance. The denial of the image is a subtle and gentle form of mistrust in images. And every form of mistrust is a distorted trust.

A strange thing about image-belief is that it works, even if we don't believe in the image. We believe in images, because we cannot help believing in them. Even in the times of critique and mistrust, the image works as a trust-maker. We believe even when we believe not to believe. One may call it image-magic or simply 'imagic'.

What does it mean to believe in an image? Generally speaking, it means to follow the image: to buy (in economy), to elect (in politics), to venerate it (in aesthetics) or to live in the shown way (in religion). Wittgenstein's idea of 'following a rule' is a pragmatist concept of image-belief. To follow an image shows one's belief.

Image-belief is *not* the naïve idea to believe that the image *is* what it shows. Instead, it is the not-so-naïve idea that the image is *a bit* what it shows. It is not what it shows, not a mere and empty representation but rather a presence: whether the aesthetic presence of an artefact, political presence (of power or 'the king'), or the religious presence of God. However, *not* naïve is such a belief only when the presence is different. It is not a real presence but a presence in withdrawal.

The promise of advertising that the promised is really present through the label and image is never kept. It would be naïve to believe that you get the final iPhone by buying the newest one. Even economically, presence is driven by withdrawal. This also holds for politics. What you see is never what you get. Withdrawal is the motion in the political sphere.

It is similar, albeit slightly different, in the religious sphere. Presence is not the final presence but its anticipation: the beginning of the new world. This anticipative presence also has its withdrawal: no foul and definitive presence but just the beginning. This model has been taken over by economy and politics. But who keeps the promise? Who keeps the truth-promise?

## 7. The Ambivalence of Image-belief: Some Examples

What images do we trust today? The most widely spread and everyday image of the world is as well the most desired: ‘the dollar’. Even if the dollar note confesses ‘In God we trust’, it embodies another trust and belief: trust in the little green images of value. Its image-belief is the belief in the globally shared desire and acceptance of this value. Generally speaking, money is a belief system, dependent on trust in the little images called ‘notes’ and ‘coins’.

It is similar with labels like Apple, Prada, and others. Labels are markers for images of trust (and of trusts). We trust images of value: the labels function as globally shared attention markers and codes of visual communication.

And this is not totally different from the so-called ‘high’ art and strong images. They are distributed and shared *like* labels: Gerhard Richter, Polke, and others. The recognition may be grounded in a belief in their aesthetic value. However, the ‘aura’ and veneration (or even adoration) of these images is like that of a saint’s relic: an image of real presence, of value, not in the least of economic value.

Less about economy but rather about power is the belief in public figures, politicians, stars, heroes, and new saints, who function like labels and images. The ‘leaders of the free world’ are images of themselves or of ideas and ideals, traditions and nations.

The code of visual communication in economy and politics is, of course, not about ‘veridiction’ but about power (political and economic power). So veridiction is just a side-effect or a secondary gesture and habit for the sake of power. This means do not trust the gestures of a public figure as in personal interaction. The whole system of communication is about something else. But it seems to be successful to design politics as if it cared about veridiction. The visual design of politicians and public performances makes an intense use of trust-markers and even religious gestures or rhetoric, but this is part of another game. The rhetoric of ‘pure and impure’, ‘God’s own nation’ and about sin, guilt and forgiveness are useful because they evoke interpersonal belief; however, the system-shift uses these cultural patterns for power-questions. Veridiction then becomes a fake, even if it seems honest.

However, what about visual communication in religion? Take, for example, the present Pope: Is he not an icon of veridiction? He *as pope* embodies the veridical, a true image of truth and trustfulness. He *is* a public image and *has* a public image of honesty and truthfulness like just few others. It may seem that he is the candidate to become a saint already in his lifetime. This is not mockery: the Pope really appears honest and truthful, but the problem is a basic ambivalence of being an image: He as a person may be so but as an office bearer, as a church official

(with Agamben: in and ex officio), he is not only a personal appearance but also an institutional monstration. The veridical of his person becomes part of institutional image-politics. His little home, his modest car, his use of public transportation, his authenticity and so on: All these markers of visual veridiction become *at the same time* political and (unintentionally?) a mean to an end: for the Church's sake.

This ambivalence of the Pope also pertains to Christ himself, regrettably. Christ as *the* visual image of God, as an embodiment of God's essence which means simply the embodiment of radical love: Christ himself became a public figure and an image of religious communication. This may be quite a veridical image-use, like in church service, communion and diakonia, but the personal appearance of the veridical becomes political monstration in competition with other religions and politics.

## 8. Three Differences: Aesthetic, Political and Religious Difference

What can we learn from this dilemma, from this reduplication of personal and institutional images? An image is never just an image. It is an appearance, like in a personal interaction. But an appearance never remains just an appearance. Embedded in different spheres or systems of communication, it shifts and becomes 'itself as another': it is altered and othered. In image-theory we are used to 'aesthetic difference': Magritte's pipe is not a pipe but an aesthetic intervention. By the way, I don't think that the pipe *is just not* a pipe. The aesthetic image is not what it shows. In image-theory we also use a 'political difference': the image is not just an image, but a political intervention, too. The personal gestures of veridiction become public *images* of veridiction in the political sphere. The appearance becomes monstration, and sometimes monstrous if trustfulness is used for personal power interests. This means to believe in such images of veridiction can be an easy deception, if and immediately if the political difference is forgotten.

And what about religion? Shouldn't we expect that the veridical is really present in religious communication? In analogy to the aesthetic and political difference, I suggest a religious difference in image theory. The religious image is also affected by the aesthetic and political difference. Of course, Gerhard Richter's window in the Dome in Cologne is an aesthetic appearance (and it is venerated because of that). It is also a political intervention (because it challenges the symbolic order of the Church and the Bishop by introducing contingency in the order of necessities). However, the religious difference is something different: in the religious sphere the image pretends to be (come) a trace of God or, generally speaking, an immanence of transcendence. This means it pretends to be access to God or, vice versa, God's

access to us. The image as a religious medium pretends to become a medium of transcendence by transcendence of the medium. This means to transcend the image in becoming an image of transcendence.

## 9. The Truth-claim of Images

This is not an aesthetic claim or a political power claim but a special kind of truth-claim: to become a metaphor from world to God and vice versa, to become a little incarnation of transcendence. More specifically, in the Christian sphere, to become a marked space of a special veridical of grace and mercy, even more specifically, to embody Christ's spirit. This is *not* a mere proposition, as if the image claims a propositional truth. It is not a truth that is said or shown (not a *vérité à dire*) but it is a truth that is done, a practical truth, one may say with Merleau-Ponty a '*vérité à faire*', or even better: a truth to live by, like the 'Christian freedom'.

Nevertheless, this *salvific* truth-claim is open for ratification or for critique. Such a special truth-claim is not self-evident but rather embedded in religious practice with all the ambivalences mentioned above. The power-claim may become dominant, or as well the aesthetic reception by the tourist; venerating religious art may become dominant as well. At last, every religious image (image in the religious sphere) is affected by the ambivalence of monstration. The image 'wants' to be a 'passive medium' of Christ's 'self-presentation', but it has to show itself in order to hint to Christ. This is a dilemma represented by John the Baptist: to show and to point at Christ is only possible by showing himself, by becoming present as an image.

In order to open up a 'marked space' for transcendence, the image has to show itself, and even more: it has to be shown and presented in public space. The religious truth-claim of an image becomes demonstrative or 'monstrative'. This means, it is shown and is in danger to become a show. One may think of some kinds of charismatic shows, or of official celebrations in Rome, or as well of the celebration of the Reformation these days in Europe.

This dilemma of showing oneself even by pointing away to Christ is a reason for the intrinsic iconoclasm in Christian image-practice (especially, of the Lutheran kind): To avoid or at least to limit the self-presentation of the image as an image, the medium has to become invisible in order to open up the marked space of transcendence. The example is the host of the Eucharist: it has to disappear to be eaten up. Accordingly, 'art' in the religious sphere is at last for consumption, not for eternal conservation.

Regarding verbal and visual media, one may argue for a specific 'relativism', or rather a specific pragmatism. There is no intrinsic truth (either in words or in

images) but the truth is 'external'. I would prefer to call it religious pragmatism: the image is whatever it may be only and exclusively in its use and consumption.

But then again, the use makes the difference: A mere aesthetic use is undercutting its truth-claim, a mere political or institutional use as well; also a mere pedagogic use. One may object that images, even in the religious sphere, are open for many uses, and that's true. But to become aware of their specific truth-claim, a special use is the decisive access. To give a simple example, art history will never access the truth-claim of a religious image.

PS: Images as truth-makers or as sense-makers and trust-makers? If we believe in images, since we cannot help believing in them, every mistrust and critique comes belatedly or with a delay, images are belief-makers: They make us believe, for example, 'what happened' or 'who the enemy is' or 'who is right'. As belief-makers images seem also to be trust-makers, in economy and politics as well as in the religious context.

However, may they be also 'truth-makers'? Is truth not an iconoclastic concept: referring to what is 'really' true? Perhaps the perspectivity of truth might help here: truth is only given in and through perspectives. This also means that truth is given in and through images (remember Plato's myths). To believe in a truth beyond all words and images leads to metaphysics. To identify a perspective or an image with the full truth, however, leads to a totalitarian claim.

What then about *the* central image in Christianity: Christ as *the* image of God? As one full of truth and grace? One can easily make an absolute claim of truth out of it: that 'the Church' possesses the full truth... But the better use seems to be a critical, a self-critical one: No one, apart from Christ himself, is the truth. The consequence is critique: of all identification, like the identification of truth and institution, of truth and image or of truth and one's own confession. This use may be called antiabsolutism (or a specific relativism: relativizing absolute positions. There is a qualified negativism in this antiabsolutism: no concept (of the absolute) is capable of this truth, either.

Does a critical belief in images mean to believe in a truth beyond all images as well? Yes, but only if this external truth is accessible in and by verbal and visual communication.

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