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The Image: Historical, Conceptual, Aesthetic, Moral

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Abstract: The concept of 'the image' can be given historical, conceptual, aesthetic and moral specifications. This essay sets out some of the scholarly issues in the dense semantic field of 'the image'. In particular, the essay considers how the meaning of the image is often determined in relation to the opposition between sensible form and intelligible idea. Specific attention is given to Kantian aesthetics, which inaugurates a specific way of understanding the sensible form as a mode of processing moral ideas.

Keywords: image; sensible form; intelligible idea; moral ideas; Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz; Jean-Luc Nancy; Georges Didi-Huberman; Immanuel Kant.

Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz's *History of Aesthetics* proposes a history of the modern emergence of the image as a category of both art historical and aesthetic significance.[1] He dates the specifically modern hold of the vocabulary of the image to the late seventeenth century. For Tatarkiewicz the term combined "two main elements: firstly, it was something *visual* and *sensible*; and secondly, it was a *symbol*".[2] The combination of the sensible, or material attributes of visual presentation and conceptual or abstract meaning recommended the "image" as a term able to link "the arts together".[3] Indeed, the notion of a technically executed sensible form

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2. W. Tatarkiewicz, *History of Aesthetics. Volume 3: Modern Aesthetics*, D. Petsch (ed.), A. Czerniawski and A. Czerniawski (trans.) (London: Continuum, 2005), 230.
3. Tatarkiewicz, *History of Aesthetics*, 230.

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bearing intelligible meaning was one of the essential constituents of the modern concept of art, which was in the process of being formed around the same time.[4] In the generality of its mode of combination of the sensible and the intelligible in visual form, the image seemed better suited than the distinctive allegorical practices designated as "emblematics" or "iconology", which in the seventeenth century also had synthetic aspirations to define the diverse forms attached to the emerging modern category of the arts. These allegorical categories can be briefly described to highlight the historical complexity ascribed to the "visual" status of the sensible presentation of concepts that the category of the image inherits from them. Allegorical practices were not only located between literature and the visual arts; their founding figures were writers who were also adept in visual art and design.[5]

Both "emblematics" and "iconology" were part of the pervasive allegorical view of the Renaissance that everything "can be expressed in a sign, a word, a concept … or an emblem" and that "every thought and concept, even the most abstract, can be expressed in a picture".[6] In emblematics, which took its name from Andrea Alciati's 1531 *Emblemata*, the same idea would be expressed both in abstract and in pictorial terms. Similarly, in iconology, whose founding text was Cesare Ripa's 1593 *Iconologia*, words and images were combined. However, emblematics used symbols to depict not just general concepts, as iconology did, but symbols were also used in emblematics for the representation of "individual human beings".[7] On the other hand, the conventions these practices followed went, unsurprisingly for allegorical tradition, in directions that were opposed to their objects: it was in iconology that the human figure was used to pictorialize concepts, but in emblematics anything other than a human figure (animals, plants, objects) could be used as the visual device for its ideas.[8] The allegorical combination of ideas and sensible forms was seen to be "morally and politically useful" and they were charged, accordingly, with the task of "moral instruction".[9]

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4. In Jacques Rancière's *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*, Z. Paul (trans.) (London: Verso, 2013) he dates the modern concept of art to the eighteenth century. He writes: "Art as a notion designating a form of specific experience has only existed in the West since the end of the eighteenth century… The term *Aisthesis* has designated the mode of experience according to which, for two centuries, we perceive very diverse things, whether in their techniques of production or their destination as all belonging to art" (ix–x).
5. Tatarkiewicz, *History of Aesthetics*, 224.
6. Tatarkiewicz, *History of Aesthetics*, 222.
7. Tatarkiewicz, *History of Aesthetics*, 223.
8. Tatarkiewicz, *History of Aesthetics*, 224.
9. Tatarkiewicz, *History of Aesthetics*, 225–6.

In contrast to the various allegorical traditions with their ties to the expanded, classical significance of "the arts" as "sciences" (*ars est quae dat rationes certas*) that followed "general principles" and performed crucial social "roles", the image seemed more hospitable to the emerging modern discourse of "the history of art", as the terrain devoted to the imagination's free play.[10] To be sure, this latter sense of "the image" still combines concepts and pictorial forms, and, just like the literary and visual dimensions of allegory, neither does its conceptual side exclude word use. However, what is distinctive about the modern conception of the image and its use in art history is that the allegorical relation of visual, sensible forms to moral and political ends gives way to aesthetic considerations regarding how an image, that is how a sensible, visual form, communicates meaning.

On the other hand, if we step back from the detail of the historical way of framing these issues, the coordination of the elements involved in the category of the image raises a number of conceptual difficulties. Indeed, it is precisely in relation to its definition as the sensible, visual presentation of intelligible meaning, that the category of the image has recently become a lightning rod for critical attention in philosophy and art history. Let me briefly mention two examples of such criticism, before looking more closely at modern versions of the idea of the image as a way of processing specifically moral ideas.

Jean-Luc Nancy has examined the status of the image as the conceptual construction that involves the sensible and visual presentation of the intelligible. For Nancy, the very idea that truth is visible is the heritage of the supposed coherence of the dualism between the (invisible) intelligible and (visible) sensibility, whose origins are onto-theological. The Western category of art has been shaped theologically. Art, Nancy says, "is the sensible visibility of [the] intelligible". Such thinking turns "obstinately around the great motif of '*the visible image of the invisible God*', which for Origen is the definition of Christ".[11] This framework is already exceeded in Nancy's terms because the view of the intelligible as a totally different category of being from the sensible way of being has lost its coherence. Crucially, this means that if ideas are no longer thought to ground or guide sensible forms, sensible presentation

10. Tatarkiewicz, *History of Aesthetics*. Georges Didi-Huberman claims that it was in the "mythic crucible of the Renaissance" that the "self-contained" image of art that the history of art created was forged. G. Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images: Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art*, J. Goodman (trans.) (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005), 84.
11. J.-L. Nancy, *The Muses*, P. Kamuf (trans.) (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), 89, his emphasis. With this formulation Nancy is referring specifically to Hegel's aesthetics.

is not "of" an Idea, it "is" the experience of this Idea with the following important qualification: neither side of the conceptual couple of sensibility or intelligibility emerges from this situation with its traditional "sense" [*sens*] intact. He argues that what we are witnessing today is the unravelling of this dualism to the point where it now seems absurd to present (i.e. in sensible form) something (i.e. an intelligible idea) which was never there in the way it was supposed to be in the first place. His analysis draws attention to the ways that sensible forms are the sites for the experience of conceptual and moral (i.e. modes that mark out a process of reflective evaluation) ideas. As such, he contests the way that in works that he refers to as those of "the tradition", ideas are treated as if they were distinct from and logically prior to the material forms of their existence and communication.

In the field of art history Georges Didi-Huberman makes a similar point about the conceptual construction of the image from out of the pairing of the "sensible" (visible) and "intelligible" (invisible). Like Nancy, he emphasizes the significance of the history of Christianity for the doctrine of the image, since the Christian tradition opened the practice of the imitation in sensible forms of the idea to the Incarnation of God.[12] Didi-Huberman examines the heritage of this dualism in art history and especially the attempt to perfect it in Erwin Panofsky's practice of iconology. He writes:

> the history of art, a "modern" phenomenon par excellence – because born in the sixteenth century – has wanted to bury the ancient problematics of the *visual* and the *figurable* by giving new ends to artistic images, ends that place the visual under the tyranny of the *visible* (and of imitation), the figurable under the tyranny of the *legible* (and of iconology).[13]

Specifically, he complains about the logic of the visible and of the legible, which, in his view, confirm the onto-theological split between the intelligible and the sensible that gives the image visible form (the visible) and meaning (iconological legibility). Unlike Nancy, however, he wants to exempt the materiality of the image from its distillation in modern art history's practice of iconology. The image, he argues, exceeds the synthesizing

12. Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, 28.
13. Didi Huberman, *Confronting Images*, 8. The discrepancy between Tatarkiewicz, Rancière and Didi-Huberman on the dating of the modern concept of art relates to their different perspectives. The long history of the Renaissance is common in art historical treatments on this topic. Rancière's account, on the other hand, is privileging the process under which the so-called "autonomous" aesthetic gaze is consolidated and the way that this allows potentially any sensible form to fall into the category of "art".

mastery of Panofsky's interpretation, which he alleges is geared to the excavation of ideas from sensible forms.[14]

Didi-Huberman's point that the attempt to give the image a specifically modern history overlooks the ancient status of the image as a problem is pertinent, of course, to its Renaissance role of moral instruction. At first glance, the modern use of the vocabulary of the image seems to dislocate the ancient conception of harmony between the beautiful and the good. It leaves behind as well the Renaissance allegorical mechanism of moral instruction. Nonetheless, the image still has the presence, presupposed in these earlier conceptions, of a motor of evaluation (that is, the capacity to assign positive and negative value or, to use Nancy's terms, "intelligible" meaning that arises from "sensible" forms). For instance, it is well known that in Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment* the description of aesthetic experience is used in service of his moral theory.[15] Kant identifies and describes a moral image of the world in particular instances of specifically natural beauty. The wild tulip provides an analogous form for the practical vocation of 'man'. It seems Kant intends aesthetic experience as a specific form of 'attunement' to fundamental contexts; meaning is sought and found in the reflection on sensuous forms. It is significant that these meanings are forged from the suspension of the cognitive attitude, which resolves the operation of judgement into testable claims, as well as appetite, which makes meaning irremediably subjective. Kant attempts to approach moral themes with a model of symbolic interaction able to locate moral ideas in sensuous forms. This interaction forms the basis for an image of morality. At the same time in Kant's notion of the sublime there is a direct presentation of the moral law, which seems to supersede the exigency of the image.

Is there an exigency of the moral *image?* Does the insistence on an "imageless" (*Bilderlosigkeit*) moral will in philosophers like Walter Benjamin nonetheless rely on other kinds of aesthetic experience and 'forms' for its ethical casting and processing of moral ideas? Benjamin draws upon but also heavily adapts Kant's use of the Judaic interdiction against graven images in his reformulation of the sublime to arrive at an imageless moral will.

The contributors to this Special Issue address these historical, conceptual, aesthetic and moral dimensions of the coordination of sensible and

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14. See Didi-Huberman on Panofsky's analysis of Durer's *Melancholia I*, *Confronting Images*, 174–5, and his criticisms of Panofsky's "humanistic Idea of art", 117. See too E. Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology: Humanist Themes in the Art of the Renaissance (Oxford: Westview Press, 2010).*
15. I. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, W. S.Pluhar (trans.) (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1987).

intelligible meaning in the "visual form" of the image. Our first essay looks at the currents of historical research in European art and media as ways of understanding the conceptual commitments of Aby Warburg's iconography (Sigrid Weigel). The next reassesses Schelling's distinctive way of negotiating the relation between works of art and philosophy (Mildred Galland-Symkowiak). Krzysztof Ziarek examines the distinction between the word and the visual form in recent literary (Dickinson) and philosophical (Heidegger) conceptions of the image. Finally, four of our contributors study the various ways in which the prohibition of images is handled in recent philosophy: as a vector of positive and negative evaluation (Gertrud Koch, Alison Ross), and as a modality for the formation of an imageless moral will (David S. Ferris, Winfried Menninghaus).

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