

Icons and Idols

How might one undertake a history of the image from within the conceptual field established by the suturing of the two terms, icon and idol? Their opposition has structured the history of European art as the history of a quarrel between ancient and modern, pagan and Christian, citizen and ascetic. But to our age, apparently condemned to mourn the death not merely of God, but of Art, the appeal to icons and idols might seem to vacillate between cynical provocation and plain naiveté. There can be no denying that, at the very moment when various cultural materialisms promise to liberate the image from its elitist incarceration as object of intellectual contemplation or of aesthetic taste, the icon/idol opposition may seem at once politically regressive and intellectually misguided. For to speak of idols and icons in Art is invariably to speak of gods, if not of God, and so to link the admiration of images to the memory, if not the lived reality, of now disgraced traditions of sacred veneration; it is to insist that there is bound up with the problem of interpreting images, an exigency to make present the invisible, an operation that the historical psychologist J.P. Vernant describes as insuring that transcendent powers become immanent in the mundane world, but not so very immanent as to be mistaken for that world.

Vernant traces the development of Greek statuary (and more generally of Greek art) out of an originally ritual practice of “presentification,” stressing the extent to which the gradual aestheticization of sacred ritual marked a growing identification of divine powers with the human form. It is in the context of this Greek “birth of the image” that the terms icon and idol would be first deployed. However, it is only later, in a Christian context, that they hardened into the conceptual opposition with which we are here concerned. What is communicated by that opposition is precisely the transformation of an aesthetics of the sculpted body (with its cosmically aligned proportions) into an aesthetics of the painted face, the latter being characterized by its transformation of eidetic definition into expressive opticality, the liminal and ultimately indeterminate play of darkness and light. The essentially contemplative optics that gave birth to the Byzantine icon broke with the Greek desire that the figure express, through its proportions, the harmony of the cosmos. The Byzantine icon opened the way for a properly kinematic figure, a very picture of the contemplative soul’s luminous exfoliation in time.

It is well known that the Art of the Renaissance was in many respects a *rapprochement* of these two tendencies, a merging of the sublime aesthetics of the Face and the beauty of the classical body's eidetic erection out of an indifferent earth. Thanks to Renaissance perspective, which locates the infinite at a vanishing point, the Other no longer descends from the heavens, but rather greets the viewer at the opposite end of a horizontal axis. However, as Hubert Damisch reminds us in his discussion of perspective's ideological applications, these constructive machines for collapsing the infinite onto the finite invariably found themselves condemned to organize their fields of transparency in relation to a certain blind spot. On this spot we can observe the trace or stain left by the withdrawal of an Other on the basis of whose Gaze everything that is given to be seen is seen even as "I" am given as its seer. That the transparency of the field of social relations is smeared with the traces of the Other's withdrawal is a truth with which a strictly "materialist" determination of culture seems ill-equipped to reckon. Many of the pieces in this issue address the becoming transparent of social relations that the imaging technologies of the Renaissance introduced, and which has continued apace. In doing so, they urge us to a re-engagement with the image not merely in its social and cultural contexts, but in its sacred dimensions as well. Why idols and icons? Because the insomniac eye of modern surveillance still blinks, and in the interval of that blink there emerges sufficient time for a return of the sacred.

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