

IMAGE ACTS

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I M A G E

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A K T I O N

Editors

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HORST BREDEKAMP

IMAGE ACTS

**A SYSTEMATIC APPROACH
TO VISUAL AGENCY**

Translated, edited, and adapted by
Elizabeth Clegg

Second Edition

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In Memory of
John Michael Krois
24 November 1943 – 30 October 2010
Philosopher and Friend

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PREFACE TO THE SECOND ENGLISH EDITION

A day after the storming of the Capitol in Washington, D.C., on 6th January 2021, I received an e-mail from Stephen Greenblatt. Commenting on the insurgents' determination to document and broadcast their enterprise, he struck me as unerring in his conclusion: "This is an image act!" What had occurred in Washington can indeed be understood as a powerful instance of the entity I have sought to characterise as the "substitutive image act". For those engaged in this onslaught upon the body politic of the USA, the visual record of this outrage was of more significance than the event itself. For a while the availability of this record, across America and around the world, was in real danger of provoking a far greater state of emergency than that which had already come about. This incident shows how easily, in our age of digital media, bodies and images may merge; but it also reveals how necessary it is to comprehend this type of substitution – of the image for the body, and of the body for the image – as a categorical form of the history of images and, in turn, how essential it is to analyse this phenomenon in order, as Aby Warburg would say, to achieve a salutary distance between it and ourselves.

It is thus all the more important to focus attention also upon the image act in its "schematic" and in its "intrinsic" forms. It is in the name of enlightenment adequate to an era in thrall to the visual that we need take these dimensions into account. A failure to acknowledge the autonomous surplus of images not fully absorbed within the conscious awareness of the observer means surrendering ourselves to its power. Guarding against such an outcome is the purpose of this book.

15th February 2021

PREFACE TO THE ENGLISH EDITION

The core of this book derives from the first pages of my doctoral dissertation on iconoclasm, as published in 1975. This opened with a photograph from the Cambodian Civil War that I had recently found in the *Frankfurter Rundschau*. It showed a soldier of the Khmer Republic cleaning his rifle while seated alongside – and thus under the assumed protection of – a painting and a figurine of the Buddha.¹ Such a juxtaposition of weaponry and imagery was startling, for it at once called into question both the categorical distinction between the two and its implicit demotion of the latter.



Cambodian soldier on the battlefield, with a painting and a figurine of the Buddha, *Frankfurter Rundschau* 27 July 1973.

1 Bredekamp 1975, pp. 10–14.

My sensitivity to evocative instances of this sort was to be enhanced through a rediscovery of the germanophone historiography of art that had been lost as a result of the emigration of scholars from Europe in and after 1933. My attention was drawn, above all, to adherents of the intellectual tradition initiated, in Hamburg around 1900, by Aby Warburg and his closest colleagues, Ernst Cassirer and Edgar Wind. In this context Wind seemed to be of particular importance on account of his later endeavour, in the 1960 volume *Kunst und Anarchie* (known in England as that year's Reith Lectures "Art and Anarchy"), to fathom the active function of images. For me this was a source of inspiration.² Also deeply compelling was the quintessentially Warburgian conviction that images were possessed of a genuine "right to life",³ and that this entailed both an obligation to uphold this right and, conversely, a duty to oppose the abuse that images may suffer

Especially remarkable was the discovery of what the Warburg tradition deemed appropriate for the attention of those with a keen interest in the "image": a Mediaeval tapestry was as likely to be the starting point for an enquiry as was an entity then still at the cutting-edge of visual technology, such as a page from the illustrated press. The distinctive visual qualities of each chosen subject were, moreover, acknowledged and respected, even while all restrictions on the scope for enlightening comparison were removed. Such an approach was later to be defined as *Bildwissenschaft* (literally, "image science").⁴

Underpinning this expansion of conventional "art history" into a true "image history", open to every possible sort of consciously created figurative form, was the conviction that the images devised by humanity do not merely represent, but veritably *construct*, do not simply illustrate, but actively *bring forth*, that which they show. As my own deeper understanding of "image history" gradually evolved, I sought – from the mid-1970s at the University of Hamburg, and from the early 1990s at Humboldt University, Berlin – to apply this conviction in my own work, some of which I came to regard as the retrospective launching of a message-in-a-bottle destined for the key players in the original Warburg circle.

These efforts assumed a new dimension during the 1990s, when John Michael Krois – himself initially trained in the United States as a philosopher, but since 1993 based at Humboldt University and editing the collected works of Ernst Cassirer – was seeking a scholarly collaborator in his project to overcome the limitations of a philosophy restricted to words alone. Together, we founded a study group, *Bildakt und Philosophie der Verkörperung* [Image Act and the Philosophy of Embodiment], in which philosophers and art historians would meet on an equal footing. In response

2 On the Hamburg circle: Krois 1998, p. 184; Krois 2009 *Introduction*. On Wind, see Schneider 2009.

3 Reciprocally, on the "human rights" of the eye: Hofmann, Syamken and Warnke 1980.

4 Bredekamp 2003 *Neglected*.

to our shared belief that this venture should have a strong linguistic element, a further Berlin scholar, the historian of language Jürgen Trabant, also joined the group.

As reflected in the essays gathered in the series *Actus et Imago*, published from 2011 (twenty volumes had appeared by 2016),⁵ our research group attended to every aspect of the de-centred, enactive, and embodied mind. In doing so we came to the conclusion that what had so far been lacking in the scholarly approach to such issues was a sufficient appreciation of the image not as a passive entity awaiting human scrutiny, but as an activating force in its own right. Gradually, there emerged the notion of the “image act” as the essential, facilitating counterpart to the Philosophy of Embodiment.

The evolution of the present volume – from its origins in a course taught in Berlin in 2006, by way of its adaptation into the text of the Adorno Lectures delivered in Frankfurt in 2007, and its extension into the first, 2010 German edition, to its 2015 revision – is outlined in my Acknowledgements.⁶ So I should like, in conclusion, to comment on the original, German term for “image act” – “der Bildakt” – and on some of the problems raised by its translation into English. “Bild” is not the exact equivalent of either “image” (more abstract in its connotations, but also more widely applicable) or “picture” (more material in its associations, but also more restricted in its application). In as far as this book considers visually perceptible material forms, however diverse their mediums, the term “picture act” might well have seemed the more appropriate; and it has, in other contexts, occasionally been employed.⁷ But in as far as my concern is with the immaterial *energeia* inherent to the form and with the responses that this may call forth in the beholder, the term “image act” was evidently the more fitting. Further encouragement for my decision in favour of “image act” came from several re-readings of David Freedberg’s seminal publication *The Power of Images*,⁸ where this term is used in a sense that is very close to my own. Reference to the “image” has, in the interim, been further reinforced through the titling of a number of my book’s earlier translations.⁹

In its English version (a translation, but also an adaptation) my initial exposition has been much enhanced through the generous intellectual engagement, the scholarly range, and the well-honed art-historical eye of Elizabeth Clegg.

5 See also Fingerhut / Hufendiek 2013.

6 See pp. 289–91.

7 See, for example, Bredekamp 2014 *Picture*.

8 Freedberg 1989.

9 Notably into French (2015, translated from the 2010 German edition) which used “l’acte d’image.” As of 2017 the volume also exists in Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Japanese, and Mandarin editions.

INTRODUCTION: THE PROBLEMATIC CENTRALITY OF THE IMAGE

I. INCREASING REFLECTION OF THE IMAGE

It is only since the 1960s that thought and debate about the status of images has again reached that pitch of intensity it had attained during the Byzantine Iconoclastic Controversy of the eighth and ninth centuries or the iconoclasm that marked the radical Protestant movements of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Europe. For this reason it now seems both appropriate and timely to seek to ascertain precisely why images and the claims regularly advanced for their conception, their formation, their elaboration, and their power have become such persistent issues.

First among the five chief reasons that spring to mind is the ubiquity of the pictorial in the new technologies of communications, information and entertainment (the “new media”): the smart phone screen, the online press site, the internet, the proliferating televisual and cinematic formats. With a myriad images daily whizzing around the globe, it is as if contemporary civilisation were seeking to pupate itself within a cocoon spun from their shimmering trails. It is above all the entertainment industry, a factor of formidable economic clout, which has generated the most familiar model of this phenomenon, unprecedented in its dimensions as in its depth: “the flood of images”. And, as with all metaphors of deluge, this powerfully evokes both the fear of impotence and an urge to self-defence.¹

Secondly, there is the use of images in politics. Here, one of their roles has always been the representation of dominion. And, even within the “flood of images”, both still and moving depictions of particular groups and individuals retain the power to leave their mark on the collective memory of a city, a nation, a continent and, on occasion, the entire world, and thereby to exert a variety of influences shap-

1 Giuliani 2003, pp. 9–19; Schulz 2005, p. 9. On metaphor: Kolnai 2007 [1929], pp. 30–31 and Theweleit 1977. On criticism of the concept: Schwemmer 2005, pp. 197–98.

ing political life and much more.² It is above all for this reason that the twentieth century was called “the century of images”,³ although there are earlier eras to which the phrase might well have been applied. Today an unpredictable blending and cross-fertilisation of older and newer images has significantly enhanced this characterisation. Images can serve both as allies and as traitors to an established political order.

Thirdly, one can look to the military sphere. Images have always been an effective weapon – as symbols of victory, as propaganda, as indoctrination – even in the arsenals of well-matched belligerents, be it in parallel with, or subsequent to, the more literal waging of war. But in the context of an asymmetrical war they may even become primary weapons. Harnessing the “launch systems” of the mass media and the internet, they serve to extend the battlefield from the local to the global by transmitting, far more directly than was ever previously possible, all that is most deeply disturbing – inflammatory rhetoric, scenes of combat or torture, distressing hostage scenarios – to the eyes of those geographically remote from the conflict zone. In some circumstances this latest manifestation of the “war for hearts and minds” may achieve far more than can conventional weaponry.⁴

The fourth reason is supplied by the sciences. These have always played a significant role in the creation of iconographies beyond the religious sphere; but the degree to which technological innovation and high aesthetic standards have been applied, since the 1960s, in the visualisation of the invisible is an entirely new phenomenon. It is now quite some time since the standards of publications in the natural sciences have caught up with those of publications devoted to the fine arts. The visual brilliance being achieved today by accounts of recent progress in aspects of medicine, molecular biology, nanotechnology, research into climate change and space exploration, goes far beyond the concept of mere illustration. When such images are readily employed not as forms of representation, but as autonomous, analytical tools, one is undeniably confronted with a highly significant instance of the “iconic turn”. Whether in the form of sequential simulations or of diagrammatic models, such images now dominate any engagement with scientific evidence, as

2 Among examples still internationally recognisable are the (reconstructed) planting of the American flag on the Japanese island of Iwo Jima on 23rd February 1945; Willy Brandt falling to his knees at the site of the former Warsaw Ghetto on 7th December 1970; or some of the photographs testifying to the regime of torture implemented in 2003 at the prison at Abu Ghraib.

3 See also the equally, if diversely, comprehensive publications: *Mythen der Nationen* 2004, and *Das Jahrhundert der Bilder* 2009.

4 Bredekamp and Raulff 2005.

well as the prevailing approach to both meteorological and socio-economic forecasting.⁵

Finally, one must take into account the increasingly prominent legal status of images. Half a century ago these were relatively freely available, restricted only through copyright provisions and a respect for the dignity of depicted individuals. Today they are often “protected” by a great many other barriers, financial as well as legal, often to the ultimate advantage of the “image industry”, which has itself become a significant branch of the economy. All too often, this is a hindrance to scholarly research.⁶

In every one of these five spheres images that had once been secondary phenomena – treasured and fostered, though also subject to criticism and sometimes even forbidden – have now advanced to primary status. Simultaneously, however, a long-running conflict regarding the particular nature of their value has come to a head. This is the result of a contradiction between two assumptions. Some argue that knowledge is only securely established when sensorial, in particular visual, impressions have ceded to abstract notions. Others maintain that, on the contrary, it is through sensorial impressions, and above all through the visual input of striking images, that thought is stimulated, feeling is aroused and ideas are engendered.⁷

Between the resulting extremes of exculpation (as effectively impotent) and demonisation (sometimes in the most extreme forms), images have steadily continued to attract serious attention from disciplines other than those – Archaeology and Art History – that have a securely founded association with their study. It is now indisputable that one is no longer in a position to address the contemporary world without first attending to the question of images. What follows is intended to serve as a commentary upon this situation.

2. LEONARDO'S INVITATION TO CAPTIVITY

A remark of Leonardo da Vinci's supplies a motto for this undertaking. It is among the most profound statements ever made on the power inherent in an image. The words, inscribed on a slip of paper, are supposedly addressed, by the subject of

5 On the “iconic turn”, see Boehm 1994. On the problem of the image and the sciences, see *Das Technische Bild* 2008 (translated into English as *The Technical Image* 2015).

6 Bruhn 2003; Bruhn 2009, pp. 115–30. The scope for research on the part of the disciplines traditionally devoted to the image has been strongly impacted by this (Bredekamp and Haffner 2008; Steinhauer 2009).

7 Jay 1993, Pape 1997 and Zittel 2009 have comprehensively defined and deplored the tradition, among philosophers, of paying little attention to images.



Fig. 1 Titian, *Portrait of Filippo Archinto*, Oil on canvas, 1551/62, Philadelphia Museum of Art.

an as yet unveiled portrait, to a potential spectator: “Do not unveil me if freedom is dear to you, for my face is the prison of love”.⁸

This utterance plays on the practice of shrouding pictures in order to uncover them only on the most important days in the Church calendar. According to Leonardo, such a work informs the person approaching it that its uncovering will almost certainly entail the sacrifice of that individual’s freedom. The image speaks and, in doing so, it demands a reaction. To leave the portrait covered will preserve freedom, but at the cost of a potentially extraordinary experience; yet risking all for the sake of that experience may destroy everything that defines and distinguishes an autonomous self.

8 “Non is coprire se llibertà / t’è cara ché ’l volto mio / è charchiere d’amore” (Leonardo da Vinci, 1930–36, Vol. 3, 1934, fol. 10v, p. 16). Marinoni discusses the divergent view that “ché” is here to be read as “che”, meaning “that” (Leonardo da Vinci 1992, p. 8: fol. 10v, note 8). Yet this would barely seem to make sense. The individual addressed can hardly be envisaged as relinquishing freedom through uncovering something that is already known. For an argument along these lines, see also Fehrenbach 1997, p. 325. On a similar formulation in the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein, see Schürmann 2008, pp. 173–74.



Fig. 2 Titian, *Portrait of Filippo Archinto*, Oil on canvas, c. 1554–56, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Titian's portrait of Filippo Archinto (Fig. 1) may offer a means of understanding more about Leonardo's maxim. The painting, completed in all likelihood in 1558, shows the Archbishop of Milan, who had been appointed to this post by Pope Paul III (Alessandro Farnese), but whose accreditation had been withheld by the civil authorities. While the Archbishop's ring is clearly visible, the book that signals his proclamation can be only vaguely discerned through the veil that covers half his body. This discrepancy has been interpreted as an allusion to the fact that Archinto had been appointed to the office of Archbishop but had not been given the right to exercise that office. As a document of failure, it would then be seen to convey an air of resignation.⁹

Yet an alternative interpretation appears to be no less plausible: this takes as its starting point the fact that the left extremity of the veil runs through the sitter's own right eye. This was traditionally viewed as the eye of justice, from which nothing remained hidden.¹⁰ If Leonardo's maxim were imaginatively applied to this instance,

9 Betts 1967, p. 61.

10 Lomazzo, Vol. 6, LIII (1844, pp. 393–96).

the spectator would be advised that if the veil were pulled further to the right then this person would confront the sitter's full gaze, and thereby be taken prisoner by it.¹¹ Fully uncovered, however, the image would effectively take on another role: not so much a revealed portrait as the re-emergence of one completed somewhat earlier (Fig. 2).¹² For a spectator aware of the earlier work, the visible right forefinger in the later version might well seem to play with the notion of the portrayal of "liveliness".

Such an interpretation is supported by an aspect of the theory of the two-sided body, championed by the polymath Girolamo Cardano. As Cardano's patron, Archinto would surely have been familiar with the philosophy of his chief work, *De vita propria*, which held that the left side of the body was to be seen as that of spiritual achievement, while the right side was associated with damnation. If Titian's later record of Archinto were indeed an allusion to this theory, the leonardesque threat of what might follow the uncovering of a partially veiled portrait would carry greater weight.¹³ Regardless, however, of the interpretation of Titian's picture from this point of view, it seems more than likely that Titian shared Leonardo's fascination with the notion of the power exerted by the painted gaze itself.

No less than any of his enlightened contemporaries, Leonardo would have started with the assumption that artfully contrived objects had the capacity to speak and to command. Leonardo's maxim alludes, moreover, to the commonly observable phenomenon of images exerting a decisive influence on the freedom of those who look at them; and the veiled portrait that he invokes stands in a tradition that persists to this day. This was taken up by Man Ray, whose wrapped and tied objects were intended to underline the potentiality within a work through its concealment, and later by Christo and Jeanne-Claude in their own "wrapping" projects.¹⁴

Leonardo's maxim also acknowledges the problem of the autonomy of the image. While humanity has the distinctive capacity for spoken language, it encounters images as a distanced form of corporeality. Neither through the expenditure of emotion, nor through any amount of linguistic manipulation, can images be drawn back fully into that human order to which they owe their creation. Therein lies the essence of the fascination of the image. Once created, it is independent. It may then become the object of admiring astonishment, but also of that most powerful of all emotions: fear.

- 11 The model derives from the iconography of Moses, upon whose face the reflected glory of the Divinity was so strong that he had to wear a veil so as not to blind all those around him:erspohl 2004, pp. 54–55. Comprehensive on the motif of the veil: Krüger 2001; Wolf 2002 *Schleier*.
- 12 Francis Bacon's veil paintings have effectively resumed this sort of transformation (Steffen 2003, p. 133).
- 13 This argument is to be found in Hall 2008, pp. 117–18.
- 14 *L'énigme d'Isidore Ducasse*, 1920/71, in: *Alias Man Ray* 2009, pp. 50–51; Christo 1993; Christo and Jeanne-Claude 2001.

3. THE *ENERGEIA* OF THE IMAGE

Until the Enlightenment, the notion of a power inherent in the image, encapsulated by Leonardo in an inimitably concise form, was a firmly established component in image theory, and was identified, as a naturally occurring force, in Latin terms such as *vis*, *virtus*, *facultas* and *dynamis*.¹⁵ As material entities, and also as features in a theatre of memory, images occurred as *imagines agentes*.¹⁶ Thereafter, however, the notion of a power inherent to the image fell out of favour, coming to be associated with magical thinking and religious occultism. If images breathed, sweated, bled, excreted oils, cried tears or were able to stand on their heads – in short, if they became obtrusively active within the sphere of the human spectator – then faith in miracles was seen to be conspiring with visual theology.¹⁷

A particularly striking instance in the history of “living images” relates to the so-called Slacker Crucifix in the Mariacki Church (Saint Mary the Virgin) in Kraków, dating from the late fifteenth century, which features in numerous reports as capable of speaking and singing. It was also said to have resisted all attempts at the application of new paint. As the painter charged with this task laid his hands upon the work, the surface seemed to him as if it had become soft, as if it were part of a living body.¹⁸ In the contemporary understanding of images, such events and concepts are no less present, even though these remain in the realm of fiction, as in the case of David Cronenberg’s film of 1982, *Videodrome*, in which a television screen acquires the same liveliness as skin in order to seduce and then subdue the observer, so luring him to his death.¹⁹

After the Enlightenment, the notion of living and active images was effectively banned from art-historical discourse, to become, in time, an object of study in the realm of Anthropology and Ethnology.²⁰ An image, in as far as it consists of anorganic matter, can of course have no life of its own. Accepting this is of particular

15 Germanophone variants were “Kraft,” “Tugend” and “Wirkung”. With regard to Paracelsus, Karl Möseneder has compiled a history of the emergence of this concept (Möseneder 2009, pp. 73–162).

16 The formula was established by the unknown author of the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*. See also the striking enquiry undertaken in Berns 2005.

17 Dobschütz 1899, pp. 102–96; Kris and Kurz 1934, pp. 77–87; Freedberg 1989, p. 301 and passim.; Elkins 2001, pp. 156–57; *Animationen / Transgressionen* 2005, passim. On reports that the relic in Rome thought to be the Veil of Veronica had stood upside down, see Wolf 2002 *Schleier*, p. 48.

18 Jurkowlaniec 2006, pp. 351–55.

19 See also Mitchell 2005, pp. 217–221, and Fürst 2009. On the cancellation of distance in general, see Mondzain 2002.

20 Brückner 1966. Fundamental from the point of view of Ethnology: Gell 1998. See also Mitchell 2005, pp. 7–8.

importance for an art historian, whose duty it may be to detect even the deepest layer of under-drawing in a painting and to explain this in strictly material terms. But a nominal “certainty” that images consist of dead matter in fact only aggravates the problem. For it is “only human” to demand more of them. They are expected to be more than a mere reflection of whatever is projected into them. (This is no less true of images than it is of works of literature or of music; but in the case of images materiality presents a particular problem.)

The observer manifestly does receive a “return” on those ideas and emotions that have, in the very act of looking, been “invested” in the work of art.²¹ For, in focusing intently upon that work, the observer becomes attuned to that which is latent within it. In a manner barely susceptible to control, this latent quality may then emerge from the merely potential to confront such a person with a counterpart. And not only may this prove to be beyond that individual’s control; it may even lead inexorably to a leonardesque form of captivity.

Aby Warburg was second to none in engaging with this duality in the work of art as simultaneously inorganic and yet infused with a “life” of its own. In a fragment of his unfinished psychology of art one finds the dictum: “Du lebst und tust mir nichts” [You live and do me no harm].²² Behind this assertion, however, there lies concealed more of an invocation than a certainty. Warburg was well aware that the self, ever re-forming and sheltering, might encounter, through images, sources not only of support but also of injury. The fact that the animated image possesses, alongside its capacity to move, also a capacity to harm, is among the essential characteristics of the phenomenology of the image act that is at the heart of what follows.

Of supreme concern here is the notion of *energeia* deriving from the linguistic theory of Antiquity, which Aristotle in his *Poetics* saw as arising when writers succeeded in the exercise of *pro ommatoun poiein* [setting before the eyes]. A verbal representation was said to be persuasive when it gave the impression that it might have been alive.²³ In the *Rhetoric* Aristotle associated this *pro ommatoun poiein* with the *energeia* that gives “expression to actuality”.²⁴ This sort of rhetorical skill, fired by the animation of metaphor, has an affinity with the image taking on material substance. The reason for this lies in the fact that metaphors, in order to achieve

21 Mitchell 2005; Stjernfelt 2007, pp. 90–91.

22 Aby Warburg, *Grundlegende Bruchstücke zu einer monistischen Kunstpsychologie*, Nachlass, Warburg Institute, London; cited after Gombrich 1970, p. 71. See also Kany 1989, p. 13. On this point, see also Mainberger 2010, pp. 251–52.

23 Aristotle, *Poetics* XVII, 1 (1995, pp. 86/87–90/91, here 86/87). See also Rosen 2000, p. 178. In general: Plett 1975.

24 Aristotle, *Rhetoric* III, xi, 2, 1412a (1926, pp. 404/401–406/407, here 406/407). See also Gödde 2001, p. 246. The corresponding Latin term would be *evidentia*: Pichler 2006, pp. 140–41.

their ends, must be so strongly set off against their background, and in themselves so tightly woven, that they attain an almost “sculptural” quality. The model for Aristotle is the deliberately planned city, which offers a theatrical density, within which there arise images just as compelling as they are surprising.²⁵ This transfer of images from language to the physical presence of artefacts was adopted during the Renaissance as a fundamental motif of art theory.²⁶ When Leonardo writes of a painter “setting [something] before our eyes” then he, too, accomplishes the transfer of *energeia* from the realm of rhetoric into that of the visual arts.²⁷

It is from this tradition that there derives the power that, according to Leonardo, confronts the prospective observer with a choice: either to dispense with looking upon the work of art or to relinquish any claim to freedom. It is of course understood that the observer will, in either case, be seized by a sense of the immensity of the decision. Yet, within the sheer bravado of the notion of the loss of freedom, there is more than a hint at something irredeemably dark. Both aspects will here come under consideration.

25 Campe 2008, pp. 42–52.

26 Rosen 2000, pp. 173–78.

27 Rosen 2000, p. 177; Rosen 2009, p. 58.

ORIGINS AND CONCEPTS

I. DEFINING THE IMAGE

A. *HOMO FABER* AND “AESTHETIC DIFFERENTIATION”

Over two million years ago, *homo habilis* was able to invest small lumps of basalt with a new dimension by chipping them with other stones, and thereby gradually shaping them into bellied forms with a pointed tip. These basalt objects then found many uses.¹ Over one and a half million years ago, his descendants had attained the ability to shape stones in such a way that their sharp edges made them into versatile tools – often archaeologically characterised as “hand axes” – even while the perfect symmetry of their form was remarkable in its own right.² A great many hand axes were, however, apparently never used, or were simply too small to be used. These examples would be further refined into the delicately faceted entities now termed “leaf points”, in which implicit function (primarily as projectiles) and exquisite form blend seamlessly (Fig. 3). Objects of this sort are even more closely associated with the prehistory and early period of *homo sapiens*. The spears made 600,000 to 400,000 years ago, found in what is now Lower Saxony, are of such formal perfection that it would seem that the use to which they were put was itself imbued with an aesthetic element.³

Collections of fossils that are around 200,000 years old, assembled in small heaps so as to draw attention to that which is common to their particular range of

1 Le Tensorer 2001, pp. 58–60; *Evolutionary Aesthetics* 2003, pp. 260–62; Facchini 2006, pp. 98–111.

2 Le Tensorer 2001, pp. 62–64 discusses the discovery that older hand axes often appear more aesthetically pleasing than those made more recently, which would seem to point to an initial symbolic surplus, followed by a phase during which more attention was paid to function. See also Wynn 2002.

3 *Die Schöninger Speere* 2007.



Fig. 3 Planar “leaf point” projectile worked on both sides Stone, c. 22,000 to 16,000 years old, Found at Solutré-Pouilly, Saône-et-Loire, France.



Fig. 4 Hand axe of the acheulean type, incorporating fossil scallop shell (*Spondylus spinosus*), Flint, c. 200,000 years old, Found at West Tofts, Norfolk Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology.

shapes, are an early sign of the capacity for what scholars have termed “aesthetic differentiation”.⁴ In the form of a particular hand axe (Fig. 4) this capacity evidently fostered the creation of one of the most astonishing shaped objects to have survived from the dawn of humanity. So skilfully has its final shape been created through chipping away around the fossil scallop shell it contains that this last is preserved almost as if it were inserted as an ornament at the very centre of the resulting object.⁵ The transformation of the surrounding stone into a frame for the distinct entity within it testifies not only to an effective awareness of “aesthetic differentiation”, but also to a will to enhance this quality by means of deliberate design. Here one encounters that capacity for discrimination that belongs to the fundamental

4 Lorblanchet 1999, pp. 82, 89–91.

5 Oakley 1981, pp. 208–09.



Fig. 5 Perforated freshwater snail shells, c. 75,000 years old, Found at Blombos Cave, Western Cape, South Africa, Iziko South African Museum, Cape Town.



Fig. 6 Incised ochre stone, c. 75,000 years old, Found at Blombos Cave, Western Cape, South Africa, Iziko South African Museum, Cape Town.

definition of the “image”.⁶ Achievements of this sort have become the distinctive sign of human evolution: to be human was to have attained the cognitive and technical capacity for refashioning naturally occurring shapes and the desire to absorb these, intellectually and emotionally, into a distinct human sphere.⁷

The probability that an elementary connection exists between *homo erectus* and the creation of “images” has recently been further strengthened through the instance of perforated freshwater snail shells, found in a layer of sediment around 75,000 years old at Blombos Cave, Western Cape, South Africa (Fig. 5). Each shell exhibits a hole at more or less the same spot on its surface, in each case evidently created through external force, be it pressure or percussion. Two or three such objects perforated in this fashion might have come about by chance; but a total of 41 similarly perforated shells would lead one to assume that these are the elements of some form of ornamental necklace. This example would seem to meet the condition that “images” can be recognised as such only through the possibility of comparing

6 On “iconic differentiation”: Boehm 1994, p. 30; on the aesthetics of the hand axe: Boehm 2007, pp. 34–38.

7 Klotz 1997, pp. 12–13.

several examples so as to exclude occurrences of merely coincidental formation and similarity.⁸

No less astonishing is the fact that, within the same layer of sediment, examples of ochre stones were also found, their surfaces carefully smoothed, apparently so as to provide suitable planes into which geometrical patterns might then be incised (Fig. 6). These scratched lines, also around 75,000 years old, likewise exhibit so seemingly intentional a homogeneity that they prompt one to conclude that they are already evidence of both a shared, rather than an individual, skill and a communal understanding of the significance of its application.⁹

B. IMAGES FROM THE IVORY AGE

Even the most recent discoveries in the realm of sculpture have issued in recognition of the need to backdate assumptions regarding the emergence of the “differentiated image”. It has been above all items discovered during the last decade that have so decidedly called into question the prevailing evolutionary theories that they allow one to perceive, in their eminently sculptural three-dimensionality, the remarkable interplay of imitation and abstraction.

For a long time the so-called *Venus of Willendorf*, a roughly 30,000-year-old hand-sized stone figure, notable for its emphatic sexual characteristics, its corporeal ostentation and its mysterious head-covering, was viewed as the unchallenged “star” among sculptural works from the Palaeolithic period.¹⁰ A decade ago, however, items now considered the oldest figural images to be found so far were discovered in the Swabian Jura, in what is now south-western Germany. Carved from mammoth ivory, they are estimated to be around 30,000 to 40,000 years old. One of these, a female figure, 6 centimetres in height, and found in the cave at Hohle Fels, has protruberant breasts, beneath which the hands appear as if laid upon the torso. Between the stubby legs the pubic triangle is as clearly marked as is the deeply grooved vulva (Fig. 7). The tiny head is no more than a small loop, so that the head of the wearer, be this male or female, would effectively replace it, suggesting the substitutive function of this piece may have outweighed the mimetic.¹¹

Most of the recently discovered mammoth ivory figures are, however, of animals. Among these are the *Waterfowl*, in shape resembling a spear-head (Fig. 8), also

8 Errico et al. 2005.

9 Errico et al. 2005, pp. 257–58.

10 Mellink and Filip 1985, p. 276, no. 257a and 257b.

11 Conard 2009 *Venus*. The emphatic sexual character of this figure and of other such statuettes is underlined through what one might take for a male counterpart that is around 28,000 years old (Conard and Kieselbach 2009). On the entire complex, see also *Les chemins de l'Art Aurignacien en Europe* 2007.



Fig. 7 *Venus*, Mammoth ivory, c. 40,000 to 35,000 years old, Found in the Hohle Fels Cave, Swabian Jura, Institut für Ur- und Frühgeschichte, Universität Tübingen.

Fig. 8 *Water fowl*, Mammoth ivory, c. 35,000 years old, Found in the Hohle Fels Cave, Swabian Jura, Institut für Ur- und Frühgeschichte, Universität Tübingen.

Fig. 9 *The Lion Man*, Mammoth ivory, c. 50,000 years old, Found in the Hohenstein Stadel Cave, Swabian Jura, Museum für Kunst und Archäologie, Ulm.

excavated in the Hohle Fels cave,¹² and the so-called *Lion Man* (Fig. 9): the most notable figure to be discovered so far, not least on account of its height, of 30 centimetres, and found in the cave at Hohlenstein Stadel.¹³ While its lower limbs appear to be those of a beast of prey standing on its hind quarters, the upper limbs seem to be the arms of a human being. The head, however, has mutated into that of a lion. The marked corporeal tension of this figure complements the hybridity of its bodily elements.

The wealth of small-scale sculptural figures found in recent years is so overpowering that it would seem appropriate here, by analogy with the conventional invocation of a Stone Age and a Bronze Age, to speak of an Ivory Age. Taking into account other finds in the same area – invariably decorated pieces of clothing, purposefully devised musical instruments, and meticulously shaped tools – it is apparent that an overtly “aesthetic” element was, in this context, by no means merely an addition, but the outcome of the “fermentation” of the achievement of earlier cultures. And so the conclusion drawn from the evidence of the hand axe is reinforced: the “image” is to be recognised as the essential determinant of humanity as a species.

This in turn establishes the basis for a comprehensive concept of the “image”. As the non-figurative hand axe already itself possesses a semantic form, “images” cannot be said to emerge only where artefacts exhibit figural characteristics. Because it is now fundamentally impossible to establish whether a given artefact would have been regarded as primarily useful or otherwise, so is it also impossible to distinguish between “image” and “art”. In its fundamental, initial definition, the concept of the “image” encompasses every form of conscious shaping.

C. ALBERTI’S *SIMULACRA*

With this broad definition of the “image” one approaches another such, in this case as simple as it is compelling, which was proposed in the fifteenth century by the Italian artist, architect and mathematician Leon Battista Alberti. According to Alberti, one might speak of “images” (he uses the Latin term *simulacra*) from that moment when naturally occurring entities, such as tree roots, evince a minimum of human elaboration. As soon as such an entity bears a trace of human intervention, it is seen to meet the requisite conceptual criterion. In this definition non-physical

12 Conard 2009 *Tiere*, p. 259. A further animal figure (found in the Vogelherd Cave), around 3 centimetres in height and also carved from mammoth ivory, exhibits the sculptural modelling of a bulky body in which the swelling of the surface is as clear below the shoulder blades as it is in the area of the hips. Rows of x-shaped crosses, which here again allude to the systematic application of an element of “graphic” art, cover both the back and the stomach (Floss 2009, p. 249).

13 *Der Löwenmensch* 2005; see also Wehrberger 2007.



Fig. 10 White sandstone from Taihu region of northern China, with marked overhang and perforations, reworked and supplied with a pedestal, Ming to Qing dynasties, 17th / 18th centuries, Richard Rosenblum Collection, New York.

entities are left out of account because, in Alberti's view, it is only the material capacity for resistance that allows for the wilful aspect of latency that establishes the basis for the question to be posed as it is here.¹⁴

Alberti's condition would have already been met when pictorially shaped natural forms were recognisably processed and elaborated through the provision of pedestals and framing. This was a prominent characteristic of the tradition – both European and Chinese – of “chance images”. At least since the publication, in 1667, of Athanasius Kircher's *China illustrata*, it was known that Alberti's definition of the origin of “images” in the inspiration that might be derived from the example of tree roots and similar natural entities had been formulated centuries earlier in Chinese art theory.¹⁵ An impression of work in the Chinese tradition might, for example, be derived from a half-metre-tall white sandstone object, which was probably acquired by a collector in the seventeenth century (Fig. 10). This had been extracted from its original natural context because it was thought that, with its markedly projecting

14 Alberti, *De Statua*, §1 (1999, p. 22). This wide-ranging concept is followed in Freedberg 1989, which supplies a model for the present study.

15 Chang 2003, pp. 55–56.

“arm” and its numerous perforations, it would invoke the memory of storm-driven clouds. But it is not only the semantically stabilising addition of a pedestal that makes the stone into an “image”. For its naturally occurring perforations were also smoothed and strengthened through having their edges filed down, in order to enrich the impression of the intermittent wafting of wind. In this aspect the object approaches works of twentieth-century sculpture of the sort associated with Alberto Giacometti.¹⁶

Transgressive manifestations of this sort, mediating between naturally occurring entities and consciously created “images”, present the conceptual problem as to whether the former might not also be appreciated as examples of the latter. In accordance, however, with Alberti’s original proposal, one should here adopt, as a primary definition, the notion that one may speak of “images” as soon as naturally occurring entities evince a trace of human intervention and elaboration.

2. PLATO, HEIDEGGER, LACAN

A. PLATO’S (DIS)REGARD FOR IMAGES

In contrast to the situation in Theology, images have never assumed a central role in Philosophy. An important reason for this deficiency lies in the assumption that Plato conceded to images an only minor, if not altogether negative, status. In order to gain space for a new beginning, one must therefore start by ascertaining how far this assumption is correct.

In the construction of an assumed opposition between Philosophy and the image, a key role was played by Plato’s Parable of the Cave, recounted in Book VII of his *Republic*. Here, Plato imagines a natural subterranean chamber, occupied by a community unaware of the (real) world beyond, but nonetheless perfectly content with this restriction for they mistake their immediate surroundings for the entirety of that world, not least as these are perpetually enlivened by the multifarious cast of a shadow-play. Jan Saenredam, in his engraving of 1604, sought to envisage this spatial arrangement with a fire situated on the left throwing shadows of idols placed along the top of a wall on to the inner surface of the Cave (Fig. 11).¹⁷ The Cave-dwellers have become used to these shadows, which, as images effectively generated by the firelight, are the symbol of a merely secondary world that is far from the truth. They believe in them and, as a willing audience, are beholden to them.¹⁸ In the area

16 Monahan 1998, pp. 44–45.

17 *Die Masken* 2002, pp. 166–67.

18 Plato, *Republic*, VII, 514a–517b (1935, pp. 118/119–130/131).



Fig. 11 Jan Saenredam, *Plato's Parable of the Cave*, 1604, Engraving after an untraced painting by Cornelis Cornelisz. van Haarlem.

leading to the entrance to the Cave the wise men, here seen gathered in earnest discussion, are fully aware of the deception that is taking place. The Cave-dwellers, however, remain fully in the grip of their shadow-induced emotions.

Through his manifest disdain for such delusions, Plato would seem to disqualify the entire sensorially perceptible world as a cosmos of epiphenomena, which hindered access to the light of truth. In resembling the idols atop the wall in the Cave that determine the shadows cast by the firelight, images of every sort would also seem to meet with his disapproval. This grouping of shadows and images would have readily met with understanding in Antiquity in so far as portraiture was then widely associated with outlines drawn around cast shadows.¹⁹

At the same time the nature of Plato's more specific criticism of images reveals that this was also an implicit recognition of their power. When he claims that the Cave-dwellers – in effect, the great mass of humanity – would rather attend to the sequences of shadows derived from idols than the light of the sun and the world of ideas and of truth that it illuminates, this signifies, *ex negativo*, an effective acknowledgement of the all but irresistible power of images. A stronger recognition

19 Pliny, *Natural History*, XXXV, v, 15 (1968, pp. 270/271): “De picturae initii [...]”.

of the capacity of images to influence human emotions, ideas and actions was hardly ever better formulated than it is in Plato's account of the shadow-play theatre.

No surviving text of Plato's is primarily focused on questions raised by the visual arts; and, whenever these are discussed, they serve, rather, for the resolution of other problems. This has ensured that, in view of Plato's occasional and frequently contradictory statements on art, it is all but pointless to attempt to extract from these a concise aesthetic.²⁰ It is, however, notable and highly significant that all such statements are marked by the conviction that images are infused by an active power. The certitude implicit in the Parable of the Cave regarding the power of the cast shadows may be assumed to embrace images of every sort. In Plato's view, as is evident elsewhere in the *Republic*, this power is so strong, and thus by implication so dangerous, that its "desire to rule us" must be countered through a series of prohibitions. On the other hand the capacity of images to serve as models is so indispensable for the education of the young that it is to be positively encouraged. It is between these two poles that Plato's concept of the "image", and by extension of "visual art", may be seen to oscillate.

In essence, as is soon apparent, Plato's rejection is chiefly aimed at those images that duplicate the sensorially perceptible world through imitation, in order – or so he assumes – to take its place.²¹ The reasons for this rejection, as developed above all in Book X of the *Republic*, strike twenty-first-century readers as unconvincing and somewhat disturbing, not least because this section of the text has little of the imaginative verve and the linguistic sparkle of the Parable of the Cave.²² In his sketch of what might constitute an ideal state, the iconophobic arguments seem harsh and humourless. To the objection that artists were able to reproduce anything that had ever existed on the earth or in the heavens, comes the dismissive rejoinder that anyone capable of holding a mirror in his hand could equally count himself among such fabricators of imitations.²³ Having made his position clear, Plato (now harking back to the Parable of the Cave) goes on to denounce any artist or poet who succeeds in the rendition of a natural or man-made motif: "For it is phantoms, not realities, that they produce".²⁴ The rule that there is no place in an ideal state for the mimetic poets²⁵ goes also for the mimetic artists.

20 Catoni 2005, p. 279.

21 Schmitt 2001, pp. 36–37.

22 This is in accordance with the anomaly that Plato, while a critic of vividly evoked myths, was himself one of the greatest mythopoeists. But here there is in fact no contradiction, in that, for Plato, the mythological and the intellectual represented two "complementary" approaches to truth (Most 2002, p. 18).

23 Plato, *Republic*, X, 598b (1935, pp. 430/431).

24 Plato, *Republic*, X, 599a (1935, pp. 434/435).

25 Plato, *Republic*, X, 605b–c (1935, pp. 456/457–458/459).

Here, too, however, as with the Parable of the Cave, the reason for this ban lies in Plato's fondness for the back-handed compliment. Poets whose work is merely imitative encourage their readers to become absorbed in, even ruled by, those excessive emotions and injurious impulses, when it is precisely such emotions and impulses that "ought to be ruled".²⁶ The recommended ban on such poetry is inevitable because it is capable of wounding its readers and because there is also the ever-present danger of their "slipping back into the childish loves of the multitude".²⁷ Mimetic painting, for its part, is far too preoccupied with the theme of illicit love, and it "associates with the part in us that is remote from intelligence".²⁸ These linguistic formulae of aversion and fear reveal, as do the corresponding passages of the Parable of the Cave, that Plato by no means underestimates what mimetic painting can achieve. Rather, it is in recognition of its power, which he holds to be excessive, that he demands that its practitioners be banned or, at the very least, that they remain under surveillance.²⁹

The fact is – and it is all the more worthy of emphasis in that it has repeatedly been overlooked – that Plato acknowledged not only a reprehensible, but also a highly valuable, effect in mimetic images. When Socrates, in the *Cratylus*, insists that painters do not necessarily have to proceed by repeating, detail by detail, all that they find in nature, but have the capacity, through omission, to draw attention to what is most important, this reads almost like a retraction of the accusation that artists are nothing but mere forgers. Plato has Socrates explain that the same goes for poets as for painters: words do not, for example, have to attend to every detail of the matter in hand. They may, indeed, characterise it far more effectively through selection and omission. According to Socrates, there would be neither paintings nor poems if these did nothing but duplicate things through meticulously reproducing them.³⁰ Like paintings, poems, on account of their capacity for concise presentation, possess the ability to give a clear account, such as Plato, in the *Timaeus*, ascribes to astronomical models: "To describe all this [the dynamism of the cosmos] without an inspection of the models of these movements would be labour in vain".³¹

It is suggestive, moreover, of a degree of appreciation when Plato compares his own considerations regarding an ideal state with a painting – both entities approximating a "master plan". The fact that a painter might depict a human being as so perfect that this depiction could never fully correspond to reality is here

26 Plato, *Republic*, X, 606d (1935, pp. 462/463).

27 Plato, *Republic*, X, 688a (1935, pp. 468/469).

28 Plato, *Republic*, X, 603b (1935, pp. 450/451).

29 Plato, *Republic*, III, 401b–d (1930, pp. 256/257–258/259).

30 Plato, *Cratylus*, 432d (1926, pp. 164/165). See also Catoni 2005, p. 76.

31 Plato, *Timaeus*, 40d (1929, pp. 86/87).

equated by Plato with the notion of his own *Republic*. For that, too, cannot depict the ideal state in all its aspects, and yet it is not on that account without value.³²

It is significant that, in the *Republic*, Plato invokes a portrait in order to make a comparison with the design for a state. Plato's starting point lies in the idea that a portrait must be harmonised in all its components. If the eyes, as the organ associated with the most valuable of the senses, were represented by precious gems, the overall impression would be thrown out of balance; and, in the same way, in devising a state, one must always bear in mind the whole: "If someone says one particular aspect [of the portrait] is not of the finest material – we should think it a reasonable justification to reply: 'Don't expect us, quaint friend, to paint the eyes so fine that they will not be like eyes at all, nor the other parts. But observe whether by assigning what is proper to each we render the whole beautiful'".³³ In this comparison of his ideal state with an accomplished portrait, Plato affirms an aesthetic of what is fitting. Here, too, he speaks not of the meaninglessness of images, but rather of their role as exemplars.

Ultimately, one finds that Plato adopts a notion of the "image" that is remarkable in being so comprehensive – ranging from gesture, by way of dance, to mural paintings and sculpture – and in turn assumes that all these will serve, in the ideal state, to encourage an awareness of form. This notion is developed above all in his theory of *schemata*. These are models for the stereotypical sequence of movements, through which bodies become images.³⁴ In the *Cratylus* Socrates observes how the body transforms into an image, with for example the lifting of a hand in order to allude to something elevated or weightless. The same goes for the imitation of the movement of horses or other animals. For "the expression of anything [...] would be accomplished by bodily imitation of that which was to be expressed".³⁵ The appropriate gestures and movements enable the *schemata* to emerge and become established as a point of reference for others.³⁶

In so far as Plato stresses the specific significance of *schemata* as dynamically shaped mediums of imitation, this is especially the case for dance. By means of ges-

32 Plato, *Republic*, V, 472d–e (1935, pp. 504/505). See also Schmitt 2001, p. 32 and Boehm 1996, p. 97.

33 Plato, *Republic*, IV, 420d (1930, pp. 318/319).

34 During recent years a fundamental reassessment of this aspect of Plato's notion of images has come about as a result of Maria Luisa Catoni's reconstruction of non-verbal communication in Greek Antiquity (Catoni 2005, and Catoni 2008).

35 Plato, *Cratylus*, 423a–b (1926, pp. 132/133).

36 Catoni 2005, p. 72. In the context of these considerations, one might wonder if Plato's theory of *schemata* could in some respects be compared with Aby Warburg's theory of "pathos formulae" ("Pathosformeln"), which he saw as able to channel the psychic energy of the repeatedly reanimated motifs derived from Antiquity (Catoni 2005, pp. 324, 243–44). See also Settis 2008, p. ix. On Warburg, see also pp. 253–64.

ture and structured movement the element of *mimesis* is here absorbed into a greater whole, with the further addition of music and some of the fine arts.³⁷

This notion finds its clearest exposition in a passage in the *Laws* in which an Athenian Stranger tells of the pictorial art of the Egyptians: “[...] it appears that long ago they determined on the rule of which we are now speaking, that the youth of a State should practise in their rehearsals postures and tunes that are good: they were prescribed in detail and posted up in the temples [...]”.³⁸ The models of the approved “good” forms might then impress the young Egyptians, and in due course their younger siblings, as guides for their development, both as individuals and as members of society. In this context the speaker recognises why the style of Egyptian painting was never permitted to change. Even after ten thousand years every element would be “wrought with the same art”.³⁹ In as far as images depict human beings, Plato readily acknowledges their potential value in both establishing and preserving desirable social norms. Looking to Egypt, he finds confirmation for this view.

In a systematic sense, images also function as a basis for thought. Plato, in his Simile of the Divided Line (which, within the *Republic*, shortly precedes his Parable of the Cave), had understood that the capacity for graphic visualisation had two contradictory aspects. On one hand it was a subordinate skill in as far as it was, of necessity, dependent upon sensorial impressions. On the other hand it was indispensable because the superior forms of reasoning – guided always by axiomata – were unable in their own right to function adequately in the lower realms. Plato accordingly provides an account of how the “higher” and the “lower” capacities may fruitfully collaborate: for the soul “uses as images or likenesses, the very objects that are themselves copied and adumbrated by the class below them, and that in comparison with these latter are esteemed as clear and held in honour”.⁴⁰

This statement signifies more than merely an acknowledgment that it may, after all, be possible to attain to the higher realms by way of capacities derived through the senses. Plato is here, rather, intent upon a deeper examination of the scope of precisely those images that, in the Parable of the Cave, he seems to despise as mere shadow-play. One might imaginatively compare his approach here with the principle of the catapult: a long process of contemplative tension and restraint issuing in a sudden productive release.

37 Catoni 2005, pp. 213, 279–81. On alternative interpretations of the *schemata* as geometrical figures and formally self-contained bodies, see Catoni 2005, chap. I. For Plato, dance is the most important vehicle of *schemata*: Catoni 2005, p. 314. On the *schemata*, see also: Gödde 2001, pp. 242–43.

38 Plato, *Laws*, I, ii, 656d (1926, pp. 100/101). See also Assmann 1986, pp. 520–22, and Catoni 2005, pp. 294–95.

39 Plato, *Laws*, I, ii, 656e–657a (1926, pp. 102/103).

40 Plato, *Republic*, VI, 511a–b (1935, pp. 112/113).

According to Plato, the role of images is contradictory. It is true that they serve as a foundation for thought and for successful action; but it has to be admitted that they conceal the truth. On the whole Plato contrives to take account of both sides. He was an enemy only of those images that he viewed as a threat to the community. And he defended and welcomed those images that he recognised as a civilising factor. Behind both extremes there stands a deep-seated fear of encountering in the image a sphere in which the philosopher may be unable to assert control.

Plato's readiness to countenance the censoring of certain types of poems or paintings, and indeed even to expel from his ideal state those poets and painters of whom he most disapproved, is anathema to modernity. At the same time contemporary suspicions are at once aroused by the ethical role he ascribed to those poems and paintings of which he did approve. Plato's enthusiasm for surveillance would have made his ideal state into an aesthetically and politically rigid society that would have excluded all that is dear to the modern sensibility: disruptive provocation, the rejection of perceived norms, the element of shock, the fictive and the surreal. In this respect, Plato remains an antipode to contemporary civilisation; but it is precisely in his role as an enemy that he points, better than does hardly any friend, to what it is now pertinent to ask. It is a matter here of evolving a philosophy that finds new possibilities within the zones of its own blindness.⁴¹

B. HEIDEGGER'S *VOLTE-FACE*

The mid-twentieth-century German and French philosophers Martin Heidegger and Jacques Lacan independently devoted themselves to the same issues as had Plato long before them, in each case in a manner as inimitable in its vigour as it was paradigmatic in its weaknesses. Both sought to take images seriously, in a philosophical sense, without delegating them to the conceptual context of aesthetics. Yet they were both, nonetheless, overcome by the very anxiety that stands behind Plato's reflections on the effects that images may have.

In Heidegger's essay "Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes" [The Origin of the Work of Art], first published in 1950 but deriving from lectures given in Freiburg, Zürich and Frankfurt in 1935–36, he accomplished a *volte-face* not only in thinking about "Time" as the condition of "Being", but also in incorporating entities of supra-historical value (such as works of art, notwithstanding their emergence in specific historical circumstances) within his own notion of "Being".⁴² His idea that works of art were to be considered, and indeed respected, as "things" and that those looking at

41 Wind 1979, pp. 9–17. See also Krois 2006, pp. 176–77, 187.

42 Gadamer 1960, "Zur Einführung", pp. 106–07. Fundamental from an art-historical point of view: Boehm 1989; on textually immanent understanding: Kern 2003.