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Marie-José Mondzain

Abstract

To ask what seeing an image means is nothing more than trying to understand how, in viewing images, we become spectators with a new role of speaking and desiring subjects. The Christian history of images was significant for western relationships to images as the iconoclastic crisis created fundamental distinctions between vision and gaze, visible and invisible, power and authority, belief and suspicion. If we look further at paleontological images found in caves, it seems that the iconic gesture represents the speaking and desiring subject. The Christian doctrine was an 'economical' sequence of negotiation between anthropological truth and political purposes.

Keywords

aniconism • belief/credulity • iconoclasm/iconophily • icons • images in the caves • object/subject • power/authority • visible/invisible • vision/gaze

What does seeing an image mean? In viewing images, how do we become spectators and how do images set up spectators as speaking subjects?

What does seeing an image mean? The wording of these few queries might lead you to expect that I am proposing to answer a series of questions in a kind of hierarchy and in the following order: first, what does it mean to see; then, what does it mean to see something? Finally, in asking and trying to answer the question of what an image means, as if it were just one of the many objects that we see and not a particular case, it would seem that I am proceeding from the general to the particular. However, this is not my intention.

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Since it is every human subject's destiny to be inscribed (*s'inscrire*) in the world through symbolic operations, and therefore through the production of signs that ground his or her relation to speech, I would like to show that it is image-producing operations that make this inscription possible. We do not see the world because we have eyes. Our eyes are opened by our ability to produce images, by our capacity to imagine. These capacities are why we need vision in order to be able to speak; this is why the blind can speak as long as their capacity to imagine is intact.

I have chosen to formulate my questions this way precisely because I think that the very constitution of the image and of image-producing operations is the source and origin of the very possibility of seeing, of seeing anything at all. By this, I mean that it is very possible that seeing subjects, that is to say subjects who use their eyes to see and their speech to say what they see or do not see, are subjects that have already been constituted as image-producing subjects. I go even further by adding that these image-producing subjects open the *realm* of speech for subjects who can then say: I see.

I will be making two leaps backwards into history: the first is historical, and the second is prehistorical. I will begin by drawing on a corpus that is very familiar to me and found in the critical period of Byzantine iconoclasm and the examination of aniconic cultures. Byzantine thought was the first to formulate the question of the primacy of the image over vision in terms of the origin and genealogy of the subject.

I will return to the radical distinction made at the time between image and vision. This is the position of those who recognize an anteriority of the image over vision and who think that seeing already implies forgetting the image, failing and even betraying it. For them, the very idea of 'seeing the image' is a blasphemous or absurd proposition.¹

These violent disturbances (the crisis of Byzantine iconoclasm, for example, of the iconoclasm of the Reform, or the destruction of 'idols' in the context of conquests and wars waged in the name of speculative or religious arguments) shook an over-confidence in the power of our eyes and sought instead to celebrate the greatness and dignity of an image that remains invisible. It was in the name of this degradation of a subject who undermined his own divinity that the orders to prohibit and destroy images were pronounced. Who has ever been more in favor of 'the image beyond sight' than the iconoclast?

Iconoclasts defended the invisibility of the image all the more vehemently since they knew full well that the visible was also the terrain where ecclesiastic power was struggling to defeat imperial power. The Church sought to maintain two monopolies in one: a monopoly over the visible and a monopoly over the invisible; in other words, the Church sought to reign over both image and vision by articulating them closely together. It therefore had to invent a doctrine at the heart of which the visible and the image were taken as one and the same thing, clearing the way for the pertinence of the expression of 'seeing the image'. Our belief that the image stems spontaneously and naturally from vision owes itself to this doctrine. Seeing the image will eventually become constitutive of any

possibility of a subject's seeing anything at all. This is the patristic interpretation of the creation of man in Genesis. If man is made in the image of his creator, this is because he comes from God's imagination and he resembles him insofar as he is an image-producing subject.

Things were, of course, neither simple nor uncontested. Both Judaism and Islam will persistently resist the more or less violent power of this construction. Choosing binary logics whose terms exclude one another (the visible cannot be invisible), they refuse the paradoxical oxymorons of the image which nonetheless inhere in the foundation of political subjects.

Judaism was the first religion to condemn idols and the degenerative use of the gaze in order to reserve the domain of similitude and the image for the contractual relation uniting creator and creature. This contractual relation seeks to limit its knowledge to speech and listening. Yet this disqualification of the visible, and therefore of vision, which separates the image from its perceptible manifestation, is grounded in a revelation which over-determines speech and the letter. The visible is reduced to the authority of its legibility. Judaism includes any narcissistic temptation that allows the gaze to believe what it sees and then perishes due to the characteristics of its blindness. If all images are a locus of belief, then a distinction must be made between a locus of faith and a locus of credulity. The idol, a locus of credulity, is a destructive and destructible object. Judaism sought to combat this saturation of desire, this pleasure in the unseparate. Whereas Judaism gives the order to shatter and turn one's gaze away, Christianity proposes an intellectual, spiritual and strategic management of the bodily operations implicated in vision. It will negotiate with desire itself by making the image a visible locus which, however, is no longer offered solely to eyes of flesh. Whereas Judaism demands asceticism from the hands and preservation of the eyes, Christianity proposes an exercise in judgement on an object of indetermination, that is, the image. The image belongs neither to being nor to the void (*non being? nothingness*), neither to the realm of truth nor to the hell of the false; it is neither truly real nor really absent. The image is the present's unreality (*true unreality of presence*).

In Islam, there is at its origin an absolute non-confusion between the theological and the political. Spiritual reasons for the refusal of idols did not, however, stop political power from using luxury, pomp and amazement as weapons. A strange combination of the speculative and the political has continually reworked the complex and often contradictory relations between the image and the visible, the visible and the legible, the legible and the invisible. Images of the other - the primary definition of the idol - were destroyed. But at the same time the Iranian tradition has been and continues to be one of the richest iconic traditions in the Muslim world, a tradition that survives into art and artists of our own day in every domain of visibility. The Koran does not forbid anything, but hints at a spiritual path that, over the course of time, the *hadith* will transform into a corpus of more or less rigid restrictions. This is much as it is in the case of Christianity, with which Islam has always been in dialogue, however occasionally rife with conflict their intimacy can be. The image and the visible constantly designate one another as the locus of the tension between what is shown too much and what is not seen enough.

One of Christianity's goals was to imagine that, because incarnation provided the invisible divinity with an historic occasion to become visible, a new story was going to change everything: from now on, God, who had lent his invisible image to his human creation, will in turn receive his own visibility thanks to that creation. Paul is the one who, by designating the Son as the visible image of the Father, makes the person of Christ, and more specifically his face, the place where the image and the visible are united. Seeing the image means seeing God and God himself can finally gaze at and reflect his face in this filial image. This relation between Father and Son, then, provides us with the only paradigm of a subject who sees himself without any recourse to alterity, since he is substantially identical to his image. If this myth had become reality, all of humanity would have had to disappear in the speculative shimmer of its own regained divinity. Imagining that the time for this redemptive fusion was near at hand, Paul had absolutely no doubt as to the imminence of this triumphant identity. But the Church fathers had to face facts: once Christ had gone, that is to say once the mirror incarnate had disappeared, time kept rolling on and human history continued. There arose a need to think through the indetermination of a long history where the management of the visible and the image could handle both the invisibility of the image and the visibility of the world to be governed. Over the course of nine centuries, a theoretical construction for the constitutive and simultaneous operations of presence and absence was set in place. From this point on, seeing the image is equivalent to detecting, in the visible, the presence of an absence. Any discourse on the image is nothing but an interminable oxymoron in which presence and absence, but also shadow and light, finitude and infinity, temporality and eternity, corruptibility and incorruptibility, passion and impassivity are constantly switching their meaning and changing places. Seeing the image means gaining access to something that, within the visible, both overflows and empties it at one and the same time. The visible does not contain the image, just as what is finite does not contain the infinite: the visible is a trace, a vestige of an incommensurable presence. The visible is deserted by what it shows. Seeing an image means gaining access to what gazes out from within the visible itself, it means offering the immanence of an absence to the gaze.

But Christian doctrine was also resolute in its desire not to abandon the sensory terrain of bodies to the emperor's sole authority. It had to legitimate its visible power by laying the groundwork for a sustained invisibility. The iconoclast emperor dreamed of reserving the empire of the visible for himself and of leaving the care of the invisible to the clergy; yet he did so in vain. The leaders of the Church were far from agreeing with this division of labor, and this is why we owe to them the discovery of a way of thinking about the relation of both image and vision, that is, of authority and power. Thanks to the victory of the iconophiles, we know that power is always visible, while authority, on the other hand, is essentially invisible. (Because of its rigor, the Judaism of the time barred its own access to any temporal royalty and any earthly empire.) This is why we, as inheritors of the priestly mode of thought, live in a world where power is now coextensive with visibility, to the point where we have grown incapable of preserving a legitimating invisibility and now complain of experiencing a crisis in authority.

Now, we might think that we are back among the aporias that the denigrators of the visible and the defenders of the invisible image had hoped to avoid. This is, however, far from the case, for the task of articulating the critical dimension of the visible is now entrusted to speech. The word (*words*) must open eyes that would otherwise forget that all they can do is believe what they see. 'Blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed', the very one who paid with his life for having wanted to show himself is reported to have said. In order for the Resurrection to give the solid promises of the visible its chances, history was forced to go through all the turbulent subtleties of patristic and conciliar literature. It is thanks to the Resurrection that the flesh of incarnation becomes light and that the visible, separated from the body and relieved of all matter, regains the unity of the gaze in the contemplation of the image. But this is only possible because speech was shared. I am referring here to the story of the encounter with Christ on the path to Emmaus after the Resurrection. In the context of my argument, it has a didactic point. Christ, who is not recognized by those who loved and were closest to him, passes from the invisible to the visible, from the unknown to the acknowledged, by the sole virtue of sharing. Authority demands nothing but acknowledgment. The one who, after the death of the body, turned back into a pure image of flesh is accessible to the eyes only through the operations of speech and the sharing of bread. Seeing means sharing an image that exposes the subject of speech to acknowledgment.

The face is the subject's inevitable gift to someone else. The impossibility of seeing one's self in any other way than at a distance and detached from one's self, the irreducible gap that will always separate every human from seeing his or her own face except through the alterity of a gaze (even if it is one's own) is an anthropological fact that marks all subjective identifications with the seal of the imaginary and of lack. If the question of identity is an inherent part of intersubjective operations, then it is thanks to the effects of an image-producing operation that subjects gain access to their own visibility in the very same movement that designates this image of self as an image of, and for, the other. The image opens the field of our visibility up to us; the image is the gift of the other's gaze on me at the moment I mourn autonomy and my power to constitute myself alone. The image is not an object and this is why I am a subject.

If the economy of the image designated for the Church fathers the dynamic relation that, from within every visible image, refers to invisible authority, I propose to name the operations linking subjects thanks to the mediation of images a 'commerce of gazes' (Mondzain, 2003).² Images are not objects placed before our eyes, but are instead places where signs can circulate among us without interruption. In French, the word *commerce* is an ancient one. It designated the totality of exchanges, whether material or symbolic. In other languages, distinctions are made between intersubjective transactions and the commerce of things. The highly symbolic explosion of September 11 has become an emblem for the suspension of any link whatsoever tying two parts of the world together. Never had the commerce of things made the degenerative dimension of relations between objects alone so clear. The saturation of the visible through destruction pronounced an end to the circulation of sense

between communities. No more commerce among men. The invisible was reduced to a terror at what can be neither identified nor grasped. Instead of being a sign of the life of sense, the invisible has become a sign of death blindly distributed by an evil genius who is nowhere to be found.

But I would like to return to my main argument, according to which, seeing an image is a condition for vision in the constitution of the speaking subject. I have already indicated that I will not limit myself to an historical argument, but that I will be giving my intervention an anthropological dimension by turning to prehistory. Leaving the iconic debates, I will go even further back in time.

I said at the beginning that seeing an image does not demand an answer, first, to the question of what seeing means, then a consideration of the image as an object of vision but, on the contrary, leads to a consideration of image-producing operations as a way of discovering the conditions of possibility for a relation between our gaze and the visible world. This perspective has led me to paleontology in order to grasp at the source, that is, in the footsteps of the first traces of human presence, how man was able to indicate the fundamental impossibility of seeing himself and the humanizing necessity of image-producing operations for a *homo sapiens* who courageously strikes out on the imaginary path of signs. The displacement of visible signs into shadows allows him to emerge from them and give birth to humanity. And I might add that we have not yet fully emerged since that birth is repeatedly performed or sometimes not.

If, then, we only see because we have renounced the desire to see ourselves, but are still inhabited by the desire to see, then we seek out our own face by producing a world whose image is haunted by the trace of our absence. Seeing is constructed on the absence of our face. This is the path I will take with you in an exercise of primary philosophy: to say what the man in the caves of Chauvet, where we find the most ancient graphic vestiges, offers first to his own vision, and then what he offers to the vision of a humanity that comes after but especially thanks to him.

Leaving councils, temples and museums behind, we find ourselves in the shadows of caves where hominoid men, 32,000 years ago, designated themselves as the species whose responsibility was the singular task of becoming human. This body won from the anthropoids will not only be more agile, it will also be the most fragile and least integrated body in its natural habitat, for its gestures act with a sovereign lack of fit from the very moment its hand and mouth begin to serve another hunger, a hunger for symbols and signs. There are innumerable cave images, which offer a strange constancy over the course of thousands of years and in spite of being separated by thousands of kilometers. Paleontologists and anthropologists have insistently interrogated their ritual, religious, shamanic and sexual significations. Leroi-Gourhan (1964-5) is no doubt the one who has come closest to what philosophy might be able to gain from this testimony when the expert renounces analogical fictions. He recognized the double inscription of the difference of the sexes and the access to symbolic operations and hence to speech. Even more than the division of animals into opposing binary pairs of masculine and feminine, for me what is most important is the construction

of systems of separation and distinction which form an act of irreducible and constitutive gaps. Producing images means inscribing operators of alterity into the visible. This is why I have chosen to speak of the hands that one finds in almost all of these images and that can be classified as negative or positive according to whether their trace was left by an imprint or by a stencil.

What I will now evoke in an image-producing operation, with as much fantasy as possible, is the scenario that inaugurates simultaneously the impossibility of seeing one's self, the birth of the image as an operation of retreat, self-identification in dissemblance, and the necessity of relying on the world to exist outside of it and at a distance from it: in a word, I would like to consider the inscription of cave images as the scenario that gives birth to man as a spectator. Making an image means putting man into the world as a spectator. A subject is a speaking spectator. Being human means producing the trace of one's absence on the world's inner wall and constituting one's self as a subject who will never see him or herself but who, seeing the other, allows the other to see what they might share.

So what is my fantasy?

Imagine a man standing in shadow in front of a wall, and thus taking the risk of a backward turn, a return to the earth and the night he has come from. In the originary (*matricielle*) cavern, in the realm of shadow, in an uninhabited place he will have to leave, there, alone or accompanied, he illuminates himself. He asks something of the torch's fire that Aristotle explains very well. I am referring to Aristotle's treatise *On the Soul*:

The reason why color can only be seen in light, we have already stated. Fire is seen in both cases, *kai en skoto kai en photi*, in light and in shadow and this is necessarily because it is thanks to it that the diaphanous becomes diaphanous. (Aristotle II, 418, 10)

So the man in the Chauvet cave has come to produce something diaphanous in the shadows to realize an image-producing operation with color. Standing in front of the rock, he maintains himself in the opacity of a face-off: confronted with a place where he can lean and which is also his starting point, he extends his arm, leans against the wall and, in the same movement, separates himself from the wall: arm's length is effectively the first distance one takes from that with which one rests in contact. This is no longer like it is outside the cave, where his eyes see much further than what his hands can touch. Here, the eye has the same limits as the hands: the wall is both the plane and the horizon. All around, there is nothing but shadow. This gesture of separation and linking constitutes the first operation. It constitutes the places between which his next gestures will soon come to find their meaning: the body and the world's inner wall. An interview begins in the sense that the man stands facing a wall which has its own consistency: the discussion will take place between these two polarities that each contributes to the construction of an intermediate space that gives their interview its consistency. The second operation concerns the function of a mouth full of liquid pigment, which now ceases to be a mouth that seizes, shreds

and ingurgitates to become an orifice that breathes, empties out and inscribes. The transaction between the mouth and the hand is no longer one of possessive and nourishing predation, but begins a double motion of relinquishment. The man breathes on his hand. He breathes in and out. The third signifying operation is the gesture of removing the hand on which he has blown. The man no longer looks at his hand covered in pigments. It is then that the image appears before the breather's eyes, his image, as he sees it because his hand is no longer there.

One cannot get rid of one's hand to see it far away from one's self like someone else's hand, but one can retreat from one's own image and allow other eyes to see it, eyes that will never themselves be seen. The wall is a non-reflecting mirror and the first non-speculative self-portrait of man is the one made by a subject who knows of himself and of the world only the trace that his hands will leave on it. Christians invented images unmade by human hands to guarantee God's iconic privileges. The first men invented the image made by a human hand, the image of a man who was a spectator of the work of his hands, a spectacle of human hands which will bring about the birth of the human gaze. Here, there is no face, no eye, whether good or bad, no idols. Only a gesture that inaugurates seeing in the nocturnal and illuminated image of a retreat. This, then, is the birth certificate of the diaphanous. The nameless diaphanous is at the origin of speech itself since the mouth that breathed participates in the operation of constitutive separation. The diaphanous is as transparent as breath. This mouth that breathes is going to speak, is even already speaking because, in producing the visible, it empties out to proffer names. It is going to name what it sees. The image is the native soil of speech. Seeing means becoming a spectator of the image our hands produce to signify the trace of our passing. The image of the world then gives us speech. Seeing an image means grasping the vestige of a passing and finding in that trace the place of the spectator that we will become, that is to say, of the speaking subject. Being human means being a spectator of the image, that is to say, occupying the fleeting and ceaselessly mobile site of a diaphaneity: that of a subject removed from himself but who, by participating in the apparition of the world into light, gains access by this very fact to the experience of his existence for and in this world. The subject who is a spectator of a world colored by light receives his own coloration from the outside: his life. The subject is beyond the world and the world keeps its distance: by approaching the world, the subject becomes his own distance. It is then that the topological dance begins, where the image is the intermediary site between the subject of vision and the subject of speech. In the end, what is incarnation if not a story whose fiction wanted to afford us the possibility of grasping a seeing body's access to the incarnation of the flesh that brings it out of shadow and whiteness? If seeing means gaining access, through the image of the world, to the color of life, being deprived of the image means dying. Seeing an image means not dying.

Notes

1. For more on the history of the Byzantine problematic of images and about the crisis of iconoclasm, see Mondzain (2005) and Nicéphore (1990).

2. See also Didi-Huberman (1992) and Leroi-Gourhan (1964–5). The philosophical meditation about the gaze is naturally indebted to the phenomenologic reflexion and particularly to the work of Merleau-Ponty. However, I want to insist upon the historical origin of any meditation on the gaze in the patristic corpus.

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