**image/象(Xiàng)**

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| European Perspective | Alain le Pichon | 28 Jun 2022 |

The term image is defined as a representation or reproduction of something. It could be said that an image is a visible reality that shows another one. The word in English as in French comes from the Latin “imago”, which originally referred to a kind of mask moulded from beeswax onto the face of a dead person in order to preserve the features, a kind of a portrait eventually used to produce a cast of the face.

In Ancient Rome, this wax portrait of the dead person was placed in the atrium and carried to the funeral. The right to such images was reserved for noble persons, thus allowing them to establish and preserve their lineage. Etymologically, an image is, therefore, the portrait of a dead person.

Many accounts by ancient philosophers and historians emphasise the emotional character often present in the invention of the image. One such example is this famous account by the Latin historian Pliny the Younger: “The potter Butades of Sicyone was the first to discover the art of modelling portraits in clay; this was in Corinth and he owed his invention to his daughter, who was in love with a young man; when he went to a foreign country, she would draw a line around the shadow of his face cast on the wall by the light of a lantern; her father would apply the clay to the sketch, make a relief of it, which he would put to harden in the fire with the rest of his pottery, after drying.”

The concept of image in European cultures is thus semantically marked at its roots by these emotional, ritual, and funerary origins. This pre-eminence of the human face in the Western history of the image is as though our European ancestors had made the statement of Lichtenberg their own: “The most fascinating surface of the earth is, for us, the human face…”

But this fascination is no less deeply and philosophically marked, at least for Europeans trained in humanities, by a dark tutelary image, that of Plato’s cave. One could say that the European imagination in its perception of this key concept of image was born in a cave and remains forever marked by this original, profound, and obsessive focal image of Plato’s allegory showing men chained and immobilised in a cave: “They turn their backs to the entrance and see no objects but the shadows of objects cast against the wall. They think they see the truth, but they only see an appearance of it.”

Therefore, of all the key concepts we are supposed to address in this first issue of the Dictionary of Misunderstandings, image is probably one of the most important, but also one of the most difficult, if not impossible, to deal with:

The difficulty lies in the fact that the European point of view highlights in particular one of the main methodological limitations of our purpose: for practical and realistic reasons, we were obliged to restrict this exercise to the sole use, on the Western side, of the English language and, consequently, to draw up the list of key words only in English. In this case, the English word image, with its classical Latin etymological references, was the “least worst”, so to speak[[1]](#footnote-1). At the same time, by choosing the word image, we have moved away from a magisterial keyword: in the German language, it corresponds more or less to the classical generic concept “Urform” of the image, with its English, but etymologically Latin, realisation in the word image. The corresponding German keyword is Bild, with its philosophical semantic development being Bildung, both of which represent a major current in the European cultural field.

The same problem, moreover, arises initially between the Latin language, and the relatively narrow and limited semantic charge of the word imago and the large field offered by the Greek language. We have therefore tried to compensate this weakness by considering successively the Greek items: eidos, eidolon, and eikon versus the Latin imago as well as the English and French image versus German Bild and its very rich philosophical trend[[2]](#footnote-2).

But despite these difficulties, in both Chinese and Western cultures the chosen keywords, image in English and Xiang in Chinese, can probably be considered a fundamental milestone, or even an “Urform”, an original form, in the history of the respective “mentality”, constitutive of the historical construction of the architecture of thought and language on both sides[[3]](#footnote-3).

On the Chinese side, the keyword, or key-character, as Professor SUN Xianchen explains in his article, seems to be at the very origin of the history of Chinese writing: the history of this character contains and illustrates the generic process of the invention of writing.

On the European side, the concept of the image, especially as described by Plato’s famous allegory of the cave, appears as a fundamental element at the origin of Western philosophical reflection, and was probably a decisive tool for two main characteristics in the construction of Western thought, namely the principle of transcendence and the principle of critical and scientific knowledge.

The elaboration of a corrected model, starting from the image, as an uncertain representation of reality makes it possible to apply, and at the same time demonstrate, the principle of critical verification (or falsification) to the different representations of reality through the exercise and construction of a theory (theorein). Theorein in Greek means to contemplate. It is through the contemplation of the image, the eidolon, that reality is born, even if that reality is the shadow that carries illusion and error, including the emotional and poetic energy it gives off. The mind can reach a critical conclusion and gradually reconstruct the model of reality and discriminate between different representations, eventually approaching eidos.

This is where, according to Plato, the essential difference between the two categories of images comes in:

The eidolon, the image-simulacrum, as provided by the mirror, offering such a resemblance as to seduce the gaze and distract it from the truth, will be condemned.

Only the eikon, the copy-image, sufficiently dissimilar to its model to guarantee its difference, will be accepted, and will have a key function in dialectical philosophy.

Above these two categories and at the top of this hierarchy is the eidos, the pure form, the empire of ideas, whose formal claimed character in spite of its invisible and immaterial principle reveals its ambiguous relationship to the world of images. The notion of “eidos”, rendered as “form” in English, is one of the fundamental concepts used by Greek philosophers in their analysis of reality. In the common language of the time, the word designated the figure, the external aspect of a body or the air of a person perceptible by sight. But from Democritus and Plato onwards, it was used to designate an invisible reality graspable only by thought which constitutes the true being of things, corporeal (that of atoms) in Democritus and incorporeal (that of the ideas) in Plato. Aristotle took up this term in its Platonic sense of immaterial principle by integrating it into his ontology of substance composed of matter and form under the title of formal cause.

For Aristotle, there is no clear separation between matter and thought, and the images, phantasmata, constitute objects of perception and provide the raw material for the development of concepts. Imagination is the mirror of the soul that brings the inner world into the intimacy of the living.

Let us now return to that original scene of the Western imagination and of the philosophy of the image: Plato’s Allegory of the Cave. Where does the light come from? To this question posed by Athens, Jerusalem gave a radical and decisive answer, which can be summarised in two propositions in Genesis:

1- “God said let there be light and there was light”: The primordial light is a direct emanation of the Divine.

2- “God created man in his own image.”

Following the way opened by Plato, Plotinus, followed by Augustine, built a strong epistemology of the image based on the main idea of the generative link of filiation from God to man. Augustine says that “there is no image if it is not generated (exprimitur) from something”, and stresses the three characteristics of resemblance, image, and equality, the three of them being fulfilled by the Christ in the Trinity.

This philosophy of image, centred on the image of man as the image of God which has inspired the entire West and through the Medieval era shaped European cultures, can be illustrated by the essential biblical concept-image of the Primordial Man: Adam Kadmon, as it appears in Kabbalah.

In Kabbalah, Adam Kadmon is an immense human form, composed of the hypostases (manifestations) emanating from the divine light, representing the creation of Man, and of the Universe “in the image and likeness of God” (Genesis 1:26). This form, in which the image of God comes from the image of man, encompasses the entire universe, has its roots in the description of the “Beloved” in the Song of Songs (Song 5:10-16).

For Christians, the figure of Christ is the living image and the real and perfect manifestation of the Primordial Man which definitely re-included man and human nature in their divine filiation. Consequently, this ambiguity of the nature of man in the history of Christianity, Islam, and, originally, Judaism raised the quarrel of images, icones, leading to the historical crisis, religiously, culturally and politically, of the iconoclasm in Byzantine Empire.

This Christian culture of the image in medieval times led to a new decisive chapter in the European perception and philosophy of the image in its German acceptation: Bild. In Germany, this was the movement of the Rhineland Mystics. Eckhart bases his doctrine of bilde (lat. ymago) on his understanding of “image-being” as a perfect assimilation (“ymago est similis”) and a living relationship between the image (Abbild) and that of which it is the image (Urbild): the image. Eckhart’s doctrine is characterised by his dynamic understanding of the image: “Ymago proprie est emanatio simplex, formalis, transfusiva totius essentiae purae nudae [the image is in itself a simple, typical and extended emanation of the whole pure and naked essence]”, as a source of inner boiling.

Kant, in turn, took up this dynamic view of the imaginary process. In his Transcendental Deduction of the Critique of Pure Reason, he writes: “Die Einbildungskraft soll [...] das Mannigfaltige der Anschauung in ein Bild bringen” [The imagination must form one picture of the diverse provided by intuition]. The “one picture” (Bild) gives the diverse the form of a universe - kosmos [κόὓμος] rather than khaos [χάος]. The image, Bild, is then a specific and unique image, a figurative synthesis (figurlich) because it is unified by the imagination (Einbildungskraft), understood as a unifying and synthesising force.

If imagination (gr. phantasia, ger. Phantasie) is classically defined in the Aristotelian tradition as reproductive imagination, Kant, for his part, distinguishes between a reproductive imagination, which is a matter for psychology, and a productive imagination (exhibitio derivative), which is a matter for transcendental philosophy (exhibitio originaria). When it is reproduktiv, the imagination is still called zurückrufend, (re)evocratice in German); when it is produktiv, it is still called dichtend, poiétique, or creative.

Fichte, taking up this Kantian reading of the transcendental imagination, made the creative and mystical Rhenish vision undergo a major evolution by positing “the image as such” as a “free product of the Self”. The image is not a reflection of the thing, but a projection (Reflex) of the Ego producing itself in image in the course of its free activity. In other words, the only original that the image can claim is the Ego.

A new and even more radical turn was taken with the phenomenological approach of Heidegger. Following Husserl, the Heideggerian reading of Kant puts forward the idea of an essential finitude of the human being, “king of finitude” (Hölderlin, Hymn to Freedom). Whereas German idealism put forward the unconditionality of the Ego of transcendental apperception as Selbstbewuβtsein or “self-consciousness”, Heidegger insists on the essential part that belongs, in all knowledge, to sensibility, understood not as passivity, but as receptivity.

Heidegger observes (Kantbuch, § 19): “The term Bild is to be taken here really at the source, as when we say, faced with a landscape: ‘What a beautiful view!’ (Bild) (Anblick), or again, in the presence of a dull assembly: ‘What a sad sight!’ (Bild) (Anblick).” In contrast to the Fichtean Bild, the Bild here is not forged by the force of the imagination. “We say of a landscape that it is a view (picture), species [“Anblick (Bild)”, species], as if it were looking at us [gleich als blicke sie uns an].” The Bild is here “de-subjectivised”.

In this rapid and reductive history of the image in the West, from the original symbolic focus of Plato’s cave to the philosophical developments around the Germanic Bild, two constants appear: that of the search for and identification of the source of energy, at the origin of the image – whether attributed to God, to man as the image of God, then to man alone, to the ego “desacralized”, or, on the contrary, “divinized” by the Enlightenment – and that of an eminent and dominant form in the universe of the image, the image of man, and even more so, his face.

For a long time, meeting and relaying Platonic idealism, Judeo-Christian monotheistic thought imposed the model of a generic relationship of man to God, of man in the image of God, and of man and image of God within creation. The Byzantine art of the icon, overcoming the quarrel over images that it gave rise to at the heart of medieval art, continuing through the Italian Primitives until the Renaissance, consecrates this celebration of the human face as the image of God, the bearer and witness of divine energy.

The industrial revolution, accompanying and following the philosophical revolution of the Enlightenment, favoured the prevalence of the Kantian alternative of the “reproductive imagination” as opposed to the “productive” and creative imagination by triggering the industrial and mechanical reproduction of the image, soon thereafter followed by digital reproduction. Thus, following the “linguistic turn”, the “iconic turn” was established in the contemporary history of Western thought as an interrogation and “deconstruction” of the sign and the image in language itself.

Along with Wittgenstein, Walter Benjamin’s thought is at the centre of this problematic. In The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility, he underlines and deplores the loss of “aura” caused by this “iconic turn”. Beyond this Marxist analysis in which he seeks to find compensation for this loss of aura and meaning in a revolutionary inspiration of a mystical nature, it is another text, one of profoundly metaphysical and mystical inspiration, that will perhaps allow us to end this journey with a questioning of the ontological nature of image.

In his essay On Painting, or Sign and Stain, Benjamin asks about the graphic line “determined by opposition to the surface”, then about painting and the act of painting, and finally about the stain. If the graphic line, the drawing originating as we have seen from the prehistoric depths from the primordial original act of fixing the trace of a silhouette or a human profile, is intrinsically linked to the person, to man, and thus is indistinguishable from the surface representing the universe in which he is inscribed and is in opposition to and distinct from his existence as a person, the stain, the one in the painting, “seems to present a more temporal significance, excluding any personal aspect”. Observing that in pictorial art, the painting operating as a stain covers the entire surface, it then only takes on its meaning because of a “higher power” “in the medium of the stain”... “This power is the word” which, invisible as such, manifests itself only in the composition and establishes itself in the medium of pictorial language. “The painted image bears the name of its composition”.

Thus, it is the very nature of the image, in its components, the graphic line and the “stain”, which in itself raises the question of man’s metaphysical relationship to the world. But some images are charged with a greater semantic energy; we could call them focal images. Each culture constructs a complex hierarchy of its main “focal images” that are supposed to carry and demonstrate its own vision of the world.

1. Our Chinese colleagues do not have this problem since they benefit from the semantic universality of characters. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. I would like to say that, as a good method, we should have included in our process, and in our debate, an internal debate with and between the different European language authors, and, thanks to a comprehensive translation system, let the authors express themselves in their mother tongue, as well as can be done between European and Chinese authors, taking into account the nuances, differences, and possible consequent misunderstandings, between, in this case, the English and German words. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Image as a keyword is very important in terms of the objectives of our project insofar as we consider that the dictionary of misunderstandings must take into account the “iconic turn” (that we will consider in the second part of this paper) and must be extended not only to key words and key concepts, but also to key images and include, within the iconic field, something like Ady Warburg’s “Atlas Mnemosyne” project. This would also imply extending and applying to the iconic field the principle of a search for “focal icons” (i.e., an anthropological analysis of “iconic focal points” according to Zhao Tingyang’s understanding of “focal points”), in rituals, in cultures, as anthropologists such as William Turner have done in their fieldwork (William Turner: the Drums of Affliction). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)