

Preface to the Polish Edition (2007)

The original edition of *The Power of Images* appeared in 1989, a few months before the fall of the old regimes of Central and Eastern Europe. In the Preface to the French edition of 1998, I noted that everywhere regime change was accompanied by the destruction and removal of images. If ever the subject of iconoclasm, for so long neglected by students of the history of art and images, seemed relevant to the role of images in our daily lives, it was then. Although this seemed clear enough at the time, the implications of that extraordinary conjunction of politics and the power of images could not yet be fully appreciated. But ever since 1989, and especially since the opening of the new century, public and private responses to images have stood at the center of both our political and our personal lives.

The literature on the topics tentatively raised in the book I wrote in the course of the 1980s has grown immense. It would be futile to attempt a listing of the studies pertaining to almost every chapter of *The Power of Images* that have appeared since the opening of the century.¹ But there is one phenomenon, not mentioned in the original

¹ For a listing of what seemed to me the most important works until 1997, see the citations both in the text of my *Preface to the French edition* and in its footnotes. Since then the flood of publications on questions raised in this book has turned into an avalanche. For good pointers to just how extensive both the discussion and the literature on these questions has grown, see the unfortunately selective and personal overview, omitting any reference to the many studies of my own on the subject, by Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel, eds. *Iconoclasm: Beyond the Image Wars in Science, Religion and Art*, Cambridge (Mass): MIT Press, 2002. For a sophisticated consideration of the period in European history when almost every aspect of the power of images, and the need and impulse to contain it was adumbrated, see Joseph Leo Koerner, *The Reformation of the Image*, London: Reaktion, 2004. Two important local studies of iconoclasm that should have been mentioned in the 1998 *Preface* are Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars, Traditional Religion in England 1400-1580*, New Haven and London: Yale University

edition of the work, that demands comment: the revolution that resulted from the yoking of digital photography to the internet, the development of the world-wide-web, and the free availability of images in cyberspace. Practically unknown in the 1980s, and barely existing in the 1990s, the full extent of this revolution has only become clear in the last few years. The consequences of almost instantaneous access to images of every kind, and the unprecedented ease with which images can be manipulated, have yet to be adequately measured; but it is clear that no political revolution in the modern world – indeed no political movement at all – can now occur without the the engagement of this other revolution, and of the exploitation of image-powers unimagined in the past.

Every major global and local conflict since 1989 has been followed – and sometimes inaugurated – by iconoclasm and censorship. Each of these conflicts has offered vivid testimony to the ways in which people are ineluctably drawn to images. At the same time they have also shown how beholders and consumers resist images, in both tacit and violently explicit acknowledgment of their power. In *The Power of Images* I drew attention to the fact that love and hatred of images are often two sides of the same coin. The greater their affective hold over their beholders, the more likely they are to be subject to censorship and destruction. The need to resist the real or imagined power of images all too often results in attempts at demonstrating that they do not have the power they are felt or seen to have. Erasure, defacement, and violence have become more

Press, 1992, and Norbert Schnitzler, *Ikonoklasmus–Bildersturm. Theologischer Bilderstreit und ikonoklastisches Handeln während des 15. und 16. Jahrhunderts*, Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1996.

frequent than ever before. The growing ease with which images can be disseminated and manipulated has only increased the pressures to control them. And everywhere we see images returning to serve their ancient affective and emotional functions.

For many years, commentators on the public and social functions of images have insisted that the rapid growth of reproductive means in the modern world – and ever greater facility in using them – have led to a diminution in the effects of images on their beholders. In this they have generally followed an all-too simplistic reading of Walter Benjamin’s famous essay of 1936, *The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction*. Here Benjamin is said to have claimed that the so-called “aura” of the original work of art is dissipated by reproduction in the mechanical mass media. Outside its original context, and reproduced in such a way that its uniqueness is inevitably lost, the work (it is alleged) no longer has the putatively magical effects associated with the rituals of its originary site. Of course Benjamin was speaking of the work of art rather than about everyday imagery; but no matter. The essay served its strange purpose – that of underscoring the alleged dissipation of the power of the reproduced original. In this view, photography entailed the loss of aura; and the notion that we had become inured to the strong effects of images (whether sexual or violent) by exposure to too many of them became deeply rooted.

In his notion of the *punctum* that draws attention to itself in a photograph, and thereby to the image as a whole, Roland Barthes realized that matters were not so simple (*Camera Lucida*, 1980). He understood that a photograph, though indeed a mechanical reproduction, often contains an element that holds us in its thrall -- whether an element of pathos, of irony, of personal meaning, even a meaning that makes plain the troubles

we share or could share with others. But it was really the widespread dissemination of images of the horrors of war in the Balkan conflict, and the use of images by the participants themselves, that brought about the key change in the prevailing commonplace that images lose their powers because of over-reproduction, over-availability and too-frequent repetition. In precisely the years in which images first became instantly available to all over the internet, when downloading of any image one chose could be done in the privacy of one's home, and when, in short, one could see any image one liked any number of times one liked, the Balkan wars offered image after image of tragedy and its consequences. Thanks to the computer and to the enormously enhanced powers of reproduction it offered, there was no escaping from these images and no possibility of denying their force. The natural alliance between fetishism and looking reinforced the obscenity of horror (though promiscuously public, all images could now be intensely private too, and that reinforced the alliance). All who saw the pictures responded with compassion, empathy, sadness and indignation. Those who suffered the consequences of war used even the simplest photographs as feeble substitutes for the dead, or as means of expressing gratitude for dangers averted and death thwarted. The shocking images of death, destruction, and loss penetrated to the hearts more easily, as old Horace would have said, than anything that reached our ears; and even Susan Sontag, who had been one of the great protagonists of the view that reproduction had led to palliation of the effects of images, of the bland banality of images in contemporary culture, made a 180° turn.

“It has become a cliché of the cosmopolitan discussion of images of atrocity to assume that they have little effect...”, Sontag wrote in her 2003 essay *Regarding the Pain*

of Others. “What is the evidence”, she asked, “that photos have a diminishing impact?”. She was taking issue with herself; for in her own 1977 essay *On Photography*, she had suggested that “in a world saturated, no, hyper-saturated with images” the effect of images that matter somehow became atrophied. But now she had come to realize that habituation was not automatic; and in a passage of great eloquence acknowledged that “there are pictures whose power does not abate”. One had only to think of pictures of faces ruined and disfigured by the multifold weapons of war: “Is it correct to say that people get *used* to these?” “Let the atrocious images haunt us”, she exhorted.

Yet at the same time as we were learning such lessons from the war in the old Yugoslavia, several further new phenomena – or relatively new phenomena -- emerged. However effective they may have been, pictures turned out to be more *unreliable* than ever before. It is true that images had always been distrusted, by beholders almost as much as by philosophers -- but never so much as now. We had come to learn from personal experience that images (“portable and insertable”, as Sontag aptly put it) could endlessly and easily be manipulated on the computer prior to their further circulation. Though viewers may seem to have become more gullible, they actually became more critical. They swiftly realized, as Susan Sontag has put it, that “all photographs wait to be explained by their captions”. The act of looking itself became more critical. The war in the Balkans, and the conflicts that followed, made plain how often and how easily the images of war and conflict could be manipulated – not just interpretations of images, but this time the very images themselves. It was not only a matter of the degree to which the many images of mourning, for example, drew on old archetypes of lament, but even more the extent to which suffering and destruction could be exaggerated or

diminished by Photoshop; or witnesses of a scene multiplied or removed. With the truth of reproduction so critically at stake, the whole field of images became more contested, more fragile, and at the same time more dangerous than at any time in the past. The harder beholders looked for the traces of artificial supplementation and cancellation in images, the more they fetishized the fragile media in which they were disseminated; and aura was augmented, not attenuated. Whatever was magical (or demoniacal) about images was only enhanced.

Even in those cultures where theologians had sought to interfere with the potency of images and the promiscuity of the eyes – to the point of wanting to rein them in, to close them, even to make them unavailable to other eyes – images found a new and enormously expanded field in which to function. Especially in the Muslim places of Bosnia the dead were everywhere commemorated by photographs, and the living incited to resistance by reproductions of the suffering body, and of the destruction of dwelling places. Slightly earlier in Iran one would come upon cemeteries that consisted not of tombstones, but of photographs of the dead, often simply attached to pole after pole driven into the ground. The killing fields were filled with photos. Votive pictures were enshrined as tokens of thanks from grateful survivors, and pictures of the enemy burnt. This was no culture which resisted images; on the contrary. It needed images now more than ever. Where it had once warned against the dangers of the representation of the body, it now openly acknowledged the potency those very warnings sought to obviate. The myths of aniconism seemed more transparent than at any point in the past.

And so it continued, in conflict after conflict. When the Taliban in Aghanistan blew up the great statues of the Buddhas in Bamiyan, they inserted themselves into the

long history of assailants of images who, though they may have *said* they were only destroying the images of idols, were actually testifying to their fear of the sensuality of art. The mullahs may have proclaimed that they were eliminating the cult images of an infidel religion; but was *that* religion not almost irrelevant now? At issue was surely the old fear that the gods somehow inhered in their representations, as well as the ancient anxiety that images were somehow too sensual and too affective to be amenable to easy control. In this the images of the infidels were like women: inherently wanton, they appealed to the senses and to the emotions; they distracted from the life of spirit and reason. It comes as no surprise, in this context, that Taliban culture should have insisted that women not reveal their faces and eyes in public. Their effects were akin to the seductive aspects of images. Iconophobe cultures are often fraught with just this fear. They set out to break the spirit of images just as they break – or attempt to break – the spirit of women. They scratch out eyes and blast off faces – because these, like the eyes and faces of women, are windows to the soul that animates, and the eyes that give sensual life. Take out the eyes of an image, and you remove the problem of inherence. You demonstrate that in the end you have power over images, not the other way around. As iconoclasts have insisted over the ages, they are simply dead pieces of wood and stone. The most startling photographs of the Buddhas make plain the elimination of the eyes and faces of the images of the Buddha; but the startlement is general and not simply cultural, because it is the eyes of an image that make plain its threat of life and liveliness. It is they that give images their vivacity, just as they do in the case of human beings. The eyes are wanton, and their burning desire to see what cannot be seen, to make what should not be made, can only be suppressed by force or elimination.

When Baghdad fell to the Americans, who could not have predicted that amongst the very first acts to be televised would be the toppling of the statues of Saddam Hussein? And that the image of the hated leader, once brought down to earth, would be treated as if he were somehow underfoot himself? For he – or rather it (the usual elision) – was treated with every gesture of disrespect imaginable, culminating in the ultimate Muslim marks of disrespect, such as beatings and scrapings with the soles of feet (especially to the face). To me as to many these deeds seemed, at first, to be the spontaneous expression of hostility to the symbols of a hated and repressive regime, as so often in the past; but in thinking this I was wrong, and failed to attend to the lessons of the many past iconoclastic movements I describe in this book. For in Baghdad in 2003 as, say, in Antwerp in 1566, spontaneous indignation and hatred was slightly less spontaneous than it might have seemed at first. No doubt the anger and hostility were there, and no doubt the soiling of the face of the image was intuitive. But it turned out, that just as so many cases from the past, the mobs that rushed to topple the first statue of Saddam to come down were actually smaller than they seemed. They had not in fact gathered spontaneously, but were specifically assembled to participate in the iconoclastic event, probably by the American troops themselves. Here television played its familiar manipulatory role, focusing on the participants in such a way as to suppress the evidence that they were much fewer than the close-ups of the iconoclast deeds suggested. The clear evidence of one's eyes was no longer to be trusted; because images could always be distorted, however accurate they might seem to be. For the most part the commentators concentrated on what seemed altogether plausible on this occasion – spontaneous expressions of resentment against an image, treated as if it were somehow alive (and then

satisfyingly stripped of its putative life) – and omitted the inconvenient truth that much on that day was actually orchestrated.

If this preface had been written before May 2004, already then it would have been possible to conclude that everywhere the pornography of images accompanied the pornography of power. But such a claim would not yet have achieved its full resonance. It would indeed have offered a satisfying symmetry between reality and metaphor – but who could have predicted how literally it would be illustrated by the images that came out of the American-run prison in Abu Ghraib? In this topic lies another book, but a few comments need to be added here. In the Iraqi conflict the soldiers themselves – and not just the photojournalists -- were equipped with digital cameras. These photographs, then could be endlessly and unstoppably disseminated, not just collected and pasted into the albums of family and war. More than ever they served the purposes of fetishism as well as of memory. In the photographs torture and pornography literally came together. And those forms of pornography were chiefly learned from the internet. Who prior to our times would have thought of devising as forms of torture forced masturbation, simulated sodomy and public humiliation of the penis by women? All of these, of course, are singularly shaming to their Muslim victims, in a culture, which has much more overt concerns about nudity and sexual shame than we now in the West. Armed with their cameras, the perpetrators actually interspersed their torture pictures (and the proof of their own participation in them) with photographs of themselves engaged in sexual acts. Though the defenders of the Bush regime may have said that these tortures were no worse than American college pranks, they failed to fully understand the context of these deeds, and the real powers of images over mere words.

Whenever we saw those photographs -- and we could not bear to see them -- they seared our hearts and minds. The terrible and humiliating force of their scabrousness will continue to inspire the enemies of America. What we have seen with our eyes have penetrated to our hearts, and to those of the Muslim world, more effectively than almost anything else; and the fact that they have been and will continue to be reproduced will take very little away from their powers. There are some things in the world that do not easily admit habituation.

The story goes on, the examples multiply. Television and the web continue to send out one grim image after another. Censorship becomes ineffectual. Attempts are made to suppress the horror of images – but the new media have ways of subverting and circumventing that suppression. The images of Abu Ghraib remained unknown for a few months, but the pictures would not go away. Some of them were cropped, but somewhere – everywhere – they remained available on the web, in the digital world. That in itself contributed to the shock of such images: their very unstoppable. Finally censorship had had its come-uppance. We can no longer change or suppress an image, because it will always be there, in infinitely reproductive a form.

Here the Benjaminian notion of diminution of effect receives its *coup de grace*. The very term is re-endowed with its original intensity because of the images it calls to mind. Even though they can only be fully seen on video clips on (or downloaded from) the internet, the recent images of decapitation of hostages by Muslim extremists are ineradicably shocking. They are so shocking that most newspapers cannot publish them, for fear of ill-defined but often-mentioned consequences on children and the future of our feelings as civilized people. But these images are almost instantly available, and it is

precisely because these pictures and films of decapitation offer the most vivid sense possible of the living dead that we understand the real power of images to engage compassion, empathy and indignation. With chilling and unprecedented clarity we understand the presence of the living in their images; and it is not difficult to acknowledge our cognitive inability to let go of those presences when they are dead -- when people are actually as dead as the images that represent them, and when heartsick memory needs pictures to assist it in bringing the dead to some form of life. These are strong lessons; but in New York the images of Abu Ghraib are put on exhibition at the International Center for Photography, and in Hollywood mediocre films such as Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* use the standard Passion iconography of centuries, along with scenes of the humiliation of the human body, to strengthen the perdurable forms of vulgar religion. If the power of images were uncomplicatedly reduced by repetition and reproduction it would perhaps have been better.

