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# THE POWER OF IMAGES AS A PRECONDITION OF THE FEAR OF IMAGES?

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Using the art of the ancient Near East as a starting point, I wish to raise the question of the relationship between the inherent power of images and the fear of images that is the subject of the present seminar. This connection was flagged early on by David Freedberg, in his book, *The Power of Images* (1989), and has been underscored by the seminar's organizer, Luc Bachelot, in his own work [see *Cahier des thèmes transversaux ArScAn*, vol. IX (2007-2008)], as well as in his project statement for the seminar. I shall focus upon the multiple images of Gudea of Lagash, ruler of the city-state of Lagash in ancient Sumer toward the end of the third millennium BCE, however what I say could easily be applied to the whole repertoire of Mesopotamian images.

I use the Gudeas because this is material on which I have worked over the years, and also because the excavated examples from the modern site of Telloh are here in the Musée du Louvre, so well known in France. And I would stress in so doing that they are works of three-dimensional sculpture, not painting. Here, it is important to note that the terms for "image" in the languages of ancient Mesopotamia, Sumerian and Akkadian, do not distinguish between media, or between two- and three - dimensional objects. All are referred to by the term "image" (Sum. **alam**; Akk. *salmu*).

Initially, upon their discovery, the Gudea sculptures, both standing and seated, were – by virtue of their clasped hands and pious gaze – thought to be analogues for well-known works in the Medieval/Renaissance repertoire of European art: those donor portraits of pious church donors with similarly clasped hands, as characterized by, for example, that of *Philippe le bon*, Duke of Burgundy, in the XV<sup>e</sup> c. And yet, once the Sumerian texts inscribed upon most of the statues and the longer inscriptions of Gudea found on two clay cylinders were read in conjunction with the images, it became clear that there were major differences between the two classes of artworks.

Not only were the European examples paintings, but also it could be shown that vested in the respective theologies underlying the image-making were very different notions of the place and role of imagery in religion and in society.

The Gudea images were intended to be placed in temple settings – both as reverent figures standing before divine images in shrines and seated in dedicated chapels to the ruler – they were also subject to ritual consecration that brought the image from a state of inert matter to one of physical enlivenment. This relationship between the representation and the referent has been foregrounded by Louis Marin in his *Le portrait du roi* (1981), and I would emphasize it here. The Gudea images did not simply represent the ruler, Gudea; they in fact stood actively, once ritually enlivened, consecrated and installed, as living manifestations of the ruler – in short, an "image vivante," explicitly instructed to speak to the deity on behalf of the living referent.

In Western Judeo-Christian tradition, and in Islam as well, this is tantamount idolatry. Images so constituted give rise to great anxiety, and justify destruction – as per injunctions in the Hebrew Bible, and as frequently illustrated in all three traditions. One Muslim painting from Northwest Iran, probably Tabriz, of the early XIV<sup>e</sup> c, presently in the Edinburgh University Library, shows *Ibrahim destroying the idols of his fathers...*, and is particularly apt, as the idol being destroyed look surprisingly like the bald-headed Gudeas we know so well! One sees similar representations of the fall or destruction of idols in Christian art of the same era – as, for example, an equally XIV<sup>e</sup> c. relief quatrefoil from the façade of Amiens Cathedral, showing the sin of idolatry as a man bending his knee before a toppling statue.

Western discomfort before the enlivened image has given rise to a very narrow historical window in which such manifestations and enlivenings could be entertained – as, for example, Classical antiquity prior to the advent of Christianity. Thus, myths such as that of Pygmalion and Galatea were acceptable because retrojected to a time prior to religious enlightenment (as seen in the Gérôme painting of that name of 1885); but contemporary practices in much of Asia that continued to observe images as manifestations of divine subjects, rather than as mere representations thereof were definitely *not* acceptable!

THÈME IV

We have seen examples of the anxiety created by images and practices that contravene our collective theologies in very recent times, as Serbs in the former Yugoslavia destroyed mosques of ethnic Albanian Muslims, while Muslims destroyed churches, as part of ethnic conflict. Oftentimes, then, the fear of images is an artifact of the anxiety vis-à-vis “the other” – whether political, religious, or ethnic; an abrogation of what Emmanuel Levinas has called “the humanism of the other” – an idealist construct in the face of real-world situations in which “us/not us” separates a given subject from not only a living other, but from the identity-constituents of that other. And as a by-product, this anxiety can also give rise to the making of new images that ridicule or deny the images of that other – as in many colonial images that exaggerate or invent local practices [here seen on a late XVIII<sup>e</sup> c. etching projecting ecstatic abandon upon a fictive South Asian peoples worshipping a rampant, ithyphallic elephant deity].

This anxiety is not always turned toward “the other,” however; it can also be turned toward oneself. The discomfort generated by images that can step over a line into idolatrous practices is clear in Old Testament texts, such as Psalm 130 and Isaiah, and in consequence, images in Roman Catholic Christian churches are carefully theorized as ‘representations,’ *not* manifestations. And yet, cultic practices that allow for the dressing of and caring for images that can in turn exercise agency skate perilously close to the line – as witnessed by the concerns of Church Fathers such as Bernard of Clairvaux with respect to the miraculous powers of the IX<sup>e</sup> century reliquary turned object of veneration of *Sainte Foy* in the abbey church of Conques.

Such concerns were clearly articulated at the time of the last Great Catholic Pilgrimage in 1519 – that to the image known as the *Schöne Maria* in Regensburg – as recorded at the time by woodcuts of Altendorfer and particularly Ostendorfer. In the latter woodcut, although the intended object of the pilgrimage was the probably Byzantine icon within the church, the image makes clear that worshippers also turned their fervor to the three-dimensional image of the Virgin and Child outside the church entrance, prostrating themselves as if before a proscribed idol!

Here I would now introduce my own thoughts on the way in which the Gudeas fit into this broader discourse. Pilgrimages continue to exist on smaller scales and can exert great affective power over their devotees – as often the case with the ‘Black Madonnas’ of Europe – here, the *Vièrge Noire* at Einsiedeln, Switzerland, probably of the late XIII<sup>e</sup>, early XIV<sup>e</sup> c. Installed images of the Virgin bear witness to the attention given to ornamenting and dressing the statue at different times of the annual and festival calendar, in practices really quite comparable to the attention given the cult image in Hindu temples of India, such as the image of Krishna *Rādharāmana* in modern Vrindavan.

One could, therefore, stress the analogies of cultic attention to three-dimensional images in the two traditions; and yet, they are distinguished by that very theological move mentioned above: the distinction between a ‘representation,’ even if miracle-working, and a ‘manifestation.’ Christians of Protestant persuasion often express similar discomfort at Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox veneration of images, just as the Judeo-Christian and Muslim world in general expresses ambivalence or hostility toward animistic, Hindu, Buddhist practices centered upon images.

I would argue that our museum world is one way of dealing with such reactions. The fear and anxiety occasioned by religious images, particularly those designated “not us,” has been at least partially offset by the displacement of such images from the original places of worship in which they exercised affective power, moving them to a domesticated and neutered context in which formal properties and historical labels are foregrounded. In the museum, such works may well induce pleasure, awe even, and elicit aesthetic response, but they rarely evoke fear, because their numinous properties have been left behind along with their original settings and cultural activities.

Thus the Gudeas from Telloh, that were intended to be distributed across many temples to deities in ancient Girsu, satellite city of Lagash, as they are presently grouped all in the same room/gallery of the Louvre, no longer evoke fear. Their initial command by the patron, Gudea: “Statue speak!” is a historical footnote pertinent to an ancient belief system; but one does not expect/experience the images as so empowered, nor is any of the mystery of their initial architectural setting, with whatever affective power that may have induced, preserved in the present installation. The ‘agency’ of the art work, as theorized by Alfred Gell in his book *Art and Agency* (1998), may still pertain; but the ascribed actual agency of the image, culturally empowered, exists only in history, in legend, or in folklore. We, then, have domesticated the idols of the past/the other, by our de- and re-contextualization into our own, controlled space.

And in several socio-cultural/religious traditions, particularly Judaism and Islam, the very image itself has been demoted in favor of the word as the prime locus of affective experience. Yet, here, too, I would argue that ambiguities abound. However much a tradition may distance itself from the notion of a living image and practices deemed idolatrous, the underlying history of worship of, and hence the power of images and imagery is never far from the surface. I show one last image, that of the interior of a Jewish synagogue – this one in Montpellier, but it could be virtually anywhere – with the Ark of the Torah open to reveal the scrolls held within. Clearly, the word is glorified; its pride of place in the shrine having taken over from the cult image. And yet: the decoration of the individual scrolls includes terms one would associate with embodiment: covering garments of precious textiles, and the use of terms such as “crown” for the upper ornament and “breastplate” for the pendant pectoral – terms that clearly have echoes of the corporeal adornment of cult images. The ultimate designation of the scrolls as representing the “living Torah” maps closely over the living images of the past and of parts of Asia.

I would leave this discussion with a distinction to be pursued in future, along with one last proposition. The distinction is that between ‘fear’ and ‘awe’ – clearly distinguished in the languages of Mesopotamia, but which cannot be pursued here. The proposition is that the three-dimensional image generates considerably more anxiety and ‘fear’ than the two-dimensional image. That is to say, sculpture elicits more fear than painting. I would argue that the corporeal analogue of the three-dimensional image to the three-dimensional human body lies at the source of this fear; and that the potential ‘power’ of the image in crossing the boundary between the material and the animate is precisely what illicit the ‘fear.’ To be continued.....