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Visual Culture: First Draft

James Elkins

Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel, eds. *Iconoclash: Beyond the Image Wars in Science, Religion, and Art*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002. 703 pp., 300 color ills., 535 b/w. \$45 paper.

It's heavier than Arnason's *History of Modern Art*, and larger than Rem Koolhaas's *Harvard Design School Guide to Shopping*. It was the bane of my existence the six times I carried it with me on a flight across the Atlantic, trying to read it in Economy-class airplane seats (it fits on the tray-tables, but you can't turn the pages). This behemoth of an exhibition catalog is one of the most important books yet produced on the intersection of images as seen from the vantage points of art history, art criticism, religious studies, and science studies. It is the *Fragments for a History of the Human Body* for the present decade: like that earlier book—which was, incidentally, even larger, at three volumes—*Iconoclash* samples a number of widely divergent approaches and ideas around a concept of pressing importance. Back then, the concept was “the body”—a subject that is still under-theorized—and here, the concept is the power of images of all sorts and the desire they incite to destroy or multiply them.

I begin in this unserious way because the contributors themselves often adopt a light touch. The principal editors, Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel, have treated their material like absent-minded but expert shepherds. The book began in an exhibition in the Center for Art and Media, Karlsruhe, but it is more than just a record of that exhibition.

Some essayists were allowed to stray, and others—the ones whose contributions make points closest to the exhibition’s theme—were kept tightly controlled. Latour’s approach is catholic and generous to a fault: in fact it can appear that he is happy just to let everyone ply their own “iconophilic” trades while he observes the emerging collage. But this book is also much more serious, both in its potential claims and in its actual accomplishments. To mirror that mixture of pleasure and work, I will start by looking at what’s scattered, and work my way toward the features I think make *Iconoclasm* an essential text.

1. *Ancillary contributions.* Much of the book is taken up with essays that don’t so much contribute to the central project, as they build a sense of how the project might be supported in some future forum. Adam Lowe, a painter, contributes a short essay on Burmese Buddhist votive paintings that has more to do with surrealism than iconoclasm (72-74); there is a weak essay by Michael Taussig—author of the interesting book *Defacement* (Stanford University Press, 1999)—on appearances of the flag after 9/11 (82-83). The physicist and cultural critic Jean-Marc Lévy-Leblond contributes a page and a half on the “reliquary” containing the gilded middle middle finger of Galileo’s right hand. The essay is unremarkable, and it ends with the startling notion that “when it comes to science, we are all idiots” (147). A number of essays document cases that could be connected to the theme, but aren’t. Peter Geimer has a quirky essay about the Stadtschloss in Berlin (384-85); there is a complicated history of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow (386-88), and a number of catalog-style essays on individual artworks such as Carsten Höller and Rosemarie Trockel’s *House for Pigs and Children* (421-22). A couple of essays are really just *jeux d’esprit*, like Richard Powers’s essay on the play-pretend corruption of his digital file of Van Gogh’s *Bedroom at Arles* (476-78) and an essay, suspiciously credited to one “Michel Jaffrennou—by way of Bruno Latour,” which proposes that a picture which looks a lot like one of Erro’s collages is actually “not a picture” (479-82). Essays like these, the silly and serious alike, are relatively untheorized and often disconnected from wider historical issues: they are raw material for future inquiries into iconoclasm.

2. *A survey of iconoclasm and iconophilia.* There are also essays in *Iconoclasm* that can, if they are read by themselves, comprise a good introductory survey of iconoclasm as it is documented in art history and anthropology. Pema Konchok’s essay is a good introduction to iconoclasm in modern China and Tibet (40-59); it could be

supplemented by Olivier Christin's brief piece on French sixteenth-century mutilations of images of the King (66-68), Simon Schaffer's essay on seventeenth-century iconoclasm and idolatry (498-515), Andreas Meyer's and Lydia Marinelli's pocket histories of Jean-Martin Charcot's materialism and Freud's fetishism (465-69), Lorraine Daston's *Albumblatt* on natural images found in stones (136-38), Jerry Brotton's survey of the iconography of St. George (155-57), Hans Belting's graceful, abstract essay on Hiroshi Sugimoto's *Theaters* and their sense of memory and space (423-27), Pierre-Olivier Lécho't's brief text on the erection of a monument in Nauchâtel to the iconoclast William Farel (214-17), Catherine Lucas's well-written demonstration that the prohibition against images in contemporary Islam is not lifted only for the élite (224-26), Boris Groys's survey of miscellaneous iconoclasms in film (282-95), Hans Ulrich Obrist's detailed history of the iconoclastic occupation of the XIV Triennale di Milano in 1968 (360-83), and especially Peter Galison's compact survey of his recent work on images in nineteenth- and twentieth-century physics—an essay that can provide an introduction for those unfamiliar with his work (300-23). *Iconoclash* is enormous; I could go on listing another ten or fifteen essays that would be part of such an anthology. A handful of essays also contribute to iconoclasm beyond vision—in the Patricia de Aquino's account of the synesthesia of Afro-Brazilian worship (234-35), and in Denis Laborde's very entertaining survey of political and institutional “iconoclashes” that have been provoked by music from Bach to Daniel Barenboim's performance of extracts from *Tristan und Isolde* in Jerusalem (254-80). There are even three essays devoted to the destroyed Buddhas of Bamiyan, Afghanistan, which together make a fascinating concise introduction to the subject (75-77, 218-20, 221-23).

Other essays would be deficient as elements in a survey, usually because they lack scholarly apparatus. Brigitte Derlon's review of the display of New Ireland objects suffers from a total lack of notes, so it repeats material widely discussed elsewhere (139-42); despite its philosophic acumen, Peter Geimer's essay on the history of photographs of the Shroud of Turin suffers from a similar lack of connection to the relevant literature (143-45). Here especially, and in Marie José Mondzian's essay on the same subject (324-35), it is a pity that Georges Didi-Huberman did not participate in *Iconoclash*. May I propose that Bruno Pinchard's ahistorical prose poems on the *Hypnerotomachia poliphili* and on Freud's reading of Michelangelo's *Moses* could have been cut (151-54, 456-57)? Pinchard's biographical note at the end of the book observes that he “thinks of Italy as a

very beautiful woman: he visits her, he pilfers her, he cries for her” (697). Like any good party conversation, sometimes *Iconoclasm* gets a bit lost.

3. *Theorizing on iconoclasm.* In making these first two points, I have not even managed to name one-fifth of the essays in the volume. *Iconoclasm* is certainly a clash of historical material, philosophy, vignettes, *Albumblätter*, and *feuilletons* of various sorts, and in that sense it is effectively unreviewable. Yet many of the texts also contain elements for an expanded sense of iconoclasm. Konchak mentions “econo-ideo-iconoclashes” (45). William Pietz proposes that iconoclasm is really impure iconoclasm, sullied by the usual “merely human” motives (65). Heather Stoddard, speaking of Buddhism, distinguishes between “inner” and “outer” iconoclashes (436-55). There is passive iconoclasm, when statues are left to crumble (458-59), and masked iconoclasm, in which masks signify an end to the transparency of childhood (462-64). There is self-iconoclasm, in Eugen Schönebeck (84-85), and there is iconoclasm as an insight into the new kind of “idol” (470-72). Latour himself implies that the remains of iconoclasm can be useful but empty by reprinting Hans-Christian Andersen’s “Emperor’s New Clothes,” which ends when the King realizes his error and says, “Now I must bear up to the end” (161-62). Galison posits iconophilia and iconoclasm as a contrast between “the concrete and the abstract” (323). There is even a theory, couched in a very fancy allegory, that the incommensurability of cultures might prevent any theory of iconoclasm (this is Miguel Tamen’s idea, 158-60).

“Simple” iconoclasm is revealed to be forever split from itself, or forever in anticipation of itself, or forever wedded to its opposite. The three are blended in many essays, but also distinct. (a) First is the claim that iconoclasm is split from itself, that “iconoclasts’ hammers always seemed to strike *sideways*, destroying something *else*” (15). (b) Iconoclasm also seems to anticipate itself, redouble onto itself, repeat itself. Pierre Centlivres, for instance, notes that the Buddhas in Bamiyan were intentionally faceless, which folds the Taliban iconoclasm onto an ordinary one and connects the sculptures to the early aniconic phase of Buddhism (77). (c) In addition, iconoclasm is also wedded to its opposite. A long and somewhat wandering essay by Dario Gamboni argues mainly that modernist images are “indestructible” because they spring up after innumerable iconoclasm, blending the two motivations (88-135). Gamboni, Latour, and others note that iconoclasts, “theoclasts,” and “ideoclasts” have produced “a fabulous population of new images, fresh icons, rejuvenated mediators:

greater flows of media, more powerful *ideas*, stronger *idols*.” In other words, iconoclasm is always already its opposite.

Readings that investigate the ambiguity of iconoclasm are in line with Latour’s initial definition. “Iconoclasm,” he writes, “is when we know what is happening in the act of breaking... iconoclash, on the other hand, is when one does not know, one hesitates, one is troubled” because it’s uncertain whether the act is “destructive or constructive” (14). Iconoclash is “the enigma, the hesitation, the visual puzzle,” between the idea that images are “dangerous” (and yet we have so many of them) and they are “innocent” (and yet they “such enduring passions”) (18). Most of the intellectual work on the ambiguity of the concept of iconoclash takes place in the introduction by Latour, in a long and beautifully worked essay by Joseph Koerner, and in a short contribution by Caroline Jones (more on that under heading 4). Koerner’s text is nothing short of brilliant, and it is worth the book’s price all by itself. He puts the central ambiguities of iconoclasm quite succinctly: “Long before the hammer strikes them, religious images are already self-defacing. Claiming their truth by dialectically repeating and repudiating the deception from which they alone escape, they are, each of them, engines of the iconoclash that periodically destroys and renews them” (167). The central insight, and the moment of highest abstraction, comes midway through the essay. Koerner is considering the claim, often made in “image wars,” that iconoclasts are secretly idolators. In a sense idolatry is only a fiction, because no one is an idolator in the sense that iconoclastic gestures imply. “If idolatry is indeed but an accusation made by iconoclasts to caricature certain uses of pictures, if (as this exhibition contends) it is less a belief than a fiction of naïve belief, what function is served by accusing the accusers of their [own] accusation?” (179, 182) The answer leads Koerner to what I consider a central insight: “believers in belief”—that is, in this case, iconoclasts—“do not confuse representations with persons (the idolator’s imputed error). Rather, they confuse representations with facts. Imagining that iconophiles know the wood falsely (as God, not wood), they hit the wood but instead strike *representation*... no wonder the critical gesture rebounds” (183). This is an abstract argument but, I think, extremely cogent. It can stand as an *Ur*-explanation for the ambiguities in iconoclash that are played out throughout the book, because the “wood”—the material and substance of the icon—is always representation in the discourse of iconoclasm, and it repeatedly becomes *explicitly* representation, and therefore liable to further attack, each time it is seen as “specious.” Iconoclasts’ hammers

strike “sideways,” and scholars’ arguments veer into ambiguities, and the resurgence of icons following iconophobic attacks seems to be interesting and in need of explanation, all because the real *Bildersturm* takes place within and periodically against the emergence of representation as an explicit theme.

Koerner ends by saying, very boldly, that an interest in religious iconoclasm, in “the impulse to pass beyond representation” or to do without representation altogether “entraps us in a world that is *only* representation: religion as nothing but what people customarily do” (213). It’s a bold admission because it means that the entire subject of iconoclasm tends, by minuscule degrees and without our notice, *away* from the religious truths that it seeks to understand. How much more interesting and honest art historical scholarship would be if it could find a way of acknowledging that truth whenever it turned its attention to religious images.

4. *Beyond iconoclasm*. There is also the possibility of escaping the conceptual frame of “iconoclasm” altogether. Latour asks how it might be possible “to go *beyond* the cycle of fascination, repulsion, destruction, [and] atonement” that is generated by iconophilia and iconoclasm (15). “Our bet,” he concludes, is that “interference” between scientific images, religious images, and art images “should move us beyond the image wars” (21). The subtitle of *Iconoclasm is Beyond the Image Wars in Science, Religion, and Art*, making a kind of escape or transcendence part of the exhibition’s purpose. In my reading, the only essay that seriously addresses that possibility is Caroline Jones’s. For a number of years, Latour has been brave enough to swear allegiance to a methodological flag he calls mediation: the inevitable interposition of layers of representation between the seeing self and the original object. The concept has appeared in various guises in post-structuralist thought; in Derrida’s writing, it is the critique of presence—but for Latour it is a particularly *pragmatic* concept. He has mapped the sequence of representations that lead from a scientific instrument to the truth it appears to generate, and in one lovely short essay, he has mapped the cascade of representations that led researchers from clods of earth samples taken in the Amazon to the printed pages of journals published in France. No one these days would argue that images are not mediated—no one, that is, except iconoclasts who need to frame idolators in those terms. The argument would be about the mediation itself. Latour says mediation “requires—why abstain from the word?—spirituality” (34). Mediation also *is* the new spirituality, and the limits to a mediator’s awareness of mediation are the terms themselves—seeing self,

original subject, nature, presence, abstraction, concretization—that are necessary in order to speak about mediation in the first place. A ladder or cascade of schematic representations, leading from the obdurate world to the abstraction of science or art, needs to rest somewhere: it needs to be planted in the soil, and it to lean against the wall of abstraction.

Jones's essay is aimed at one of the principal concepts that stabilizes the ladder of mediation, supporting Latour's enterprise. "If iconoclasm stands for productive collisions among endless mediations," she writes, "then what might be useful is a brief note on the systematics of our great abstractions, an argument about how they themselves are as mediating as the icons they abjure." In particular the concepts of abstraction and representation, as they were played out in modernism, were demonstrably products of a series of specific social contexts: they were "human, labored, mediating" (412). We make "cultural and therapeutic use of our constructed dialectic between these two kinds of mediation—abstraction and representation," so they cannot function in any sustained way as supports for ladders of *other* mediations.

I agree with Jones's argument, and with her unease about Latour's openness: "his fatigue with criticality worries me," she writes at the end of her essay (416). She has in mind the necessity of continuously and vigilantly critiquing the "appealing concoctions" of Hollywood cinema. I would extend that beyond the critique of common culture: Latour is so open, so interested in conversations of all sorts, that he has always had a benign weakness when it comes to concerted critique. I would be surprised if he took Jones's argument about the mediated nature of abstraction as a serious problem: shift the ladder to include abstraction itself, and you have a new scale of mediation. People like Latour are so rare in academia that I am loath to pursue any criticism too far. (I once recognized Latour's writing in an anonymous reader's report, because it contained a good-natured joke: who else manages to keep the good humor that should be part of any democratic conversation?) Yet I think the path toward that critique is clear enough: cascading mediations are inherently weak precisely because they are supple and adaptable. As soon as interpretation slows to what Latour calls the "freeze-frame" ("extracting an image out of the flow, and becoming fascinated with it") allegiances form, stances harden into positions, and criticality begins to make sense. The ultimate problem for an iconophile of the sort Latour describes, swimming in "a world *filled* with active images, moving mediators" is that anger and fear are incomprehensible (26). Latour's position is nothing

if not wise, but it points to a final unbroachable problem with studying iconoclashes, a problem he shares with Jones's closer-grained attention to mediation: what happens, as Koerner might ask, when it comes time to take *beliefs* seriously? In 1991, the University of Chicago Press published *Fundamentalisms Observed*, a partial record of an enormous conference on fundamental religious practices around the world. In the preface the editor, Martin Marty, observes just in passing—as if it were an object of only slight concern—that in fact not a single practicing fundamentalist had contributed to the book. All the conference participants were more or less lapsed, and therefore capable of talking to one another—capable of becoming, in Latour's word, iconophiles. In the spectrum of attitudes to images, fundamentalists occupy the ultraviolet of pure belief. The many spectral lines crowded at the other end of the spectrum are iconophiles of various sorts, closely spaced because that is where the ground remains to be contested.

5. *What matters for visual studies.* *Iconoclash* has significance beyond its theme, important as that is to art history and neighboring disciplines. It represents various disciplines that are currently converging on the field variously known as visual studies, visual culture, and image studies. At least two essays, Moshe Halbertal's (60-62) and Dörte Zbikowski's (428-34), are written from a religionist's viewpoint. Others are written from anthropological, linguistic, political, and art-critical standpoints. Those disciplines are currently converging into the new amalgam known variously as visual studies, visual culture, or image studies. The convergence is uneven, reflecting our uneven interests. I note, for example, that science is inexactly represented despite the curators' best efforts: the essays on scientific images are not explained at the same level of detail as in the texts that concern art. An essay on autoradiography by Hans-Jörg Rheinberger barely explains how such images are produced (516-19), and one on digital images of particle physics by Jörg Huber experiments hardly touches on the content of the images (520-22). *Iconoclash* is the diametric opposite of Jean-François Lyotard and Thierry Chaput's 1985 exhibition *Les immatériaux*, in that *Iconoclash* promotes mediation and social context; but the two exhibitions are not entirely dissimilar in the disparity between the detail accorded to the history of art and that accorded to science. The inequality is not a flaw, so much as it is a map of people's concerns. I am not entirely happy with Latour's reasons for including science—he says that the “pattern of confidence, belief, rejection, and spite is entirely different” for scientific images and art images (19). Nor is it wholly convincing that the exhibition's third component, contemporary art, is included because it is against

transcendence and offers “no access to truth or to the divinities” (21). The reason for including “science, religion, and art” (in the book’s subtitle) can’t be as it is put in the introduction, to find a way past iconoclasm and iconophilia. Rather it’s a matter of beginning an open-ended conversations about *all* images—all together, all talking at once. That is Latour’s very generous concept of “a world *filled* with active images, moving mediators,” talkative and inventive iconophiles, who like to “move fast from one image to another” and who no longer “dream the impossible dream of jumping to a non-existent original” (26-27). Those people are *us*: academics interested in images in our particular conflicted way. We are unwilling to subscribe to the notion that images can capture the truth but unable to tear ourselves away from the last faint echoes of that possibility, wary of image fanatics but fascinated by their histories, skeptical of the possibility of directly representing divinity but nearly hypnotized by the many attempts that have been made to do just that.

The most important problem for the emerging field of visual studies may not be the triangulation of science, religion, and art, or even the twin themes of iconoclasm or iconophilia: in other words, the name *Iconoclash* may end up being ancillary to whatever concerns the new field turns out to have. Let me propose another title, and therefore another use, for *Iconoclash*: I would call it *Visual Culture: First Draft*.