

An Anthropological View of Vision

Antonio Marazzi

The image of the cave described by Plato in Book VII of the *Republic* is the most frequently quoted emblematic example of the belief in the illusory nature of what sight transmits to the mind. 'We must compare the world of the senses with the view of those who live in a prison', says Socrates, referring to the cave in which there are men in chains who can see nothing but a wall onto which are projected shadows of objects lit by a fire behind them, and who, ignorant of the objects themselves, are inclined to give more credit to the shadows than the objects, as long as they are not free and able to rise in their souls from the visible to the intelligible world.

The whole history of human thought could be rewritten in terms of the confrontation between the eye and the mind. The immediate power, poignant charm, evocative force of the messages sent from one to the other have encouraged a bewitching abandon, internal illuminations, but also moments of deliberate blindness and destructive furies. Starting from periods of vague iconophilia, a large number of societies have moved to periods of obsessive iconoclasm in public forms of representation. From sublime experiences of divine mystical visions to the most degenerate forms of violence and pornography, it is the visual image, perceptible or mental, that imposes itself.

In many cultures mental images have been seen as the main carriers of an experience of the supranatural world. The vision is the instrument used by the shaman to make his journey into the spirit world, as well as by the oracle for divination. It is during a vision that the shaman receives the necessary powers and instructions to act subsequently on people, curing their sickness or mental disturbances, and on nature, drawing out its secrets or asking for desired events like rain. In order to enter into relation with spiritual entities reference is made to visual contact in diverse cultural contexts: an expression that goes from the metaphorical to the concrete in the mystical experience where the mental evocation assumes the appearance of sense perception itself. Voices are heard, prints are received, the flesh is stirred, as with the temptations of St Anthony and Simon the Hermit: but it is to the eyes that the role is given of proving the direct relationship that has been established with what others

Copyright © ICPHS 2003

SAGE: London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi, www.sagepublications.com
0392-1921 [200308]50:3;89-98;038512

cannot see. Apparitions of the Virgin have given rise to cult sites where people go to ask for a favour, for where she has been seen she is felt by the faithful to be nearest at hand.

There is a close relationship between the nature of the mental vision and the cultural context in which it occurs. Whereas all who have eyes see what is in front of them and so avoid an obstacle, for instance, although they receive specific cultural 'instructions' as regards interpreting what appears to their sight, the attention to be paid to it and so forth; mental visions seem to be formed from available cultural elements and then themselves become cultural material. The following question could be asked here: if culture only supplies the instruments to know or rather to recognize the image formed in the mind, is the priority given nevertheless to the object of the vision, which has an absolute, extrasensory character within a spiritualist perspective?

From very ancient times eastern cultures have developed techniques for accessing extrasensory realities through practices of internal visualization. At its most advanced stages Hindu and Buddhist meditation is based on evoking before oneself a spiritual figure, most often an anthropomorphic one, with which one enters into empathetic communion by acquiring powers and virtues through detachment from an illusory (*samsaric*) sensory reality. Such figures and the moral qualities they represent belong to the repertoire of a religious tradition whose formation belongs to a certain historico-cultural context, and thus they are manifestations of a socially conditioned thinking, which individuals can develop and recognize in their solitary ascetic practice. Furthermore, even in their deceptive (*samsaric*) nature, external forms are seen as an important aid to raising the spirit to the pure non-sensory vision. The geometric forms of mandalas are symbolic containers for spirits to be evoked and help to focus the mind, concentrate it on a central point from which the vision will unfold.

Though there were no anthropomorphic representations of divinities in the oldest Vedic tradition, later on, as we know, Hinduism generated an almost unlimited number of divinities, who were multiplied in their various manifestations and often doubled, with complementary male and female identities, possessing rich external attributes that make it easier to identify them. Hindu exegesis provides a justification for this pantheon by saying that these forms are themselves imperfect, as is everything that comes to us through the senses, but nevertheless useful in order to draw people's attention to spiritual aspects of which these figures are manifestations, and to rise towards them.

Vision also allows us to obtain useful pointers to orient ourselves and act on sensory reality. It is the duty of oracles to interpret signs, which are like messages left for humans by spiritual forces that humans manage to pick up in a world of generally known and familiar phenomena. A need to interpret an unknown external reality may arise, however, making obvious, with all its problematic, the relationship between the internal vision and the external forms in which it can be manifested, between mental processes and the cultural context in which these processes occur and express themselves.

Such a case took place in Tibet when the state oracle received in a vision an indication of where the latest incarnation of the Dalai Lama might be found. He stated

he had seen a house whose roof was decorated with turquoise ceramic tiles, which was foreign to Tibetan custom. It might be a house situated in an area where the local Tibetans had adopted Chinese ways. In a village near the then Chinese border, where the houses had this type of decoration, a child was found who was later acclaimed as the current Dalai Lama. With many religious now exiled far from Tibet, the question of reading a social terrain belonging to a different culture crops up regularly in the interpretation of signs that are useful for finding other incarnations, maybe even among western children.

In these cases, vision techniques developed and practised within a specific cultural tradition agree to interpret realities belonging to different cultural contexts by repositioning them in their own terms and adapting to changes caused by historical events. Though in the past reincarnations were sought among members of the native society, the search can now spread to lands that have been opened up to awareness because of life events. Thus visions are not limited or conditioned by the original cultural context.

The 'religious' vision

Just as external forms of reality, reincarnated individuals for instance, can be interpreted through internal visions, visions can be projected externally in visible forms.

Unlike the Hindu pantheon, which is explicitly a cultural invention with edifying and didactic aims, the Virgin of Lourdes has become a cult object in an iconographic form that corresponds faithfully to the description of her appearance by Bernadette: white robe and blue sash round her waist. In this case there is a transfer from the plane of the vision to the plane of external representation, whether pictorial or sculptural. The two planes reinforce each other: in some sense this form legitimates the cult and lends greater credibility to the dialogue between the faithful and the Virgin: in this form the cult celebrates the original event.

It is precisely this point that was the object of the iconoclastic attack launched by the Orthodox Church in the eighth century. At the Council of Hieria proclaimed by the Emperor Constantine V in 757, a declaration (*horos*) was made to demonstrate the error of those who fabricate and worship images. In it the 'division or confusion in the hypostatic union of the two natures of the person manifested individually' is condemned, a union 'that surpasses understanding and is ineffable and unknowable. Therefore what is this absurd idea of the "painter of madness", urged on by the attraction of sordid gain and a quest for profit that ought not to exist, in other words the pictorial representation by profane hands of those things that the heart alone believes and the mouth confesses?'

The argument is effectively developed by means of an example. 'A person made an image and called it "Christ". The name "Christ" refers either to God or to man. Thus it is an image of Christ and also an image of a man. So in his vain opinion [the painter] has captured divinity, which cannot be captured by capturing created flesh, or else he has confused the union that cannot be confused, falling thus into sin of confusion. Those who worship [the image] take on these blasphemies.' Historically the iconoclastic movement had no consequences nor did it last, even within the

Orthodox Church. Mention is made of destruction of images, instances of deconsecration of churches and persecution of monks who resisted the decrees implementing the synod's conclusions: among these lynching, as mentioned by the chronicles of the monk Stephen the Younger, is emblematic. But modern historians such as Stephen Gero, from whom I have taken the *horoi* quoted,¹ are inclined to attribute certain instances of persecution less to iconoclasm than to animosity towards the monastic movement, which was often rebellious vis-a-vis the ecclesiastical hierarchies. The decisions of Hierea had mixed fortunes: revoked by the Council of Nicea in 787, they were later revived by the iconoclastic council of 815. For its part the Catholic Church quickly took care to distance itself from the iconoclastic movement by condemning the Council of Hierea in the 769 synod and showing that it saw as positive the evocative and communicative force of images of the sacred story.

We can understand these historical events as signs of the troubled fate that faced representations through images, especially in the expression of abstract concepts to which a culture attributed a fundamental value, as can happen in the religious context.

From the beginnings of Christianity graphic symbols such as the cross and the fish (whose name in Greek was formed by the initial letters of *Jesus Christ Son of God, Saviour*) were used as private secret codes. But it is humans' ability to obtain sensory or mental images that is explored by St Augustine. It is not just that we must remember that we may be dealing with illusory shadows, as Plato says, and pursue the truth in the world of ideas. 'My eyes love beautiful varied forms, bright pleasant colours', we read in the *Confessions*.² 'But let them not catch my soul! May God alone hold it who created these excellent things: he is my treasure and not them.' 'The queen of colours herself, that light in which everything we see is bathed, wherever I am in the day, slides her caress towards me in the thousand ways, even when I am busy with other things and am not attending.' St Augustine distinguishes two parts to the sensory experience: one pursues pleasure, the other pursues curiosity; both are deceptive. With artistic works and other manufactured objects, human beings have added '... innumerable attractions to the eyes' seduction'. 'They follow what their art does and leave behind within themselves Him who made them [the Creator], destroying what He has made in them.'³ To this is added what Augustine defines as 'the eyes' lust': there is 'in the soul ... [a] vain curiosity that bears the name understanding and knowledge' and leads us to 'investigate the secrets of external nature, understanding of which serves no purpose'. Furthermore we must take account of the fact that 'religion itself encourages us to test God, when we ask him for signs and miracles, not for a soul's salvation, but for the mere satisfaction of experiencing them'.⁴ And this is equally true of mental visions: 'Those fictions have such power over my soul, over my flesh that, false as they are, they suggest to my sleep what realities cannot suggest to me when I am awake.'⁵

This Augustinian phenomenology of the vision, which was to influence over a long period a Christian thinking that was more austere and ascetic, derives from Plotinus, who had devoted a book of his *Enneads* to the vision.⁶ 'When the eyes of the body close', writes Plotinus, we must 'substitute and conjure up another sight, which everyone possesses, but only a minority uses.' According to Plotinus necessary

premises concern the nature of what we see, which links together the good and the beautiful, the ugly and the bad.

What then is this mode (of vision)? What is its means? How shall we see that inestimable beauty that remains, so to say, within the sanctuary and does not escape towards the outside so that the profane may see it. Therefore let those who can do so go and follow it deep within themselves leaving behind the sight of the eyes and let them not turn back towards the splendour of bodies as before. Indeed it is necessary for those who see the beauty of bodies not to run after them, but know they are merely images, traces and shadows, and flee towards that (Beauty) of which they are images.

The Beauty Plotinus is talking about is none other than God. On the other hand those who give themselves up to 'the visions of the eyes' will become blind in their intelligence and 'will live only with shadows'.

So it is not searching for truth with the intellect that will clear away the illusory shadows from the Platonic cave: ethical categories must come to the fore to guide us towards contemplation of the divine, of which created things are the manifestation. If this strand of thought, which descends from Platonic idealism and combines with a transcendental dogmatics, devalorizes and condemns trust in what appears before the eyes, it is strange to note that it is precisely certain ascetic spiritual searches that rehabilitated sensory perception. The groups of hermits and mystics who invaded the Christian Middle Ages did not launch into philosophical disquisitions, but asked for and used images in their meditation practices. Add to that the masses of illiterate believers to whom the Church wished to offer effective means of spiritual communion and forms of visual representation of religious subjects and themes. Teaching the illiterate, instilling in the memory the mysteries and examples of the saints, arousing emotions with more force than words could do: this was the three-fold argument that Thomas Aquinas and many fathers of the Church put forward to support the dissemination of sacred images throughout the Catholic world.

According to St Bonaventure images 'are signs given by God and placed before us so that we might see them. They are examples or rather exemplifications put before our unsubtle minds and appealing to the senses so that they might pass from perceptible things that they can see to intelligible things that are beyond their sight, just as when we go from the sign to the signified.'⁷

Anagogia, the ecstasy of the soul in the contemplation of divine things, as in the case of images, may however be jeopardized by the seductive forces of visible forms. The position of Gregory the Great in the late sixth century is indicative of an ambivalent attitude towards iconographic representations. On the one hand he was happy to receive the anchorite Secundinus's request for sacred paintings, so that 'you might be inflamed in your spirit by love for Him whose painted image you wish to see', and added that 'there is no harm in wanting to show the invisible by means of the visible'. On the other hand he ordered all the most beautiful statues to be thrown into the Tiber, since contemplation of them might divert souls from the Christian religion, which was still recent and unconsolidated.

This is a very important theme that runs through 2000 years, with occasional striking episodes of iconophilia and iconophobia, and traces of it can be seen in the way our contemporaries relate to images.

Midway between the dangerous and the positive nature of these powers many people will end up agreeing, like Theophanes the Reclusive, an Orthodox mystic, that the faculty of sight 'is very useful to the reason, since it stimulates thought through images', but that the imagination should be seen as a 'lower faculty of understanding'. The dangers could appear, according to what Giordano Bruno writes in his treatise on magic, in the form of connections. 'The mind also connects by means of sight . . . when forms move in various ways before the eyes. The active charms and the passive charms come from the eyes and it is through the eyes that they get to the inside.' 'Many things seen', he goes on, 'and forms captured through the eye do not produce a sensation at the level of the obvious external feeling powers, and yet they go down more deep and wound even mortally; the sensation thus engendered reaches immediately to the interior spirit.' It can happen, for example, that 'on seeing certain actions or states of mind or movements we may be made to weep . . . no reason can be given for this phenomenon except the disturbance that connects us through the means of sight'.⁸

But there is an opposite tradition. In support of the production of images Basil's Byzantine argument against the iconoclasts has often been quoted, to the effect that the veneration of images was transferred to the prototype – provided the distinction remains complete between this and worship, which was strictly reserved for God. This point was particularly sensitive in the Judeo-Christian world. It is here that we find the condemnation of idolatry, of which the emblematic episode is the worship of the golden calf, a moral deviation seen as extremely serious and insidious. This argument, about possible deviations of the relationship between veneration and worship, can be compared in semantic terms to a slippage from metaphor to metonymy. Given that the former is an operation that is conceptually more developed and more full of cultural values, implying a conceptual analogy and not just a formal contiguity, these passages of semantic reference from one type to the other – of which idolatry is the most striking expression – may be seen as limitations rather than deviations. The argument was carried to a higher level in iconoclastic polemic: if Christ is venerated as an image of the Father, the best way of venerating the latter is to venerate the images of the former.

If it is well directed, sight can be the most powerful instrument for entering into communication with God, the Virgin and the saints. Favours and miracles are preferably obtained by entering into mystical contact with their figures. The anthropomorphization of divinity, physical characterization and the addition of symbolic objects in the case of saints, in paintings, statues and illustrations are seen as an aid for the faithful whose spirit on its own cannot rise directly to the divine. Furthermore, miracles themselves are often interventions in the world of the visible and can be valued as evidence: apart from the most emblematic and symbolically significant case of the restoration of sight, their most obvious forms are illustrated by *ex-voto*. At the sites of the cult of the great healing saints, for instance the Basilica of St Anthony in Padua, there is a very rich display of tablets illustrating the miraculous event, together with visible proof of a cure, such as the crutch of someone who started to walk again. In this ambiguous environment known as popular belief the prestige of the different saints is measured by this external evidence of the effectiveness of the plea addressed to this saint or that. There are external forms that are

expressed and celebrated on feast-days with processions that demonstrate their repeated popularity. However, a vague awareness exists that the spirit cannot be reined in and kept under control in the face of visible forms. Sight is thought to be the most powerful source of emotions, and the feelings it unleashes may be transferred to the other senses, especially touch.

The eye can make the observer see living images by calling up the most fervent and uncontrolled fantasies. The theme of Pygmalion and Galatea was transferred from classical mythology into the world of mystical visions. The story of the episodes devoted to this theme is a rich one: crucified Christs, male and female saints who talk, embrace the ecstatic faithful, heal them and feed them.

These edifying episodes are an invitation to prayer and meditation, but they are often delicately poised on the ill-defined boundary that separates mysticism from eroticism. In order to avoid sinful fantasies it is possible to alter the images themselves or operate certain forms of mental control. Like its Hindu equivalent (and even more so) Christian iconography is full of nudity, starting with Jesus, from childhood up to the crucifixion, and in many allegorical figures. The recent restoration work in the Sistine Chapel in Rome has freed the figures of the additions requested by the Vatican authorities to cover certain parts of the body, particularly the genital area. Bodies, positions and scenes that might suggest lascivious thoughts were frequently hidden for public exhibitions and kept away from children. In many cases this was not enough and there were often occasions when paintings, sculptures and illustrations were destroyed, such as the bonfires ordered by Savonarola to combat the lasciviousness he condemned in his eloquent outbursts as widespread even within the Church. As for control of the mind, guides to meditation were drawn up with precise instructions as to aims and method, as in the most famous of all of them, provided by St Ignatius Loyola. In the first of his spiritual exercises, it is suggested that the practice should start with a visual composition of the place. 'In visual contemplation or meditation . . . composition will consist of seeing in the imagination the material place where the thing I wish to contemplate is.'⁹

In a subsequent exercise it will be necessary to be able to 'see, with the sight of the imagination, the huge flames and the souls as if they were in bodies of fire'. Sight was to be protected from its ability to evoke the pleasures of the flesh even in direct observation of reality: hence the appeal to wear clothing, adopt a hairstyle and assume a demeanour indicative of chastity or at least sober morals. These were appeals that grew more pressing (and are still customary outside churches) at the entrance to holy places. It was women's bodies especially that came under the vigilant eye of the censor, who was motivated by an idea of woman as weaker psychologically and thus less protected from the accusation of being intentionally a subtle temptress, following the prototypical figure of Eve, but also by the idea of men being easily inflamed and by their very nature richer in libido.

Similar forms and purposes are to be found in the secular rules of etiquette, which were adopted by the ruling classes and imposed via the education of the younger generation. Through its main characters the literature of chivalry presents idealized behaviour for men and women in love relationships, battles, matters of honour. Contemporary illustrations show ways of dressing and the correct attitudes for achieving social distinction. Here too it is clear that the greatest attention was paid

to the control of young people's erotic impulses through an extreme formality of behaviour. By comparison with religious behaviour, what is different is not so much that attention is focused on society – even the faithful were part of it and their rules for behaviour were themselves social – but that the explicit aims of the forms of control over individuals were based on class interests. Moving from the aristocracy to the class that gradually replaced it in Europe, the bourgeoisie, etiquette was largely restricted to imitating aristocrats on the surface by adopting their rules. But often interpretation and application became ossified, so that extreme forms of Puritanism and the mode of life of Victorian society were adopted. The reason may be found in the fact that the bourgeoisie was, at least theoretically, an open class, unlike the aristocracy, which tended to perpetuate itself endogamously; that is why it had to equip itself with stricter rules in order to put clear limits on its social boundaries.

There is a similar analogy to that of control of external behaviour through etiquette between the rules of the religious context and those adopted by the upper social classes with regard to the prestige that could be acquired among the masses through the visual celebration of power.

Political 'vision'

The arguments and practices around sight that followed on each other's heels with particular fervour in the religious world are very instructive for those who wish to trace the evolution of attitudes to ways of seeing and visual representations in western societies.

It is customary to contrast the apotheosis of form in the Catholic Church – culminating in Renaissance painting and Baroque architecture – with austere Protestant churches and Muslim bans on anthropomorphic representations. But it would be naïve to imagine that Catholics innocently abandoned themselves to the celebration of God's work through images of what he created. The Church hierarchies were quite aware that certain representations were capable of arousing the senses beyond what was necessary to raise the spirit and that they could even recall earthly pleasures; but this went together with the celebration of the Church's 'triumphs' in worldly matters too. Here we come to the invention of creating a spectacle of power, which, according to this viewpoint, instead of remaining spiritual, had to become visible and so earthly and of the flesh.

Castles, palaces and villas can be thought of as the lay equivalent of churches and basilicas. Particularly from the gothic period (and with specific values during the Renaissance and the Baroque apotheosis) these latter came to signify something that went far beyond their social purpose as a refuge for the community of the faithful; indeed in the case of the first it was also about systems of defence or comfortable residences. In both cases, the symbolic function of representing a power, whether its origin was social or transcendent, was more important than the power itself and played a functional part in it. It would be possible to draw other parallels with social phenomena which had a big visual impact and were very effective in terms of prestige, religious processions and military parades, sacred festivals and secular ones.

Clergy, aristocracy and bourgeoisie adopted similar strategies even to the extent

of destroying the visible forms of powers considered to be threatening and hostile, thus demonstrating that their importance and danger were acknowledged. The iconoclastic fury that was aroused against religious images in the Byzantine world, as we have seen, by internal disturbances within the ecclesiastical hierarchies themselves, was repeated on a similar scale in the history of the Orthodox Church. Early in the 20th century this fury descended on Russia from abroad with the coming to power of the socialist regime and continued in the countries known as 'satellites'. Historical materialism, which became a form of government, then had in its turn to impose its own scenography, redefining architecture and urban design, communication techniques and aesthetics. After swiftly condemning constructivism and early abstract painting, which were seen as decadent rather than art for the masses, the political regime imposed the socialist realist style. At the apex of this manipulation of images reigned the most emblematic icons: Lenin and Stalin first, then the balcony in Red Square with the members of the Politbureau. With every internal reshuffle the images were changed, until the final fall. The fall of the Berlin Wall in the physical sense was an extremely spectacular visual event which brought with it the demolition of statues in the big squares, especially in the countries that were no longer dependent on Russia, and first of all statues of Stalin, who had become the emblem of a despotic regime of a classic Asian variety.

The other great revolution, which historians use as the start of modern period, the French Revolution at the end of the 18th century, was also characterized by an iconoclastic anti-religious phase as dramatic as it was spectacular, accompanied by operations of great visual force and dominated by the 'spectacle' of the guillotine. The aftermath saw the birth of symbolic images of the new goddess Reason, the tricolour, Marianne, the famous painting of Marat assassinated in his bath.

Without exception charismatic dictators and leaders, from Mussolini to Hitler and Perón (with his significant gender variant Eva), from Mao to Castro, have felt the need to put themselves forward as icons and symbols of their political regimes, as if in order to involve the masses emotionally in a more immediate and effective way than words could offer unless they were included in scenographic rallies in public arenas. The examples are numerous enough and are repeated so regularly that we can identify the constant elements. The first is that political and social movements based on emotional influence and involvement make great use of images as influential signs of power, based on the cult of the leaders' 'persona' (with the etymological signified 'mask') more than 'personality', as we normally put it. The second is that many revolutionary movements, and not only the modern period's materialist socialism, attack external forms of religious beliefs with the aim of 'liberating' the people's minds from the conditioning of which they are supposed to be a powerful vehicle. This close correlation between external symbols and the most abstract forms of thought, such as those related to transcendence and spirituality, has often been obscured by the vague view that it was a question of conflict between opposing interests. It is rather against the power of images *per se* that the attack is directed, for it is clear how uncontrollable that power is by the instruments of both reason and repression: it is a power that evokes sensations and emotions and through them appears able to communicate directly with the world of ideas. It is not just shadows thrown onto the walls of a cave for the eyes of people in chains, whom reason should

liberate by revealing the illusion by which they were imprisoned. Indeed it may be that sight is waiting to be liberated from the hegemony of interpretations imposed, through historical periods and in various cultures, by a reason that is too bound up with current ideologies and social conditioning.

Antonio Marazzi
University of Padua

Translated from the Italian by Daniel Arapu

Translated from the French by Jean Burrell

Notes

1. Stephen Gero (1973).
2. Augustine, *Les Confessions* (1960 edition) X, 34, slightly modified.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 35.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*, p. 30.
6. Plotinus, *Les Ennéades* (1924–1963) I, Book VI, para. 8.
7. In D. Freedberg (1993: 252).
8. Giordano Bruno (1986: 91).
9. Ignatius Loyola – translation (as 1991 edition) slightly modified.

References

- Augustine (1960) *Les Confessions*, X, 34. Paris: Garnier.
- Bruno, Giordano (1986) *De Magia. De Vinculis in genere*. Pordenone: Ed. Biblioteca dell'immagine.
- Freedberg, D. (1993) *Il potere delle immagini*. Turin: Einaudi.
- Gero, Stephen (1973) *Byzantine Iconoclasm during the Reign of Constantine V: With Particular Attention to the Oriental Sources*. Louvain: CSCO.
- Loyola, Ignatius (1991) *Ecrits*. Paris: Desclée de Brouwer.
- Plotinus (1924/1963) *Les Ennéades*, I, Book VI. Paris: Vrin.