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ANGELS OF CENSORSHIP

**ON THE RELATIONSHIP OF IMAGE PRODUCTION, HEGEMONY
AND VIOLENCE**

In the Baroque section of the Museo de Bellas Artes in Seville there is a picture by Lucas de Valdés.¹ A painter is lying on the floor of his studio. He must have fainted. He has fallen off his chair, his pallet still in his hand. An angel has taken his place at the easel. Behind him on the windowsill a print, from which he is painting, is leaning against the recess of the window. It is the portrait of the founder of the Order of the Minims, Francis of Paola. Is the painter merely a copyist, overcome by his own state of mind, by inspiration? That was the nineteenth-century interpretation. What we think is that he has just been visited by the officer summoned by the government of heaven to supervise the truth of the portrait and correct the work.²

What does this picture have to do with the topic to be dealt with here and in the three following instalments of this column? The aim is to reflect on the conditions of artistic production in the new metropolises of power of the globalised world. Authors in Berlin who are following the development of centres of art in Beijing, Dubai or Moscow (or who could also be part of their programme) will engage in this reflection. The motive for this reflection could therefore be the fear of losing cultural hegemony. And indeed, we are concerned with losing something that we shall call criticality here and that is linked to the particular political freedom granted to post-war western society in the ranking of the »better state«. It is the attribution to artistic production to react critically to its own power relations.

Defining this attribution becomes all the more difficult the more the attribution itself becomes the legitimisation of both the customers and the contractors. By installing a western art system, the customers lay claim to freedom of opinion, while the contractors believe themselves to be subversive and engage in touting enlightenment. These arguments may weigh almost as nothing in the gravitas of the vast building volumes and the exorbitant sums that change hands and cause both parties to become intoxicated with their own importance and the availability of world. They only become heavier when we consider the social circumstances that they accompany.

In this first instalment we will describe a historical example of global image production and its direct link to violence. We will maintain that hegemony is not an abstract function but rather implies this violence. We cannot take this to create any straightforward continuity up

to the conditionalities of cultural hegemony, ideology-bearing nature, and today's globalised creations of value. We can, however, maintain that there are parallels and links between the »ideological function of colonial painting (painting of the Counter-Reformation, A.C.) and the function now assumed by art in order to furnish the new elites of globalisation with legitimacy.«³

Back to the picture. The print by the window does not expose a copyist. »We know that they were used billions of times and that artists' studios were a veritable treasure trove of engravings... The painter Baltasar de Figuerola from Colombia bequeathed six books of engravings about the lives of the saints along with another 1800 engravings after his death.«⁴

The Peruvian art historian Francisco Strasny, the author of this quotation, emphasises that not only in South America, but also in Europe and the entire Christian world, painting from reproduced pictures was introduced with the industrialisation of printing technology. At the same time, the mass production of prints is one of the most important devices for proselytising the new colonies. In both cases it serves the purpose of religious control of image production. As of 1570, the Church and the Spanish king granted a monopoly to the Plantin publishers in Antwerp on prints for Spain, the Netherlands and the colonies. »These prints [...] reached the masses; both in Europe and America there were large percentages of illiterate people. [...] Methodically, the form in which the spread of the catholic doctrine was focused was a serious predecessor to the more modern audiovisual systems.«⁵ The Plantin press became one of the most important printers of the sixteenth to eighteenth century. The mass reproduction and control of images is part of the agenda of the Counter-Reformation that was drafted at the Council of Trent. At the end of the Council, a decree was passed on the veneration of images.⁶ This was a reaction to the reproaches of the Reformation whereby the object of veneration had long since fused with the image (the signified with the sign) in altarpieces to form a magical thing, and whereby the fashions of the Renaissance and Mannerism had contaminated Christian iconography with lascivious and heathen (ancient) themes. Image animism and image autonomy may be officially fought. At the same time, however, these are the very accomplices of proselytisation that allowed people to experience the new gods as a continuity of their own effaced faith in a syncretised iconography. Throughout the Catholic world, the Tridentine decree on images precipitated a flood of follow-up tracts and rules in which the specific local dogmatics seemed to mask the actual complicity like a façade.

»The need of images was immense. [...] artists of great religious zeal traveled to the Andes to disseminate devotional images ... Fray Diego de Ocana [...] lamented that the monastery of Guadalupe in Spain failed to answer his plea for prints... if I had twenty or

thirty thousand prints, I would have used them all because everyone took one to have at home.«⁷

By the early seventeenth century at the latest, Europe was no longer supplying the demand for images but rather painters in Quito, Cuzco or Potosi, whose studios were akin to factories. This global boom in image production was caused by the tremendous, sudden wealth produced by exploiting mineral resources and by the violence connected with this exploitation. The images were installed in the churches of the mining aristocracy and the indigenous forced labourers. »In Cartagena des las Indias, the port-of-entry into Nueva Grenada [...] for the slave trade from Africa, the arriving men, women, and children were almost immediately presented with images of Christ's suffering and the threat of the own eternal damnation in addition to their worldly one. [...] Portraits of popes, cardinals, and kings were placed around the altar [...] the paintings in other words created an entire world of celestial and mundane hierarchy that the newly baptized slave joint [...] this paintings created such a fear of eternal damnation and so strong a desire to accept the divine blood [...] that they were worth much more than any words of persuasion [...] similar scenes of the Last Judgement [...] were painted on the inside of the entrance portal of every native church.«⁸

If, at this point, we call to mind the direct link of violence between cultural hegemony and image production, this concerns Europe not only as the cause and beneficiary, but also as a simultaneous field of religious offensive and social upheaval. Around eight million natives were killed as a result of mining in Potosi. Some 600,000 tons of silver were shipped to Europe, passing through Spain, creating stock exchange centres and a demand for all shippable goods, which triggered a process of agricultural industrialisation that made people redundant who were available or eliminable as vagabonds, as proto-proletariat. What we conflate here in one sentence – nonchalantly and almost cynically – is a historical context that is too complex, too cruel and too contradictory to form the positive historical fact of a sentence. Nor is it a description of an »origin« of capitalism and of the role of its images, but rather a thread in a tangle of origins. Instead we are laying a trail that shows what we might be dealing with should we follow it: the idea of modernism and the role of image production in it cannot be conceived within »globalisation« without the history of colonisation and its crimes. Taking »globalisation« into account in this way may perhaps put an end to the amnesia of bloc-power modernism in this connection. We are encouraged to throw other sounding lines – e.g. those of the heavenly censor officer – into the waters of history so as to plumb the current functions of image production, hegemony and violence.

The table that we described at the beginning could be the negotiating table at which the cultural authority of the Emirate of Dubai meets the directors of the museums of

Prussian Cultural Heritage from Berlin, the painting collections in Munich, and the Dresden State Art Collections to undersign their participation in the universal museum. It is, naturally, the largest museum in the world, and it will receive logistical and art historical support from the three museums. It could also be the table of the press conference held in Berlin on May 28 to announce this co-operation. The head of the Cultural Arts Authority in Dubai, Michael Schindhelm, explained there that the polyglot nature of this museum also reflected the multi-ethnicity of the population of Dubai. He forgot to mention that only ten per cent of the population of Dubai has civil rights and that the majority of the other ninety per cent are among those who work in slave-like conditions. Is it merely an ugly minor consideration that the monthly wage of a worker on the construction site of this museum is about 100 dollars? Does this have no impact on the architecture and the pictures exhibited there? Or are we seeing three new angels of censorship meet at this table who do their work so poorly, like those of the painting of the Counter-Reformation/colonialisation, who constantly have to repeat what they wish to ignore/efface because in effect it cannot be overcome?

The next instalment will focus on a discourse analysis of this table.

1 Lucas Valdes: Retrato milagroso de San Francisco de Paola, c.1710, oil on canvas

2 On angels as administrators of government, Giorgio Agamben: *Die Beamten des Himmels*, Frankfurt, Leipzig, 2007

3 *Inversion Modernidad*, draft paper by Alice Creischer, Andreas Siekmann and Max Hinderer, Berlin 2008. A project on the colonial painting of the former vice-kingdom of Peru and its possible renewal. This column is the result of the discussions under the project.

4 »Sabemos que se usaron por millares y que los talleres de los pintores eran verdaderos archivos calcográficos... Baltasar de Figueroa en Colombia, quien deja a su muerte seis libros de vida de santos con estampas para las pinturas, además de 1800 estampas. » Francisco Strasny: *Breve Historia del Arte en el Peru*, Lima 1967, p. 35

5 Teresa Gisbert, Jose de Mesa et al. *Bolivian Masterpieces, Colonial Painting*, Secretariat de Cultura, La Paz, 1994, p. 74

6 *De invocatione, veneratione, et reliquiis sanctorum, et sacris imaginibus*, 3.12. 1564, Concil von Trient, *Canones und Beschlüsse*, ed. Wilhelm Smets, Bielefeld 1868

7 Thomas Cummins: *Images for a New World*, in: *The Virgin, Saints, and Angels, South American Paintings 1600 - 1825 from the Thoma Collection*, ed. Suzanne Stratton-Pruitt, Brooklyn, 2006, p. 15

8 *Ibid.*

9 Human Rights Watch Report, March 2006. Requests by the Human Rights Watch for a statement by the Moma and the Louvre regarding working conditions on construction of their museum branches in Abu Dhabi went unanswered.