

General

Idols of the Market: Modern Iconoclasm and the Fundamentalist Spectacle

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Review – November 1, 2009

Sven Lütticken, *Idols of the Market: Modern Iconoclasm and the Fundamentalist Spectacle*, New York, Sternberg Press, 2009, ISBN 9781933128269, 248 pages

With a view to historicizing iconoclasm to the point at which its potential for the current situation becomes visible, Sven Lütticken has collected five of his substantial essays under the title *Idols of the Market: Modern Iconoclasm and the Fundamentalist Spectacle*. He calls the book not only essayistic but also interventionist, rather than academic. In his introduction Lütticken provides a clear answer to the question of how, by means of a book, you can intervene in an issue that appears to have become delicate and complex in recent years: critical thinking is a necessary condition for intervention. However, the important thing is not to institutionalize this critique and at the same time to expose its inefficiency. Lütticken calls on us to think beyond the 'idols of the market'. It is more productive 'to re-imagine religion' than to fall back into a hysterical atheism as represented by the harsh criticism of the protest against images like the Danish cartoons which its opponents regard as both idolatrous and blasphemous. Western enlightenment thinking and a diabolical monotheism – particularly Islam – and the opposition to them are merely strengthened by such ruthless attitudes. Rethinking religion is facilitated by consciously creating overlaps, at present often still incidental, between academic, artistic and activist contexts, of which *Idols of the Market* is both a result and an example. Such collaborations also provide the freedom for the urgent reconsideration of the image.

In order to read the image anew, Lütticken concentrates in the five essays on contemporary forms of iconoclasm, while not eschewing philosophical, economic and theological 'excursions'. These digressions result in virtuoso texts in which the points are just as diverse as the sometimes unexpected references and turns. In the first essay, 'Myths of Iconoclasm', Lütticken touches on the few occasions that Islam and its protagonists are taken seriously in Western philosophy, varying from Montesquieu's *Lettres Persanes* to the writings of Hegel. He then goes on, via Nietzsche's views about God – the ex-parrot – whom Nietzsche declares to be dead rather than non-existent, to underpin the difference between 'mythos' and 'logos' and to point out the persistent existence of myth in Nietzsche himself. The ostensible revival of religion is a historical myth that expresses a social and cultural reality, Lütticken continues. The question is whether God is not a phantom, a sign and an invisible image that moves about in the media spectacle rather than in daily reality. Basing himself on Freud's *Moses and Monotheism*, he argues in response to his own question that physical iconoclasm has an equal in the spiritual, conceptual iconoclasm that was the domain of great thinkers and artists. Only a dialectics between these two variants of iconoclasm can bring about the dynamism that characterized great historical moments like the Reformation. It is because of this that the image could, and can, be defined once again. Today, says Lütticken, the work of Gert Jan Kocken testifies to such a dialectics. The enhanced materiality of Kocken's pictures leads to what Lütticken calls visual iconoclasm.

Although the path leading to this interim conclusion is sometimes dizzying and deliberately anachronistic, Lütticken's attempt at reading images differently never loses sight of the relevance of his amplifications for artistic and theoretical practice. And vice versa: What starting points, he asks himself, are offered by modern theory and art for mediating in the struggle between fundamentalisms?

Lütticken repeatedly stresses that the modern critique of the visual in art is not directed against images as such, but against instrumentalized visibility in regulated representations. Asger Jorn aimed at 'smashing the frame that suffocates the image', while the artist Natascha Sadr Haghghian recently asked herself: How [does one] erase the images that create invisibilities? We can find an answer, writes Lütticken, in Sean Snyder's work 'From One Spectacle to Another'. Snyder suggests that a material analysis of representations cannot pass over the details within today's image production. Focussing on the use of photograph and video in the current 'War on Terror', he concludes that both the Pentagon and Al Qaida and kindred groups who produce, reproduce and distribute these images are hardly aware of the status of the image. It is up to artists like Snyder, thinks Lütticken, to reflect on this and to read the symptoms. After all, a symptom is a temporary trace of missed moments of liberation, such as revolutions or attempts at them, which can always be reactivated. Just as Snyder can perceive an image anew by means of a renewed encounter with it, so we should likewise reappropriate religion. Under the motto 'if there is a future . . . it has already happened' we can regard Paul and the early Christians as contemporaries, not because of their dogmas, but because of their unrelenting resistance to what is or has been.

As Lütticken writes at the beginning of his essay 'Attending to Things (Some More Material than Others)', we should reject the tendency to associate religion with fanaticism and a fleeing from the world. Are criticisms of idolatry and iconoclasm just symptoms of a transcendental aversion to material? Implicitly or explicitly, aesthetic thinking is always political, he emphasizes, following Rancière. Yet this proposition does not prevent the author of *Idols of the Market* from falling back on his pet subject, Marxism and later readings of it, in order to demonstrate the produced value of articles and of art works, however immaterial and conceptual these may be. What are ostensibly objects that speak for themselves, such as 'branded consumer goods', have to become 'things', 'matters of concern' that are open to discussion and, as such, can be produced and used 'differently'.

Since 9/11, the 'West' and 'Islam' have been transformed into 'super brands', entrancing the consumers of the fundamentalist spectacle and turning them into slaves. What we have to do, says Lütticken, is 'turn the oppressive "facts" of life into forms'. Those sharing in this project can be called true representatives of the critique of idolatry. And of that of monotheism, should they so wish. Just as religion has its secular side, so is hypercapitalism not lacking in abstractions and every abstraction is more and more concretized today. Are these materializations of the immaterial becoming our current 'product[s] of thought'? A fully nuanced critique of the polarization between the West and Islam is revealed in the final chapter, 'Veiled Revelation'. Gestures of revelation are part of Enlightenment rhetoric, Lütticken reminds us. Whereas veiling, in its turn, betrays on the one hand a mystification – of women, social relationships and of Islam – the 'abstracting' robe is at the same time deployed in order to divulge liberal Western values, the West's seemingly unhindered emphasis on visibility. Paradoxically enough, veiling, like other iconoclastic gestures, creates new images which sometimes display a surprising similarity with aesthetic modernism, staging a spectacular representation of 'Otherness' in their game with visibility.

The 'excursions' that the author warned us of in his introduction turn out to be the points of entry that have enabled him to approach and differentiate a complex theme.

Idols of the Market: Modern Iconoclasm and the Fundamentalist Spectacle is well supported with references and affirms Sven Lütticken as an intelligent and well-read writer who moreover incites new forms of collaboration between previously separate contexts, or what used to be known as opponents.

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Tags

Aesthetics, Art Discourse

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