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The image and the brazen serpent: division, mediation and the translatability of cultures

This article confronts possible effects of the crisis of intercultural communication by investigating the transforming power of images to reorient or transfigure accepted cultural meanings. With current image theorists such as W J T Mitchell and Hans Belting it emphasises that the image's power to self-create or to possess a life, presence or soul of its own – that aspect of the image that makes it seem animated and able to trap or immerse – is not merely a relic of ritual, cultic or idolatrous comprehensions, but may rather be one of the constant features in ontologies of the image.

Die beeld en die koperslang: verdeling, bemiddeling en die vertaalbaarheid van kulture

Hierdie artikel neem die moontlike gevolge van die krisis van inter-kulturele kommunikasie onder die loep, deur die transformerende mag van beelde om aanvaarde kulturele betekenisse te heroriënteer of te transfigureer, te ondersoek. Tesame met hedendaagse beeldteoretici soos W J T Mitchell en Hans Belting beklemtoon dit dat die beeld se selfskeppende mag of die skynbare vaardigheid daarvan om 'n eie lewe, teenwoordigheid of siel te besit – daardie aspek van die fassinerende beeld wat dit skynbaar lewendig maak – nie bloot 'n oorblyfsel van rituele of kultiese ervarings is nie, maar dat dit eerder een van die konstante eienskappe in ontologieë van die beeld is.

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Religious image debates are currently revisited in image studies in the light of the "new image question", especially in German-language *Bildwissenschaft*, *Bildkritik* and *Bildanthropologie*. The formation of the postmodern synthetic digital image that can no longer be described in terms of representation, as well as the appearance on the inter-cultural global horizon of images from the field of anthropology have unleashed a new *Bilderstreit* of definitions of the image. Since postmodernity seems to have reverted to image beliefs that were supposed to have been surmounted, image studies are now focused on human image practices.[1] James Elkins has even argued that implicit religious discourses have become a noticeable tendency in current art history writing and he analyses the way in which concepts from religious image debates have become generalised in order to understand modern and postmodern art, as well as images *per se* (Elkins 2010). W J T Mitchell (2000) confronts the seemingly untamed and irrational aspect of the modern image's power to self-create or possess a life, a presence or a soul of its own, as relics and "idols" were once supposed to have. He traces the modern evolution of scientific and popular images of the dinosaur for which no prototype or model exists, to specific prototype images from the Victorian era. The dinosaur, which has become the image of the theory of evolution, is shown to evolve or self-create in images. Mitchell suggests that the "life" of the dinosaur takes place "on the borderline between nature and culture, biology and anthropology, and that whenever culture is reduced to a mere projection, a shadow or mirror of nature, or vice versa, totemism lifts its head". Hans Belting (2000) invokes "idolatry" to explain that the abstraction of reality into images is compensated for in the current increasingly violent intensity with which lost reality recurs in images. Venerated simulations and animations on computer screens impress more than their originals so that our comprehension of the world conforms to images and becomes image-like (Belting 2000: 278-9). Villem Flusser ironically underscores the description of postmodernism as the "age of idolatry" when he declares that if all images are idols,

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1   Cf Belting 2001 & 2006, Boehm 2004, Latour 2002, Mondzain 2000 & 2005, Morgan 2005.

there is no idolatry (Belting 2006: 17).

Image debates in this postmodern "age of idolatry" should benefit from an analysis of representations of the *topos* of the brazen serpent selected from crucial stages in the history of images. The *topos* refers to the Old Testament history related in Numbers 21 of how God sends fiery serpents from heaven as punishment for the Israelites' blasphemous complaints about their hardships in the desert. The Lord commands Moses to erect a serpent of bronze upon a pole, so that those who look upon it in faith may be saved. This history provokes awkward questions about its similarity to heathen animal cults, bewilderment at God's instruction to Moses to make an image in the light of the prohibition of graven images in the second commandment, and puzzlement at His choice of the incongruous prototype of a serpent, usually associated with Satan and sin.

Several general characteristics of brazen serpent representations, as well as their relative persistence through many centuries make them useful in an investigation of the nature of images. Representations of the biblical passage on the brazen serpent are by definition self-aware images – images of images, examples of *mise en abîme,* suggesting an infinite search for the foundations of images (Stoichita 1997). In most brazen serpent representations the dividing power of this sculptural image over observers is of central interest. In its depictions of the differentiation of spectator positions, segregating those who look in belief and live from those who do not observe in faith and die, it stages reactions to what W J T Mitchell (1994: 45) would call a multi-stable or dialectical image, in which there is a "co-existence of contrary or simply different readings in a single image". The classic example of a multi-stable meta-image is the famous Duckrabbit drawing which can be read as either a duck or a rabbit. This image is useful to explain, at a literal level, the ambiguous referentiality of the sculptural image of the brazen serpent. Brazen serpent representations also resemble multi-stable images in that depictions of this dividing power of the sculptural image over its spectators correspondingly elicit questions about the self of the observer and the position of the observer in front of the image. They are, by definition, sophisticated self-referential images that not only stage their image-ness and diverse perceptions

of images, but also perform the power of visual images to remediate textual narratives. Brazen serpent representations must be thought of as visual versions of a biblical ekphrasis or as reverse ekphrases. The production of painted versions of the textual description of the reactions of spectators to the three-dimensional bronze image entails a process of remediation. From the Renaissance onwards when the visual arts aspired to the status of the literary arts and visual artists rivalled with one another to produce vivid and forceful painted versions of textual descriptions and presentations, the staging in paintings, of observers' diverse responses to the sculptural image of the brazen serpent seem to become increasingly dramatic and rhetorical.

Although representations of the brazen serpent are relatively infrequently encountered in the history of art (Brown 2008: 266), the *topos* appears to be revisited in threshold eras of cultural crisis. The Catholic Reformation in the Southern Netherlands (Harrison 1990) as well as Italy, for example, inaugurates the most prolific return to the subject. These representations then demonstrate a capacity to re-describe, translate or reconstruct conflicted image functions. Diverse representations of the history of the brazen serpent appear to be characteristically aimed at types of images other than itself – mythical symbols, icons, or idols – in order to replace, destroy, fight, transform or modify the understanding of images, opening up what Bruno Latour (2002) would call a cascade of thickly entangled connections. In the history of pictorial brazen serpent narratives they demonstrate a propensity to emancipate from other or preceding image understandings. God's instruction to Moses to erect an image of a brass serpent is part of His gradual transformation and reformation of the conceptions of divine manifestation of the heathen nations of the whole ancient Near East, re-aligning it with Israel's experience of the covenant God and his nature (Eichrodt 1967: 15). The production and beholding of the image of the brazen serpent originally entailed a ritual of atonement and captivated the senses of the Israelites. Its lifting up on a pole made it conspicuous like an ensign (Calvin 1847-50), demonstrating the conversion of the

Israelites to a new understanding of God's revelation of himself in history.

This article focuses on the capacity of the *topos* to divide as well as to mediate. Image wars, ongoing iconoclasm, the perpetual destruction, negation and replacement of images are features of the history of changing conceptions of the image (Latour 2002). Under various catchphrases like the migration of images, the dialectic of the interval, the *Kunstwollen*, principles of opposed dynamisms of style, the clash of gods, the ethnographic turn, the reformation of the image, the lives and loves of images, it has been a central concern of art history since its inception as a discipline. The nature of images to lead to other images, to beget images, to be transformed, modified and re-represented – brought to our attention once more by the *Iconoclash* exhibition (Latour & Weibel 2002) – is distinctively apparent in brazen serpent representations which stage, as such, the "innate duplicity of the image" (Mitchell 2005: 50) as substitute, resemblance, or simulacrum.

Skimming the rich field of historical and systematic image theories, this article investigates in a number of representations those typical predispositions of brazen serpent narratives mentioned above, in order to confront current image questions. The investigation starts with a medieval image that excludes, erases, replaces or transforms a series of other images, including the brazen serpent. A nativity scene (Figure 1) in a Gothic Psalter in the Hart Collection of the Blackburn Museum shows a manger with the infant Jesus, on a pole (Camille 1989: 195).

Figure 1: Nativity, Gothic Psalter, Hart Collection, Blackburn Museum and Art Gallery, Hart 2100, folio 1 recto (Camille 1989: 195)
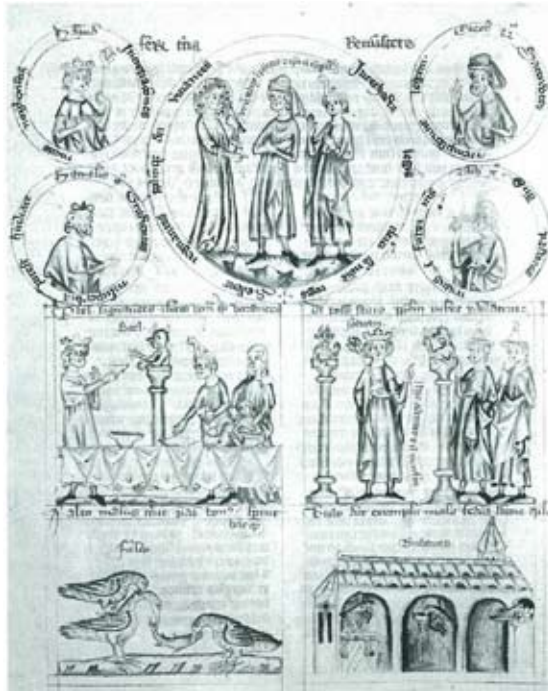
Figure 2: Christ and the Pharisees and Old Testament "types": the idolatry of Ahaziah and Jerobeam. *Concordantia Caritatis* of Ulrich of Lilienfeld. Lilienfeld, Stiftsbibliothek, MS 157, fol 44 verso (Camille 1989: 169)

Old Testament idols were often represented on columns, or poles as in the *Concordantia Caritatis* of Ulrich of Lilienfeld (Camille 1989: 169) representing the idolatry of Ahaziah and Jerobeam (Figure 2). The re-placement on a column of the manger in the nativity scene is an iconoclastic gesture and suggests that Christ is the conqueror of heathen idolatry (Camille 1989: 198). Simultaneously, the exhibition of Christ's incarnation in human flesh, the only image in which God showed himself to humankind, justifies Christian image-making. Like an uplifted eucharistic paten which holds the communion bread at the altar, the raised cuplike manger expands this reference to Christ's body as image and hints at the progressive

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enrichment in history of the understanding of images. Apart from the nativity, the crucifixion is one of the most important moments of Christ's incarnation and the pole supporting the manger also refers to Christ's subsequent suffering on the cross. If Old Testament idolatry is viewed in typological relationship to Christ who overcame it, the crucifixion replaces the Old Testament order of the law, usually represented typologically by another pole, the pole upon which the brazen serpent was erected. The successive replacements of the repellent image of the snake on a pole, by the bloody crucifixion, by decorative foliage supporting the manger, could be interpreted as an evasion or disguise of violence. Conversely, it is by reading this image from the perspective of the iconoclastic power of allegory that a surge of substitutive images is unleashed. According to Paul Ricoeur (1967: 16), to interpret allegorically is to penetrate the disguise and thereby to render the original image useless. In the rich medieval image-language system (Warncke 2005) a characteristic iconic energy prevails by means of which more is revealed than is shown.

But the urge to reorient, translate or re-describe established images also points to the inadequacy or insufficiency of the image and the human yearning for absolute fulfilment in contemplation. Like the suffering image of Christ throughout his life on earth, the image in its material fetters merely reveals through a glass darkly. The incarnation of Christ as a human being not only reveals but also conceals his divinity. Unlike Byzantine icons of the Eastern Church in which it is believed that through an *epiphaneia* the holy can momentarily erupt into human time, the *figura* used in the medieval church of the West is considered to be a barrier between humankind and God (Camille 1989: 205). Veiled, shrouded and obscure images are progressively revealed and enriched in the *Heilsgeschichte* and its interpretation (Ricoeur 1995: 39-41). The decorative foliage surrounding the manger suggests the renewed sprouting, regeneration and transformation of the image itself. The desire or lack of the image to which W J T Mitchell (2005) seems to understand in Freudian terms may have its origin in this oblique interaction with the divine which remains flawed, blemished

and unsound. According to Koerner (2004: 122-7 & 2002: 191-6), religious images are in themselves self-defacing engines of "iconoclash" that have iconoclasm built into them. They "repeat the antagonism between appearance and truth that the image itself already displays" (Koerner 2002: 168). The ensuing struggle among images is also a progressive interrogation of the changing functions of the image.

The most popular art historical exemplum of the brazen serpent *topos* is Michelangelo's fresco on one of the four relatively large pendentives of the Sistine chapel (Figure 3). This Renaissance representation exhibits what Aby Warburg called the dialectic of the interval (Warburg 1999, Rampley 2001) by means of which he described the processes of negation and preservation at stages of cultural change in the expectations of what constitutes an image.

Figure 3: Michelangelo Buonarroti, *The brazen serpent (*1511). Fresco, 585 x 985 cm. Cappella Sistina, Vatican, Rome (Web Gallery of Art <http://www.wga.hu/index1.html>)

The foundations of medieval biblical exegesis are apparent in the design of the Sistine ceiling which was conceived by Michelangelo's

theologian patrons. In the encompassing iconographic scheme of the ceiling the brazen serpent scene has a bridging and linking function (Figure 4). Its position close to the altar (Figure 5) as well as between the Old Testament ceiling frescoes and the New Testament last judgement scene behind the altar (Seymour 1972: 74) underscores its typological connection with the crucifixion. By contrast, the composition itself is characterised by the potency with which it segregates onlookers into distinctive groups. Its placement and composition together exhibit the distinctive capacity of division and mediation inherent to the *topos.*

Figure 4: Michelangelo Buonarroti, , The brazen serpent *(*1511). Pendentive fresco, 585 x 985 cm. Cappella Sistina, Vatican, Rome (Web Gallery of Art <http://www.wga.hu/index1.html>)

The placement of the representation of the brazen serpent on a spandrel is an effective means of remediating the description of a three-dimensional object into painted form. Taking the concave field of the spandrel into account, the composition is divided by a

central axis that seems to strike into the space of the spectator. The group of flying serpents resembling lightning strokes, at the back of the picture plane, draws attention to a virtual axis commenced by the representation of the ruddy copper serpent, and dramatically extends into the excessively foreshortened figure of the male figure who is overpowered by a greyish muscularly animate serpent in the foreground, dividing the spectators in two distinctive groups. In this respect the composition corresponds with the ceiling fresco of *The fall and expulsion* (Figure 6) which flanks the central ceiling fresco.

Figure 5: Michelangelo Buonarroti. Ceiling frescoes (1508-1512) and *Last Judgement* (1537-41). Cappella Sistina, Vatican, Rome (Web Gallery of Art <http://www.wga.hu/index1.html>)

Figure 6: Michelangelo Buonarroti, *The fall and expulsion from the garden (*1509-10). Fresco, 280 x 570 cm. Cappella Sistina, Vatican. Rome (Web Gallery of Art <http://www.wga.hu/index1.html>)

In the fall scene on the left, Adam and Eve's arms are extended towards the live serpent curled around the central tree of knowledge, repeating the gestures of the sinners seeking atonement from the copper image of the serpent, whereas on the right in the expulsion scene the palms of their hands ward the serpent off, repeating the gestures of those overcome by the fiery serpents. The two differentiated groups of spectators in the brazen serpent scene is thereby theologically linked respectively to the expulsion and its depiction of estrangement from God through sin in the presence of the serpent, on the one hand, and to the fall and its depiction of the promise of atonement and redemption through the coming of the Messiah which was first given directly after the fall, on the other.

The *terribilità* of the representation of the live serpent over powering the male figure in the foreground obviously borrows from the *Laocoön* (Figure 7) which was discovered in Rome four years before Michelangelo finished the brazen serpent fresco in 1510 during the second phase of his work on the Sistine frescoes (Harrison 1990). The sculpture represents the Trojan priest, Lacoön and his two sons being destroyed by serpents sent in unjust punishment by the Greek god Poseidon.

Figure 7: Anonymous, (Roman) after Greek original from c 300 BC, *Laocoön and his sons* (c AD 50) Marble. The Vatican Museum, Rome (Didi-Huberman 2001: 635) .

In the mythic anthropocosmic experience of its original observers the sacred power of Poseidon was immediately significant in the terrible power of the snake. For modern beholders of the Lacoön sculptural group the god Poseidon, manifested in the mythic serpents, was dead, but reincarnated in the virtuosic creators of Renaissance art, like Michelangelo, *Il Divino* himself. Myth had lost its explanatory function through its demythologisation, but now reveals its exploratory significance or symbolic function as a new dimension of modern thought (Ricoeur 1967: 5). In Michelangelo's remediation of the pagan sculpture into a biblical mural painting we witness the artist's redefinition, the aesthetic demythologisation of the idol-status of sculptural representations of the gods of antiquity and their realignment as aesthetic *exempla*.

Whereas the crucifixion, to which the brazen serpent points in Michelangelo's work, represents a central moment of the incarnation of God in historical time, the formidable suffocating serpents in the Lacoön sculptural group were direct mythical manifestations of the Greek god Poseidon. The embodiment of the classical deities differs radically from the incarnation in that Christ becomes human in all aspects, except for human sin. By using the Lacoön which had become the *exemplum doloris* or aesthetic norm for the depiction of agony and suffering during the *rinascimento all'antica* (Brilliant 2000) as his model, Michelangelo suppresses the biblical text that stipulates that the serpents sent by Yahweh caused death by poisoning rather than suffocation. This is not a minor deviation from the text, but rather entails a reinterpretation of the biblical history in terms of the more archaic cosmic symbolism of defilement from without, rather than of sin as poisonous infection (Ricoeur 1967) of all humankind from within; as severance from God. The tragic figure of the overwhelmed man seemingly propelled into the space of the spectator becomes a manifestation of the *Dialektik des Monstrums* (Warburg 1999, Rampley 2001) in whom the Renaissance clash of pagan gods and Christian God is witnessed. The conflict between the tragic archaic and redemptive biblical concepts of fault, blame and sin is staged in this agonised figure. By reintroducing myth through the reference to the Lacoön and fusing it with biblical history the artist paradoxically draws attention to the conquest of myth as myth, to the dissociation of myth and history through the Jewish and Christian religions (Ricoeur 1967: 161), and to the emerging recognition of the revealing power of myths as symbols during the Renaissance.

In her provocative text *Can images kill?* Marie-José Mondzain (2009: 28) argues that the principal contribution of Christian thought with regard to the question of images is the justification of the image through the Incarnation. She contends that the incarnation legitimates the image by "... not only freeing it of its mortifying and confusing power [in Greek culture, for example in images of the Medusa and Narcissus], but also in giving it a lifesaving and even a redemptive power [translated into German as *Heilswirksamkeit,* SdV-H]." The violence of all human passions henceforth converges

in the image of the passion of Christ, the image of compassion, rather than in Greek tragedy. I argue that the original desert ritual of the brazen serpent as described in the Old Testament is a crucial event in this process of the gradual emancipation and differentiation of the image, as an early catalyst of the progressive enrichment through history of our understanding of images. I argue furthermore that Reformation theologians were aware of the significance of the biblical passage of the brazen serpent for Eucharist and image debates. The biblical history of the brazen serpent as pre-figuration of the crucifixion is significant in their biblical exegesis with reference to the holy sacrament, and contributes to the modern understanding of the differentiation of the art image from the cultic image, as will be shown in the next example. The "eucharist question" necessitated a reconsideration of the function of images and their imaginative reception (Belting 2006, Stoellger 2008).

In Martin Luther's exegesis of the passage on the brazen serpent in Numbers 21:4-9, the fact that Moses himself made and "raised it" is the most essential element. To him there is a justification for image-making in the fact that Moses, the great lawgiver, also created an image (Michalsky 1993: 19). A classic illustration of the abuse of art, to Luther, was king Hezekia's destruction of the brazen serpent only when it was misused. Therefore he believed that only the adoration of images is forbidden, not their making, and that it is in the heart of the spectator that images can aspire to replace God, not in the nature of images themselves. This may reveal Luther's underestimation of images as mere mirror images, mental signs to gaze upon, as mere witnesses to aid memory ("zum Ansehen, zum Zeugnis, zum Gedächtnis, zum Zeichen") (Michalsky 1993: 27). Yet, on the other hand, he thereby removes the sacred aura of images and contributes to the uncovering of their modern understanding.

Figure 8: Workshop of Lucas Cranach the Elder, *Law and grace* (ca 1530) London, British Museum (Belting 2006: 184). Ca. 1535. Nürnberg: Germanisches Nationalmuseum (Belting 2006: 185)

For a number of years after the Reformation images were subjected to the new text culture to become mere sign systems. In a painting titled *Law and grace* produced by the workshop of Lucas Cranach around 1535 (Belting 2006: 184-5), a representation of the brazen serpent is strategically placed parallel to the representation of the temptation and fall on the left, and "in the shadow of" the crucifixion on the right. Such double images in which the law of the Old Testament is confronted by the grace of Christian religion became popular Lutheran *Gedenkbilder* – mental signs to gaze upon – and *Zeugnisbilder* – witnesses to aid memory (Michalsky 1993: 27). This painting was reproduced and circulated in print (Figure 8) as didactic treatises that must be read, like two pages of a book (Belting 2006: 184).

The upliftment or raising of the image of the serpent, a common feature among representations of the *topos*, has a sacramental

significance to both Catholics and Reformation theologians. On the one hand, it resembles the raising of the host during the Roman Catholic holy mass. On the other, in John Calvin's *Commentary on St John*, he interprets John 3:14 in the context of the preaching of the gospel. "To be lifted up" is done by preaching the gospel and such preaching is to be understood sacramentally in an old established reformational tradition that Calvin follows (Devries 2002: 15). Calvin asks the question: "Does Christ compare himself to the [brazen] serpent [in John 3:14], because there is some resemblance; or does he pronounce it to have been a sacrament, as the Manna was?" For Calvin the brazen serpent is the Old Testament type for the New Testament sacrament of the preaching of the gospel (Devries 2002: 16). By preaching the gospel Christ is raised up high, placed before the eyes of all, so that all who look at him by faith may receive salvation.

Figure 9: Lucas Cranach the Younger, *Altarpiece* (1547). Wittenberg Christ Church (Koerner 2004: 258)

Lucas Cranach, a friend and supporter of Luther, is believed to have been influenced by Martin Luther in the design of the Altarpiece (1547) (Figure 9) he painted for the church in Wittenberg, the church of Luther's ministry where it still stands. The central panel and wings of the retable represent the last supper, baptism and confession. These "external signs of grace" are supported by another sign of grace: preaching, the subject of the predella underneath, which seems to "support" the rest of the retable (Koerner 2004: 76) (Figure 10).

Figure 10: Lucas Cranach the Younger, Predella of altarpiece (1547). Wittenberg Christ Church (Koerner 2004: 258)

I contend that the predella presupposes Luther's commentaries on biblical passages referring to the brazen serpent and that Christ's animatedly billowing and twisting loincloth in the airless space of the church has a distinctly serpentine quality which alludes to it. According to Koerner (2002: 210), "… in the Wittenberg predella, Christ dies in the dead air of a school room, despite the flapping loin cloth". I maintain that in its allusion to the brazen serpent *topos*, the predella painting extricates itself from "the school room" and that the energy set free by the swirling loin cloth differentiates it from other didactic images produced by the workshop of Lucas Cranach like the *Law and grace* print referred to above. In the predella the image of the crucified Christ, according to Koerner (2004: 175-8), refers neither to a vision (the cross is planted in the floor), nor to a sculpture in the church interior (it has no sculptural base), nor to the historical flesh-and-blood crucifixion (droplets of blood are stylised and the drapery flies horizontally in a windowless interior). The

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ambivalent placement of the crucifix in the unusually unventilated space suggests that it is interiorised, placed in the mind of the congregation, as a metaphor of the manifestation of Christ's presence in prayer and preaching.

Yet, I want to add, the painting is composed so as to resemble the scene of the interpretation of an image. This is evident in Luther's pointing gesture from the lectern on the right, and in the elevated gazes of the members of the congregation, both resembling the main actions, respectively, of Moses and the Israelites in the majority of existing brazen serpent paintings. In the ritual actions of pointing, seeing, saying and hearing the new sacramental sense of images spawned by the Reformation becomes evident. The emphasis is on sacramental preaching as the ritual breaking of the bread, rather than on the exhibition and elevation of the presence in body and host of the transubstantiation (cf Paulson 2003: 1-24). According to Mondzain (2000 & 2005, Stoellger 2004), art's break with the church during the Reformation potentially initiates a sacramental interpretation of all images in the West. The *Heilswirksamkeit* disclosed in the image of the death of Christ now justifies all images which are potentially understood not only as essential but also as beneficent and redemptive. The act of the proclamation of the word, the constant re-enactment of the word through preaching (Ricoeur 1995: 42, 46, 47), as opposed to the fetishization of the written word or the auratic image, requires the constant renewal of the powers of the imagination and transforms the representation and the reception of images. As with the brazen serpent ritual that captivated all the senses of the Israelites, the gradual transformation and reformation to a new understanding of God's revelation of himself in history is mediated.

An early painting by Antonie van Dyck of *Moses and the brazen serpent* (1621) is an example of art produced during the Catholic Reformation in Antwerp (Figure 11). The work can be productively compared with *The victory of eucharistic truth over heresy* (1625/6), an oil sketch (Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge) that Peter Paul Rubens produced a few years later for the cycle of tapestries *The triumph of the eucharist* (1625-26), commissioned by the regent archduchess

Figure 11: Antonie van Dyck (1599-1641), *Moses and the brazen serpent,* (1621). Oil on canvas, 205 x 355 cm. Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid <http://www.artbible.info/art/large/143.html>

Isabella for the convent of the Descalzas Reales in Madrid (Held 1980: 153). Van Dyck entered Rubens's studio as an assistant in 1617 or 1618 and remained there until late 1620. The comparison reveals aspects of the contemporary battles of images. Rubens's cycle starts with four Old Testament pre-figurations of the eucharist – excluding the brazen serpent which was sometimes associated with Protestant art and was used, for example, on the title page of Calvin's *Institutiones.* In the subsequent allegorical sketch of the cycle, *The victory of eucharistic truth over heresy* (Figure 12)*,* the luminous figure of truth steps on the dragon of heresy. An inscription *hoc est corpus meum* above her head associates truth with the mystery of the mass, and Calvin, represented with a scholar's cap and Luther, a fat monk, have fallen on the ground before her (Held 1980: 153). The alternatives of blindness to and visual recognition of the body of Christ in the

eucharistic host is thematised by the Rubens sketch and, I am arguing, in Van Dyck's painting as well. Whereas Cranach's predella performs the religious authority of the Word and the inner presence of Christ in preaching and prayer through references to the brazen serpent, the sculptural representation of the hissing serpent in Van Dyck's painting looks just as alive as the flying serpents surrounding it. The dramatically animate serpent on the pole draws the attention to its presence, rather than to its representation as an image or sign.

Figure 12: Peter Paul Rubens, The victory of eucharistic truth over heresy (1625-26). Oil sketch. Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge (Held 1980: 153, Cat 103)

In the controversy over the holy communion, Protestant criticism of the doctrine of the transubstantiation of the bread into the true body of Christ was associated with the condemnation of the image cult, and Van Dyck navigates carefully through this difficulty. His painting demonstrates the most striking features of most visual representations of this *topos*. First, the raising or lifting of the image of the serpent so that Moses and the Israelites (and in this case also

(and in this case also the spectators of the painting) look up towards it (as to the elevated sacramental host); secondly, the separation of spectators according to their diverse reactions to the image (as in Michelangelo's version) and, thirdly, the centrality of corporeal gesturing and pointing towards the image of the serpent (as in Cranach's predella). The proximity of a surplus of hands hailing the image, attracting attention to it and educing its healing power, and Moses' hand aligned with pole and serpent, broach the issue of the human-made character of this image of the serpent, as opposed to the purported self-creation of the golden calf.

When Moses was instructed by the Lord to make and erect the image of the brazen serpent, the idolatrous adoration of the golden calf was not far from the minds of the Israelites. Aaron's explanation that the Israelites had given him their gold and that he "threw it in the fire and out came this calf" (Exodus 32: 24) suggests the self-creation of a sacred image or *acheiropoiete* with a presence and life of its own. In the light of the widespread incidence of animal worship in neighbouring kingdoms of the Israelites, in particular in Egypt (Eichrodt 1967: 22), God's perplexing instruction to Moses to make a bronze image of a serpent and erect it on a pole was a means to explode and invert the power of nature mythology; a means to "tear down their altars and break down their pillars" (Exodus 34:13). The conceptions of divine manifestation of the heathen nations of the entire ancient Near East were not eradicated by the forms of Yahweh's self-manifestation, but existing image conceptions were rather gradually transformed and reformed as a result of Israel's experience of the covenant God and his nature (Eichrodt 1967b: 15). Similarly, Christian sacred icons or *acheiropoiete*, like Veronica's veil or Christ's visage on the Turin shroud, are not believed to have been made by human hands, but to exist without intermediary. The exploitation of the immersive presence of images was part of the Catholic Reformation strategy to propagate the power of images to mediate the immediate presence of the Invisible.

Figure 13: Azaria Mbatha *The story of Moses* (1963). Linocut on paper, 46.5 x 72 cm. The Campbell Collections, University of Natal, Durban (Durban Art Gallery 1998: 91)

A brazen serpent scene once again assumes a crucial position in mediating and differentiating between disparate cultural notions about the revelation of the sacred, in the South African Zulu artist Azaria Mbatha's narrative linocut print *The story of Moses* (1963) (Figure 13). Paul Ricoeur's (1995: 48-67) distinction between the "manifestation" of the sacred and the "proclamation" of the Word is useful to analyse the fundamentally contrasting narrative attitudes in the work of Azaria Mbatha the Lutheran Zulu Kholwa (or converted Christian Zulu) (Winters 1998), and that of his acquaintance the Zulu prophet Laduma Madela (Figure 14). In Laduma Madela's mythical representations (of Miles 1997, Schlosser 1997) the sacred is represented to be read directly on the world, on fragments of the cosmos, whereas Azaria Mabatha's work is an endeavour to translate and transfigure this mythical Zulu symbolism in accordance with the requirements of the Word.

On a photograph, taken on the September, 21 1979 by the German anthropologist Katesa Schlosser, of Laduma Madela waiting at the entrance to his homestead on the Ceza Mountains in northern Zululand to welcome her (Figure 14), Madela presents a carton and coloured pencil poster which he had specially prepared for the meeting. The drawings on the poster present copies of some of the hundreds of drawings Madela had produced since the 1950s. In 1957, at his first acquaintance with O F Raum, professor in anthropology at the University of Fort Hare, Madela was urged to begin to record his visions and knowledge of the creation story and of the Zulu sky god Mvelinqangi. Madela holds the guiding red-brown "arrow" that protrudes from the right of the poster in his hand. It represents, according to him, the tongue of Mveliqangi inscribed with the Zulu words: "The voice of the almighty speaks to us". The gesture of touching the representation of Mvelinqangi's tongue demonstrates Madela's acceptance of the role as medium, vehicle, conduit or messenger of the Zulu sky god who dictates the form of his drawings.

Figure 14: Photograph of Laduma Madela waiting at the entrance to his homestead on the Ceza Mountains in northern Zululand. Photographer: Katesa Schlosser, 21 September 1979 (Schlosser 2002: colour plate II)

The compelling image on the left of the poster repeats a drawing (Figure 15) in coloured pencil, pencil and ink made in a drawing pad of the "powerful elephant" opening the hollow half spherical "rock of rocks". The blue and red contours around the rock, according to Madela, respectively designate the cold and lukewarm water surrounding the rock of origin, its heart. Inscriptions below the head and body of the elephant identify the blue and red stripes on either side of the opening as lightning bolts that had empowered the elephant to open the rock. The manner in which the appearance of the natural elements is depicted manifestly conveys excessive meaning. Madela's rich rendering of the sheen of copper as multi-coloured concentric bands to which the eye converges suggests the plenitude of meaning of the mythical cosmos that makes Mveliqangi's power immediately significant. Madela pictorially enhances the value of the durable metal to allow the transcendent to appear through it.

Figure 15: Laduma Madela, *The powerful elephant after having opened the rock of rocks (sa).* Coloured pencil, pencil and ink, 26.8 x 18.8 cm (Schlosser 2002: 11)

The power of the elephant is apparent in the portrayal of specific points of resemblance between the elephant and Mvelinqangi himself. The rendering of the hairy elephant with a dilated human-looking right eye, effectively enlarged by red triangles in the corners and positioned next to an ear of unusual shape, can be compared with a drawing of one of Madela's visions of *The creator god Mvelinqangi* in which the sky god, like the elephant, wears a headband to enhance his authority (Figure 16). The copper feather in Mvelinqangi's headband, his impressive beard, the wood and metal knobkerrie (his attribute of both destruction and creation) and above all, the sun itself worn as breast decoration, render Mvelinqangi efficacious and awe-inspiring. Madela explains: "Nobody goes near him, because the sun is hot". Although they remain recognisable, natural elements such as copper, elephant, thunder and lightning, water, mountain and wind are transformed and enhanced so as to allow the immanence of the sacred to appear through them.

Figure 16: Laduma Madela *The creator god, Mvelinqangi (Sa).* Pencil and ink, 12.3 x 17 cm (Schlosser 2002: 15)

Azaria Mbatha, on the other hand, wrestles with the crisis of cultural translation in his circumspect selection of particular scenes from the many episodes in the life of Moses, carefully relating them to Zulu anthropocosmic experience of copper (transfigured in the brazen serpent), thunder and lightning (associated with Moses' vision on Mount Sinai), water (the crossing of the Red Sea and water from the rock) and mountain (Mount Sinai). Mbatha depicts a process of translation or transfiguration, for example, of the mythic belief in the manifestation of the sacred through the power of thunder and lightning into the biblical belief of the progressive revelation of the God of history in the *Heilsgeschichte* (Figure 17).

Figure 17: Azaria Mbatha, *The story of Moses* (1963). Scene 9: "We ask for mercy!" (detail). Linocut on paper. The Campbell Collections. University of Natal, Durban, (Durban Art Gallery 1998: 91)

In Zulu culture, according to Berglund (1975: 37, 38), thunder and lightning are attributed to Mvelinqangi, the Lord of the Sky. A specific category of thunder, a sudden cracking roar, accompanied by forked lightning, is attributed to the Lord-of-the-Sky's bad temper or anger and demands an apology and a request for mercy from

Mvelinquangi. Mbatha chooses to depict, under the title: "We ask for mercy!" the trembling and fearful people of Israel hearing thunder and seeing lightning and smoke on Mount Sinai where God's revelation of himself in the inscription of the Word on two stone tablets occurred, is represented. In the succession of scenes, this translation of direct sacred manifestation in terms of the requirements of the proclamation of the Word prepares for an explosion of meaning, in the climactic subsequent *dénouement* of the brazen serpent scene (Figure 18).

Deictically titled as: "Behold and be saved!" the Brazen serpent scene is interpreted in terms of Christ's crucifixion. In the Brazen serpent the beholder's position is challenged in the face of the conflictual gap at the meeting of powerful cultural forces and the "intranslatability" of the Christian God.

Figure 18: Azaria Mbatha, *The story of Moses* (1963). Scene 10: "Behold and be saved!" (detail). Linocut on paper. The Campbell Collections, University of Natal, Durban, (Durban Art Gallery 1998: 91)

The fetishistic misappropriation of the image of the brazen serpent by the Israelites returns one to the postmodern era of idolatry. The sculptural object accompanied the Israelites on their subsequent

journey through the desert initiating the cult of Nohestan, after which king Hezekiah (2 Kings 18) reduced it to powder. This myopic and obsessive focus on the object itself is not unique in its history. The constant human struggle with the function of images as substitutes manifests again in the sixteenth century when plague medallions (Figure 19) with relief impressions of the brazen serpent on one side and of the crucified Christ on the reverse were struck in various cities in Germany (Schouten 1967: 101). As fetishistic amulets they served an apotropaic function to avert the evil of the plague.

Figure 19: Plague medal, German (beginning of the sixteenth century). Silver (Schouten 1967: 98)

In the light of the rarity of sculptural remediations of the biblical passage on the brazen serpent, Giovanni Fantoni's postmodern brazen serpent sculpture (Figure 20) in front of the Franciscan friary on Mount Nebo in western Jordan is remarkable.

Figure 20: Giovanni Fantoni, Brazen serpent sculpture. Mount Nebo, western Jordan <http://www.panoramio.com/photo/4874646>

The sculpture at first appears to be a substitute, repetition, prototype or reproduction of the original image, placed near its original site where the Israelites camped during their exile. The sculpture was visited by pope Jean Paul II in 2000 during his pilgrimage to the holy land which can be surveyed from Mount Nebo, and by pope Benedict XVI who delivered a speech there in May 2009. But the sculpture's displacement at a conflicted site where Moses, a patriarch of the Jewish, Islamic as well as Christian religions is believed to have viewed the promised land that he could never enter, and where he is believed to have died and been buried, soon makes the spectator aware of the ironies of the central value that the Other assumes in conceptions of the self in postmodern society. Aleida Assmann (1996: 99) points out that "[t]he period of postmodernity is characterized by the fundamentalization of plurality". Yet, she continues,

on the other hand it is hardly known upon which bases and in which ways the Other is supposed to be known. The sculpture signifies the struggle at the bloody crossroads of cultures and calls into question the self-understanding of the observer. It is displaced in the age of idolatry, the age of the missing referent. Disturbing questions like: "Does it refer to its original referent, the power of the God of Israel and/or the crucifixion or not?" highlight the fear of the danger of substitutes and the need to unmask them.

A closer look at the sculpture (Figure 21) reveals that the image of the serpent is merely hinted at by a wire representation of the substitute of a serpent, its slough; by a similitude of the cast dead skin dropped off from its living flesh. Fragments of a pole seemingly violently hacked to pieces are welded onto the central pole, underscoring and endlessly repeating its hollowness. The mythic durability of copper that had been transformed by the meaning of the brazen serpent image is reduced to left-over scrap metal. The sculpture dissimulates the hollowness and emptiness of the pole, and the absence, demise and loss of the serpent and its image. It has a disquieting quality related to a deep questioning of the visual in society. Does this bricolage give a glimpse of a Latin cross, an *ankh* cross or rather the horns of a bull? Is this surplus of multi-cultural references not an ironic pointer to the emptiness of signs at a time when the pope himself has become a media star, a living icon who has acquired cult status?

The sculpture confronts and interrogates changing image conceptions through the possibilities of the image as *figura*, allegory, substitute, resemblance, mimesis and simulacrum. In the postmodern era of the fundamentalisation of pluralism it has become a hollow simulacrum of the original power of this image to divide and mediate. In the era in which diversity is revered as a central value, even though the basis upon which otherness may be confronted is mostly left undefined, otherness remains enigmatic and ungraspable. But even when saved as digital images and invisible data files, the brazen serpent shows that ultimately images remain on the threshold of the visible and the invisible, connecting these two zones and one cannot but still believe in them, waiting for the true

and real image to appear. Images remain place holders for what one believes to be true.

Figure 21: Giovanni Fantoni, Brazen serpent sculpture (detail).
Mount Nebo, western Jordan< http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/
Mount_Nebo_(Jordan)>

Representations of the brazen serpent *topos* themselves perform the interrogation of the nature and function of images in various ways. The biblical history demonstrates the putting into action of the Word of God in the sculpted image of a serpent, whereas artistic representations of this *topos* remediate the verbal biblical history in visual form, staging the transforming relationship between image and spectator. The *topos* presents the calling into question of the self-understanding of the spectator in front of an image. The incongruous and unsettling use of the image of a serpent to point to God's redemption shifts attention to the act of looking – to the possibilities of being transfixed, attracted or repulsed. By representing the segregation of spectators in front of the sculpted

image, alternative understandings of images and perceptions by Others are acknowledged, and this seems to be at the root of the understanding of brazen serpent representations. A clash of understanding is implied in the observation of the image and this destabilises one's ideas of the image itself. This calling into question of the understanding of the image or iconcrisis becomes a matter of life and death in the biblical history of the brazen serpent. W J T Mitchell discerns a sense of "wildness" in the very nature of multistable meta-pictures which by definition resist fixed cultural status. This shifting or switching of alternative understandings points to the predisposition of brazen serpent representations to uncover, discover or reveal anew; to revive, transpose, translate or question existing understandings of the image.

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