



*Seeing Through Un-Reality *

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Looking at Looking: Imaging the Realities of Reality's Images

What is visible is light. What is seen is imaged—or imagined—in the mysterious medium of consciousness. What is imagined is real—one way or another. 'I see a tree; I thought I saw a tree; I imagine a tree that is not there.' In one sense, all images of phenomena are psychological productions, and as such, constitute 'thingless things of thought.' Such 'cognitive imagings' (what we 'think' we see) are actual, if 'immaterial,' phenomena that have literal consequences in determining human understanding and actions. Thus, regardless of their 'empirical accuracy' as representations of objects and events, all 'imaginings of reality' are potentially 'functional factors' in causation—even those that are 'delusional.' There is a sense then in which all the images 'through which we see the world' are both actual and yet 'un-real' in so far as these are 'imagined images of' the things of the world.

Another implication of this notion that 'all images are imaginal' (regardless of their literal accuracy as representations) is that all have the potential to be significantly meaningful to humans. The meaningfulness of specific images is attributed to them *in and by* consciousness—not simply by 'objectively verifiable scientific accuracy.' Indeed, many of the most scrupulously validated 'scientific images' of what is 'literally out there' pose attributes of reality that most humans find difficult to accept as actual relative to their own experience. Ordinary seeing and touching of the phenomenal world does not seem to coincide with or verify many 'scientific facts.'—whether the 'truth' that the earth orbits the sun or that all matter is composed of electrons, protons, and neutrons. Nonetheless, humans have learned to 'imagine' these 'facts' as images of things that are not actually ordinarily visible—as schematic models of solar systems and atomic structure.

Thus, however literal or accurate as ‘imagination that represent the things of the world,’ images are ‘given meaning’—and often in rather arbitrary ways. What images are ‘understood to represent’ differs in different social and cultural contexts. The meaning-fullness of an image thus derives from what a person or society pre-determines it refers to or signifies. An image is meaning-less if it does not in some regard thusly signify a familiar form, concept, or feeling. Of course, such meaningful significance can be ‘attributed’ *after* a first encounter with a previously unfamiliar image—or as a discovery of new significance in relation to an already familiar one. Particular images can have many differing, even contrasting meaningful associations that are ‘seen through’ that particular image.

Images thus seem to serve human knowing as ‘signs’ that representatively ‘point to’ or signify in ways derived from some collective agreement between persons of specific social contexts (i.e., the image of a ‘stop sign,’ the Statue of Liberty, or a swastika). The resulting meaningfulness of images can signify literalistically practical identification (‘blue cup’) or metaphorically symbolic association (‘cup of sorrow’). Yet both types of meaningfulness (literal and metaphoric signification) can potentially be attributed to the image of a single object (which object is, ‘in fact,’ neither of these imaginings). Given such different types of signification and how these can be derived from ‘the same image,’ it seems rather difficult to reasonably determine which image might be the ‘more real’—the so-called literal or the seemingly metaphorical? Put another way, how do we determine whether either type of image is any ‘less real’ than the object that it identifies? Regardless of how one answers such questions, ‘accuracy of representation’ seems to be relative to the type of representative image, or mode of signifying meaning, that is being emphasized in any given context: who is doing the signifying and why are essential factors in determining ‘meaningful accuracy.’

Thus there appears a sense by which humans appear to ‘see *through*’ the un-reality of images ‘to’ both literal and symbolic realities. But if those ‘realities’ are not ‘in’ the images seen or imagined (images which are not the objects ‘looked at’), then just ‘where’ are these ‘signified meanings’—in ‘the mind,’ or ‘of the manner of looking?’

Seeing Is Believing—Although, It's All in How You Look at It

Seeing is regarded as a primary proof of valid existence. Yet, if what is seen is a mental image that representatively signifies some event, object, or meaning, then ‘believing in the image’ is a form of idolatry—meaning that the sign is *taken to be* that which it signifies or represents. This confusion of image/sign with what it signifies also appears in relation to how words or concepts can be assumed to ‘be what they represent.’ A drawing and photograph of a bridge are no more that object than a description in words or mathematical formulas. Not only is representation necessarily interpretive re-

presentation, but it is inherently limited. Regardless of how accurately drawing, photo, or description represent certain traits of a particular object (the bridge) that object always has other traits not included in one type or version of interpretive representation.

One reaction to the equation of image or word signs with what each is assumed to signify is to reject it—images are a ‘false’ basis for belief. However, such ‘iconoclasm’ tends to impose an indefinite insecurity about the validity of meaningful signification. How can anything be known confidently if images and words cannot be relied upon to accurately and unequivocally identify particular things and phenomena? If we are all ‘idolaters of false images’ who ‘miss-take our mental images for the things out there,’ then how do we know what we are actually looking at? Perhaps this depends upon differentiating the ways we ‘look upon’ what is ‘out there.’

If we see what we believe to be real by looking, yet we can ‘see’ different meanings by ‘looking through’ the same images, then how we ‘look at’ things must shape our imagings of reality. Visual perception tends to be relied upon as the most primary means of ‘telling the difference’ between the things of the world. Yet there appear to be various ways of making those distinctions—such as in ‘looking for’ literal or metaphorical meanings. Just as image is not the object it re-presents, image is not the meaningful associations that it is assumed to signify.

An ‘artistic’ drawing of a bridge tends to constitute a rather different type of representational image than a photographic one. Each type tends to prompt different modes of ‘making meaning’ from the image. And yet, one person might look at the photograph of the bridge and interpret its meaning-fullness as emotionally compelling while another person might regard the same photo as signifying how certain principles of engineering science are employed in bridge construction.

Humans ‘look at’ the world from, or ‘through,’ widely differing socio-cultural conventions and perspectives—through ‘lenses’ such as mechanistic materialism, mythical animism, and psychological semiotics. Phenomena are thus inevitably seen variously (i.e., as inanimate material objects, spiritually animated entities, or referents for symbolic phenomenological mental significations). There ‘appear,’ one might say, various un-realities *through which* we see differing aspects of ‘how things are the ways they are’—*in terms of* our ‘manner of looking.’ It is not surprising then that we often ‘see’ self and world in differing, even contradictory ways that are all experienced as relatively valid. Inability or failure to be aware of this complexity in how one ‘sees’ and ‘makes meaning’ of images seems likely to be a source of much confusion, miscommunication, and ‘unconsciously registered meaning.’

Imaging Meaning Differently—Knowingly and Not

If there are various ‘ways of looking,’ with each having some ‘realistic validity’ relative to the ‘types of meaning’ these signify (mechanistic, aesthetic, metaphorical), then there arise questions about which ones are being emphasized by whom and when. That is, this notion of diverse ways of ‘making meaning’ in relation to images poses doubt about whether one knows what one is conveying by reference to certain images—could there be more meaning attributed to an image than one consciously intends or acknowledges? In relation to ‘seeing differently,’ what happens when two people imagining the same image assume it to have different meaningful associations? One person might ‘understand’ the image of a door as signifying that general, literal thing that opens and shuts on hinges. Another person might recognize the image as a particular door to particular building, Yet another might take the meaning of the image to be symbolically indicative of thresholds or ‘places of transition.’

The use of images in communicating thus is ever subject to both different intended meanings and different subsequent associations. There are then images of unintended or mistaken meaningfulness. In so far as images have become associated with multiple meanings, how do we know which ones are being communicated or ‘activated’ in people’s consciousness?’ This potential for unintended meanings has the additional implication that consciousness might be influenced by meaning associations not overtly recognized. That is, meaningful associations to images might effect attitudes and understanding ‘unconsciously. Study of social psychology indicates that large scale effects can result when an entire social group assumes consciously that a particular image has meaning X, yet their thinking is also being unconsciously influenced by an unacknowledged meaning Y. A collective group might assume that their national flag stands for ‘freedom’ yet be unconsciously be influenced by its associations with superiority and the right to dominate others. The meaning-fullness-es of images are not only various, contrasting, and context dependent, but intentionally *and* unintentionally ‘active’ in human consciousness *concurrently*. Well might it be, then, that what we ‘see through’ the ‘un-reality’ of images is ‘more than gets overtly acknowledged.’

Seeing Iconoclastically—Making Meaningfulness Dialectically In/Between Images and References

These notions of how images provide a basis for knowing by way of multiple, contrasting significations that derive from different criteria for ‘how we see’ poses a context of uncertain, ambi-valent interpretation. Just as the notion of idolatry (‘worship of a form’) suggests ‘taking the image for the thing it represents,’ the notion of iconoclasm indicates a rejection of established beliefs or ‘iconic images’ of fixed meaning. The word iconoclasm derives from the Greek *eikon* for likeness and *klan* for to break. The appearance of ‘a likeness’ is thus regarded as somehow ‘false’ or needing

to be ‘broken.’ The idolater thereby is posed as accepting ‘the image’ as what it is assumed to be or mean. The iconoclast tends to respond with doubt and suspicion about the relationship of image to thing or meaning. The idolatrous approach is related here to how humans ordinarily perceive and interpret self and world. The iconoclastic mode then can be seen as more of an extra-ordinary ‘way of knowing’ because it prompts a resistance to ‘seeing things in ordinary terms.’

Manifesting a consciously iconoclastic regard for the relations between images, things, and meanings in human consciousness enables one to better investigate ‘how we are seeing’ or ‘making meaning’ in any given context. If images are not simply ‘what they appear to be’ and their significations are not those reflexively assumed, then just what else might be ‘going on’ in the formation of our motives and actions? For some, the uncertainties suggested by such a perspective on knowing and understanding seem so threatening to the possibility for confident assertions of identity, reality, and truth that any notion of iconoclasm is unacceptable. For others, the impulse to destroy any and all ‘icons of absolute reality and truth’ is so compelling that they effectively become ‘idolatrous iconoclasts’—persons who seek to idolize the ‘image of the absence of real images’ or ‘impossibility of reliable representations of truth.’

In between these extremes (the idolatrous reduction to exclusive essences and idolization of the essential absence of essential representation or meaning) there appears potential for an iconoclastic seeing that methodologically ‘sees through’ the various ways images are experienced as meaningfully re-presentational. Such a mode of ‘comparativistic seeing and interpreting’ could be termed dialectical in so far as it enables a conscious activation of multiply meaningfully, contrasting references or significations *concurrently*. The effort here then would not be to oppose real and unreal, valid and invalid images or significations, but to constellate the ambi-valent interactivities of the affinities and contraries of various versions. An iconoclastic move that ‘respects’ the meaningful multiplicities of images-as-signifiers thus poses a ‘revelation’ about the inherent, typically unacknowledged, activities of meaningful association occurring in consciousness.

Thereby, image/meanings that habitually appear as reliably constant, thus ordinary, can become energetically animated as parts of a radically complex interactivity of references to and about ‘what goes on’—in and between self and world. It does not seem unreasonable to suggest that such an attitude is a primary element in what is termed “scientific method,” with its discipline of preserving doubt about the ultimate accuracy of its ‘ever revisable’ hypothetical assertions upon ‘the nature of things.’

[Of Ordinary, Unusual, and Extra-Ordinary Images](#)

Given such potential for multiple, divergent, and unacknowledged signification of images, attempting to designate what might be the normative or ordinary meanings of images seems a dubious goal. What could categories such as ‘ordinary meaning’ versus ‘extra-ordinary meaning’ mean? A distinction offered here is that many familiar images are collectively, and reflexively, understood as signifying literal, singularly separate conditions of ‘identity.’ The ‘things of the world’ are thereby ‘assigned’ specific images, whether oranges, waterfalls, or persons, that ‘fix’ the status of things. Such images (or the meanings assumed to be signified by them) establish the realm of the familiar, the normative, the ordinary—a ‘baseline’ of actuality. This vaguely defined category would include whatever images are ‘taken to mean’ that ‘things in the world are the way they are supposed to be.’ However, in reference to the notion that particular images can have multiple and divergent meaning-associations, the broader sense of ordinary status for things would seem to derive more from ‘how we look at’ things when we are seeking to image them as normative, usual, predictably consistent entities. That is, images are ‘ordinary’ in so far as these are reflexively assigned such status. The same images could potentially be regarded as signifying some other-than-ordinary status.

Certainly there can be no ‘ordinary continuity of things’ (or their images) except in contrast to what is regarded as unusual, unexpected, or somehow exceptional. In order for there to be some ‘ordinary order’ of things, there must also be an unusual or atypical status for objects and events. One such category would be ‘deformity.’ A bird with one wing does not present an image of ‘ordinary birdness.’ However, it is familiar and ordinary in the sense that it is unusual only because it is damaged or deformed—one readily ‘sees’ that its image is partially or incompletely ordinary one. In this way the ‘realm of the ordinary’ can be imaged so as to include both the ‘central’ and ‘peripheral’ conditions of the reality of the ‘ordinary world’—things as more or less ordinarily ordered.

However, there are also images that overtly contradict our expectations of ‘ordinary being.’ Images of horses, in various colors and sizes, some with deformities, can all be classed as relatively ordinary. But images of horses that are half human suggest a thing that is not, ordinarily, possible. Such an image is likely to be immediately recognized as not signifying aspects of ‘ordinary order.’ And yet, such images are not exactly unfamiliar. This one even has a word name: centaur. It would seem that this image cannot signify anything meaningful about the ‘ordinarily literal’ nature of either horses or humans. Nonetheless, for some persons at least, it signifies some coherent meaning about ‘human nature.’ How can such an ‘ordinarily unreal image’ be experienced as signifying some accurate condition of reality? Perhaps what is indicated here is a more-than or extra-ordinary type of image in that it contravenes ordinary reality. Indeed, its meaningful signification must have something to do with its overt ‘un-reality’ as an

image, by which it evidently conveys meaning about ‘how the world really really is.’ That is, the very extra-ordinary un-reality of the image must ‘make visible’ some trait of human consciousness that is ordinarily ‘hidden’ by the standardized assumption that horses and humans are utterly different entities.

Such an extra-ordinarily un-real image that can signify meaning about the ordinarily real suggests that there are aspects of reality for which ordinary images and references provide inadequate representations. It is suggested here that such a relationship between extra-ordinary representation and actual reality is likely an important enhancement of how humans understand the often-obscure intricacies of complex phenomena. The case can then be made that many of the images generated by scientific theory and research are similarly ‘un-real figurations of ordinarily invisible structure and dynamic phenomena.’

However, such relative categorization of images as ordinary versus extra-ordinary, relative to standards of normative reality, is not constant across cultural boundaries. Standards for normative order differ. This discontinuity of cultural standards for ordinary status again suggests that such distinctions are more an *attitude about images* than any absolute distinction that can be made between them. Ordinary status varies according to contextual references both in and between cultural frames of reference. Human signification includes a rather bewildering capacity to at times regard what are apparently overtly extra-ordinary images as not really so. Consider that many fantastically ‘un-real’ images are often regarded as meaningful only in terms of fantasy (‘science fiction’), or as entertaining ‘make believe’ (fairy tales). not because these signify some important though ‘ordinarily invisible’ traits of actual reality. Conversely, even seemingly ordinary images are sometimes experienced as signifying a ‘greater reality’ than ordinary assumptions acknowledges. From some perspectives, the ordinariness of an image of a human can be regarded as a ‘sign’ of the irreducibly complex interactivities of mind and matter, the unfathomable manifestation of an ethereal spirit of consciousness in and as the material mechanisms of biology.

Thereby, it seems inaccurate to assume that more-than-ordinary meaningfulness is inherently *in or of* images that represent the things of this world in ways that contravene the reality of ordinary status. Rather, the contrast between ordinary and extra-ordinary categories might best be understood as deriving from contextually engaged impulses to ‘see things’ as relatively simplistic, static forms versus as intricately interactive, metamorphically dynamic phenomena—the latter requiring images or meaningfulness that conflate ordinarily fixed and distinct image-meanings. Ordinary imaging is thus not so much a consequence of ‘seeing realistically’ as ‘imaging normatively meaningful standardized status.’ Seeing *by way of* extra-ordinarily meaningful imagining thereby ‘looks for’ how things ‘actually are’ in ways those ordinary references exclude or

repress. The suggestion offered here is that normatively ordinary status tends to depend upon reductive fixity and exclusive singularity of status. Thus it is the province of extra-ordinary imaging and signification to elaborate more complex and dynamically irreducible actualities of phenomena by effectively violating or confounding the conventions of ordinary status.

Iconoclasm's Release of the Mythical Visions of Extra-Ordinary Archetypal Signification

An iconoclastic distrust of the 'idolization of appearances,' or how images are reflexively taken to be the things they signify, is useful in appreciating the relative epistemological values of ordinary versus extra-ordinary status. In one regard, extra-ordinary signification would seem to be a reference to typically unacknowledged or 'unseen' traits of 'the things being imaged.' Ordinary status involves familiarly ordered and prioritized 'meaningful relations' between things and events. Thus the signifying relations between images and meanings tend to be reductively exact and literal. In order to 'see beyond' that way of imaging reality, those images must be in a sense 'broken' as 'icons of the real.' Such a 'break through' to seeing meaningful associations that are ordinarily 'repressed' suggests an 'other world' of phenomenal reality—relative to the world of habituated assumptions. However, those extra-ordinarily meaningful images are thusly meaningful only because they are experienced as 'un-real reality.' That is, should these be taken as 'literally what is being represented' then they also effectively take on the idolized status of 'icons of ordinary meaningfulness.'

The particular mode of knowing (or epistemological method) activated by an extra-ordinary 'seeing of meaning' thereby involves an 'iconoclastic vision.' That is, the traits of things so imaged/signified 'see through' the hierarchical ordering and singular status of 'ordinarily idolized priorities' to a relatively less reductive multiplicity of meaningfully dynamic relationships. Iconoclasm's suspicion of the ordinary status of images, with its reductive repressions of actual associative complexities, can effectively activate a 'release' of those complexities of meaningfulness. Once the attitude of ordinarily iconic idolatry is displaced from reflexive dominance in consciousness, a more inclusive 'play' of potentially meaningful significations becomes possible. Such a 'release' of awareness tends to confront consciousness with a veritable 'riot' of significant associations between distinguishing traits of likenesses and differences—an order of dynamic complexity that resists reductive definition and thus requires 'un-realistically real' imaging. However, that potentially extra-ordinary signification of dynamic complexity actually manifests its iconoclastic meaningfulness *by way of* its contrasts with 'ordinary idolatry.' Idolatrous and iconoclastic tendencies thereby appear mutually complimentary rather than oppositionally contradictory.

At this point, these musings on ‘looking at looking’ and how the ‘cognitive sensations’ of ‘imaging things’ produce diversified modes of signification, prompts an association with notions about archetypal and mythical meaningfulness. The concept that images ‘signify’ by way of relative differences and likenesses between them (oranges are round like apples but one is red in color) suggests that it is elemental or archetypal traits that are actually, that is cognitively, being imaged—rather than ‘the things themselves.’ And those traits can be understood as ‘archetypal’ in that these are somehow primary or ‘originating’ elements that together compose the ‘status of things’ (i.e., roundness, orangeness, redness, smoothness, roughness, fruitness, etc.). The tracking of potentially meaningful or significant associations between things thus requires differentiation of the ‘archetypal elements’ or traits composing them *as represented in images* (i.e., of apples versus oranges). Such use of archetypal traits in the general imaging of distinctions is relative to configuring the contrast between ordinary and extra-ordinary status. Imaging the ‘ordinarily significant status’ of a thing, in the reductive mode of idolatry, tends to delimit or compress the diversity of its archetypal traits and potential associations with other things. Some are represented or signified as ‘what it is’ while others are not ‘taken into account’ in how its status is habitually posed. In contrast, a more extra-ordinary (thus relatively iconoclastic) perspective will tend to ‘break’ that iconic dominance of ordinary classification by emphasizing typically unacknowledged archetypal traits and how these conjoin or interact ‘as the thing imaged or signified.’ The ordinarily singular status ‘apple’ thereby becomes the extra-ordinarily diversified multiplicity of archetypal traits and significations constituting ‘appleness.’ A ‘free play’ of the ‘archetypality of appleness’ extends into such realms of signification as biology, physics, cultural symbolism, historical associations, and personal experience. Thus ‘apple’ is no longer a particularly singular, conventionally fixed entity but a dynamic, shifting constellation of archetypal traits and associations.

In so far as iconoclastic suspicion about the ‘true meanings of images’ enables greater latitude in posing complex archetypal associations between images/entities, it is associated here with the metamorphic play/interplay of meaningfulness suggested by the relatively extra-ordinary character of ‘mythical images.’ The strange confluences of the centaur image do not practically signify an ‘ordinarily ordered status of things.’ Yet its conjunctions of archetypal traits of horseness and humanness evidently provoke some potent significance by ‘breaking’ and conjoining two ordinarily distinct icons of meaningful reality (at least to some persons in a particular cultural context). It is offered here that the imaging style of representation generally associated with the term “myth” ‘makes meaning’ by way of such ‘challenging’ of the idolatrous assumptions of ordinary perspective. That is, mythical imaging/signification ‘plays off of’ how relatively ordinary signification represses archetypal diversity by, a. ‘taking images to be the things they represent,’ and, b. reductively limiting the significant associations between images/things to reaffirm ‘ordinary order.’ By elaborating archetypal traits of

and associations between things, mythical imaging/signification confounds those (practically necessary) exclusive reductions of ordinary socio-cultural standards for identity, conduct, and reality.

The result is what might be termed ‘mythical visions’ of self, others, and world that are ‘archeytpally iconoclastic’ —in that these ‘reveal’ archetypal traits of composition and association which the imaging of ordinary status tends to ignore or repress. As such, the knowing of ‘mythical iconoclasm’ is a ‘way of looking through the un-reality of images’ that can ‘see thusly’ by way of relatively ordinary and extra-ordinary styles of imaging (oranges as well as centaurs). However, the intensity of its potential for dynamical amplification of archetypal complexities is effectively enhanced by the more overtly iconoclastic disruptions of ordinary significations.

Even so, that potential is not simply inherent in those disruptions. Their implicit impetus for iconoclastic ‘release’ of awareness from the restrictions of ordinary reduction into the mythical visions of extra-ordinary archetypal associations can be effectively preempted by imposing dogmatic interpretations upon even the most overtly ‘mythical images.’ By simplistically narrowing the archetypal activity of their potential significations to the definitive parameters of ordinary status, mythical meaning is depotentiated. It is in this manner that the hierarchical impositions of ordinary status can maintain an ‘idolatrous grip upon reality’ despite the manifestations of extra-ordinary imagings of archetypal signification that ‘appear’ to contravene those reductive assumptions about ‘how things are supposed to be.’ The ‘realities of mythically dynamic reality’ that can be ‘glimpsed’ by seeing through the ‘iconoclastically extra-ordinary unreality of images’ is not so easily experienced as one might ‘ordinarily’ wish to believe.

The **Seeing Through Un-Reality** page of this web site offers some audio-visual ruminations on how people see the world(s) and their selves in relation to it. These videos are attempts to stimulate imaginal reflection archetypal traits of experience and knowing. However, none have been composed in an overt lecture format. The style is intended to be more provocative than didactic.

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Leslie Emery