

What Images Show

An Interview with Philippe Descola

Philippe SIMAY

The curator of the recent *La fabrique des images* exhibit at the Quai Branly Museum in Paris, anthropologist Philippe Descola offers a new approach of pictorial representations on the five continents and shows the four great worldviews they manifest: naturalism, totemism, animism, and analogism.

Exhibiting as an Experiment

Books and Ideas: What connection is there between the exhibit *La fabrique des images* (The Making of Images) and your last book, *Par-delà nature et culture?* (Beyond Nature and Culture)?

Philippe Descola: This exhibit is an experiment, an opportunity that was offered to me by the Quai Branly Museum in order to examine, in a specific domain, the relevance of a number of the claims that I made in a book that appeared five years ago, entitled *Par-delà nature et culture*.¹ In this book, I wanted to go beyond the idea that the forms of discontinuity between the human and the non-human realms are universal, notably the idea, with which we are most familiar, of a distinction between, on the one hand, a world of social rules, conventions, and cultural life, and, on the other, a sphere of natural regularities and recurrences. My experience as ethnologist had shown me that in other regions of the world, notably in the Amazonian lands where I did my ethnological fieldwork, this distinction did not exist. In the book, I tried to consider: what are the different procedures that human beings have invented to identify and discover the continuities and discontinuities between the human and the non-human realms,

¹ Philippe Descola, *Par-delà nature et culture*, Gallimard, 2005.

our own distinction between nature and society being but one model of these procedures for managing and identifying our relationships with the world?

I found four such models. The first two, “naturalism” and “animism,” refer to an opposition that first struck me when I was in Amazonia. Later, I discovered that it was also valid in other regions of the world. People do not make a clear-cut distinctions between the human and the non-human realms from the standpoint of inwardness. In other words, plants, animals, spirits, and even some artifacts are presumed to have a soul, a mind, consciousness, subjectivity, and so on, which makes them capable of social and cultural life as we understand them. Human life is extended to a very wide range of non-human beings. At the same time, each species of non-humans has a body that is completely specific to it and which allows it to act in the world with specific biological tools, tied to movement, food acquisition, forms of reproduction, etc. Each species is connected, thanks to its biological advantages, to a particular world. These worlds are not completely incommunicable, precisely because each species’ world can communicate with others through the medium of their shared inwardness. This is, consequently, a very original system that is not unique to the Amazonian world, nor to the society of the Jivaro Achuar which I studied. It is also found in North America, Siberia, certain regions of Southeast Asia, and so on.

Needless to say, this model is opposed point-by-point to our own way of seeing things, which, as it was gradually formed over the past few centuries, emphasizes that human beings have a distinctive kind of inwardness and that they alone possess this inwardness—consciousness, the cogito, a reflexive capacity. However, from the standpoint of their physical properties, humans are no different from other objects in the world. From the perspective of the laws of chemistry of physics, humans form a continuum with other beings, whether they are organic or inorganic. Consequently, this first opposition is founded on the capacity of human beings to attribute to organic or inorganic objects in their surroundings an inwardness similar to their own or to deny them this inwardness. It is also premised on their capacity to identify physical continuities and discontinuities.

These two elements—inwardness and physicality—play an important role in formulas found elsewhere, including two in particular. I call the first “totemism,” using a term from the anthropological tradition that is highly characteristic of aboriginal Australia. According to this

tradition, humans and non-humans with very different appearances can be grouped together into a single class, known as the totemic group, because, despite their differences, they share certain physical and moral characteristics. These physical and moral characteristics are usually subsumed under a totemic name, which, moreover, is often a quality, referring to a totemic species that is typically an animal.

The final formula is, to the contrary, founded on the idea that all the elements of the world are separate and different—not only beings themselves, but their parts, conditions, and qualities. In a world of such abounding diversity, composed of an enormous mass of singularities, one must search for correspondences, links, and connections. Because it is analogical thinking that provides the most plausible way of establishing such connections, I call this system “analogism.” One finds it in the Far East, in China, India, in the high civilizations of the Andes and Mexico, and in West Africa, as well as in our past, at least through the Renaissance.

The formulas that I brought to light in this book are based on texts: those I work on as an anthropologist, philosophical texts, scientific texts, books of theology, collections of myths, ritual discourses, and so on. I told myself that if there is some basis to my claim about these four great formulas, which I call ontologies—that is, systems of qualities of beings—it should be possible to express them in non-textual ways, particularly through images. It is from this moment that I began to work on images, to see how these ontologies became visible—how relatively abstract modes of relationship become visible through images.

Why Images?

Books and Ideas: Do images help us to explain these different worldviews and ontologies (naturalism, totemism, animism, and analogism)?

Philippe Descola: In previous works, I tried to see how these ontologies let themselves be seen or how they had implications for realms of social life other than the somewhat abstract or philosophical domain that I call “ontology.” I examined the way these ontologies became perceptible, for instance in what I call the modes of aggregating the collective—in other words, what we traditionally call “society.” But this term is inadequate, since outside the West, which conceptualized this category and used it as an analytic tool beginning in the

eighteenth century to grasp its own social reality, there exists no other society that isolates itself from the wider universe. So the first kind of application was to understand how humans and non-humans are connected or disconnected through these ontologies. The second kind of application considered theories of knowledge, which are traditionally called epistemologies. What are the conditions of legitimate knowledge in each of these ontologies? What knowledge problems are encountered does each of these ontologies encounter? In each case, my goal was to displace our gaze, to show that our own path, which leads to modern science and contemporary philosophy, is not the only one possible and that everything must not be judged by its standards.

So why images? There are obviously discourses accompanying them that must be taken into consideration. I only use images that I know something about. I do not understand them based on nothing. At the very beginning, I chose them for purely illustrative purposes. It is ultimately quite simple. I identified each of these ontologies in a particular region of the world. I then looked at images from these regions to see what they suggested. By slowly delving deeper and deeper into these images, I began to realize that they existed somewhat autonomously in relation to discourse. Nowhere was this more obvious, it became quickly apparent in what I call “naturalism.” This movement appears very suddenly, in a self-reflexive way, beginning in the seventeenth century, with the scientific and mechanical revolutions, thanks to Bacon, Descartes, and Galileo. Naturalism rests on two pillars: the distinctive character of human inwardness and the physical continuity between human beings and all the other objects in the world. I realized rather quickly that pictorially, these two pillars became evident much earlier, beginning in the second half of the fourteenth century. In naturalism, images are also shaped by a very distinct historical dynamic, as, over time, humanity’s distinctive inwardness dissipates, gradually dissolving as it becomes a function of physical attributes. In this process, one can identify any number of stages, which I have tried to suggest in this exhibit.

An exhibit is a special kind of activity, an activity that is part didactic, part suggestive. It obviously does not have the same status as a book, a treaty, or a written proof. When one deals with images, one makes choices. My choices consist in always choosing images that seem to contrast with other categories of images. For naturalism, I could have followed the usual iconographic path, that of traditional art history—the internal history of art, which

emphasizes the *ars nova* or new painting, beginning in the fifteenth century, developing through a steady succession of movements, schools, and national traditions. This is not at all the path I chose: I decided to look at images that appear to illustrate the two proprieties I mentioned a moment ago, by making this dynamic apparent. One turns very quickly to images that have not traditionally been used by art historians. Beginning say, in the eighteenth century, it is scientific images that begin to interest me. They are images like any other, but they are more commonly examined by historians of science than of art. For my part, I make no distinction between images. A woodcut in a geological or botanical atlas has the same status as a painting by Michelangelo.

This work on images developed gradually, in a way that allowed me to see, within each ontology, modulations that went beyond what could be identified in discourse and which were specific to images. Consider the example of the images that I associate with animism—the opposite of naturalism—which extends human inwardness to a very large number of beings, each with its own body. I realized that we had images that were entirely characteristic of this model, particularly this mask from Canada’s northwestern coast, which I have right here behind me. It’s an eagle mask, with an eagle’s body and all an eagle’s characteristics. But when one opens it up, one finds a human. It’s not a human disguised as an eagle that one discovers upon opening up the mask, but rather human-like inwardness. This is one characteristic. One finds another characteristic in other regions of the animistic world: human bodies are transformed into images. This is another declension of animism that is entirely specific to images, that is not founded in texts but which is obviously related to texts. Why? Because myths, in the Amazonian world, say that at a particular epoch, humans and non-humans formed a continuous whole. They had comparable forms of inwardness and super-powerful bodies, generally described as of having humanoid features.

Images Present Relationships

Books and Ideas: Does understanding ontologies refresh our understanding of images? What do they add to iconology or art history in general?

Philippe Descola: In my view, yes, otherwise I would not have thrown myself into this project. I think the way that images are used in teaching is misguided. First, there is little art history, which is a problem, but there is also no history of scientific images. The images to

which we are constantly exposed are sliced up between very different realms. If you want to see them in a museum, you go to the CNAM (the National Conservatory of Arts and Crafts), to the Arts and Crafts Museum, to see machines and automatons; you go to the museum of the Medical Faculty to see *écorchés*; you go to the La Villette museum, the science museum to see technology; you go to the national library if you want to see exhibits featuring magnificent eighteenth-century botanical atlases. All these museums are conceived as if their objects were different from one another. Because we are constantly bombarded with images from across the world, now more than ever thanks to audiovisuals and computers, we find ourselves surrounded by widespread confusion.

An image can always give rise to a large number of discourses. Because of its range of meanings and the feelings it provokes, an image will always exceed everything that can be said about it. It is very humbling to engage with this field. I think all images have effects. In particular, I think of those images to which we tend to attribute a kind of autonomy, a capacity for action, intentionality—that we more or less transform into social agents. I think that all peoples of all times have experienced this phenomenon and have made different uses of it. It is no accident that in a museum like the Quai Branly, most of the objects exhibited are related to rituals. They are images employed in collective activities to present and condense relationships, to obtain results, and so on. All images serve this purpose. But beyond this general purpose, it strikes me as useful to see how images present relationships. I only deal with images that are iconic, a term that I use only in the most general sense to refer to images that seek to represent a real or an imaginary prototype by reproducing some of its traits—sometimes just a few, sometimes a lot—and which, in this way, transforms this prototype into something other. But beyond what these images represent and depict, beyond their content, they display the conventions according to which these prototypes are depicted. These conventions teach us a lot about the way in which humans conceive relations of continuity and discontinuity between themselves and other beings. It is this angle that I have tried to emphasize in particular.

Once again, as in the book I was referring to, *Par delà nature et culture*, I proposed ideas that interest me a great deal. But I am not Pico della Mirandola. I don't know everything. It's up to the specialists of the various regions of the world to see how they will make use of the ideas I put forth. It is interesting to see Sinologists, for instance, or specialists

of archaic Greece using the idea of analogy to see how it works. It is exactly the same thing with images. It is not for me to do most of the work. That would be absurd. I have neither the competence nor the ability to do so. I am suggesting directions for research. Anyway, there are young art historians working on these issues, notably during the Middle Ages or the Renaissance. I think it is interesting to try to modulate and complicate ideas that, because of their schematic character, might at first, almost of necessity, appear a little rigid.

Philippe Descola reacts to the following images:

The mask of the shaman Ma'betisek, showing a spirit that is half human and half tiger (Malaysia)

Just now I showed you a transformation mask from the northwest coast which illustrates animism perfectly: an eagle's head that, when it opens up, reveals a human face and thus human inwardness. The mask of the shaman Ma'betisek, which comes from a different region—the Selangor swamps in Malaysia—does the same thing. It was made by the people considered to be Malaysia's indigenous inhabitants, who are known as “Orang Asli” but who call themselves the Ma'betisek. It is a shaman's mask, which implies the same perceptive field as the transformation mask: on the one hand, we have the animal's body, on the other, the human inwardness of this animal body. In this case, the arrangement is much simpler, organized around a vertical dissymmetry: on one side, the human, on the other, the tiger. One only has to move slightly to change one's point of view. When one looks at the mask from my angle, we mostly see a human; when one moves a little, one mostly sees a tiger. This principle of commutation—of a shift or a change in perspective between two planes or two dimensions of everything that exists—is rendered here with great economy.

The Magdalene Reading, Master of the Female Half-Lengths (first half of the sixteenth century)

Naturalism, as we have just seen, is the opposite of animism. It is the idea that ultimately humans and only humans have a distinctive inwardness, but that the physical world is, on the other hand, homogeneous and continuous. This Magdalene reading was painted by an anonymous painter known as the “painter of female half-lengths.” This painting, which dates from the beginning of the sixteenth century, clearly depicts inwardness. The Magdalene is a sinner, a repentant sinner who has turned to contemplative life. She is shown reading, in order

to emphasize this contemplative character, this turn to oneself and an inner dialogue between the reader and the book's author. Her gaze is fixated on the book, yet, at the same time, the organization of the canvas, the detail with which objects are rendered within this room, the cloth, the woodworks, and particularly the continuity between the room's interior and exterior, all emphasize the idea of physical continuity. The window in particular is entirely characteristic of what is known as the *veduta*, the Flemish window: that is, the painting in a frame, an opening, a window, or, later, a gallery, of a background scene that is related to the room and which will gradually evolve into landscape painting. We genuinely see here all the components of a naturalist ontology, with the changes that I mentioned earlier occurring in seventeenth-century Dutch art in particular. Emphasis is placed on description, from which inwardness gradually fades away or at least becomes a function of intersubjective relations between people. Inwardness becomes less accentuated and less linked to individuals. Next, we have the scientific images that begin to develop in the eighteenth, the nineteenth, and above all the twentieth centuries.

Bark Painting (Kangaroo)

Totemism is a different formula, one that is rather difficult to represent. Ultimately, it is the idea that humans and all kind of non-human beings—animals, plants, sometimes even meteorological phenomena—belong to a same class because they share similar physical and moral attributes. How does one represent the idea that creatures that would appear to be very different belong to the same class of beings? The most economical way of doing so is the choice made by the Australian aborigines: show the source, the prototype from which all these extremely diverse elements emerged. Here, the prototype is a kangaroo. The first thing that one notices is that he has no depth; he is inert and has no environment. Consequently, he is a model. He is not a kangaroo in his environment that is doing something, but rather a model. This effect is made even more evident by the fact that his internal organs and skeleton have been made visible, as if one were looking at him with X-rays. There is kind of painting from northern Australia that is traditionally known as “X-ray painting.” They come from the Arnhem Lands. They are bark paintings representing kangaroos as totemic ancestors. What they show is precisely a model, the architecture of a social and ontological body, which unites a wide variety of species that have, it is said, descended from this model. Not “descended” as from an ancestor—the image is relatively abstract. If the Australians had the possibility of doing so, they might well have represented an X-ray skeleton, like the first images that were

produced after Röntgen invented X-rays: something that transcends the barrier of appearance. There are other ways of representing this idea, which can be seen in the exhibit. Rather than presenting the totem, the source, the prototype, that matrix, as it were, within which the totemic group formed and perpetuated itself, one can represent the effects of these totemic beings on the landscape. One sees this in those absolutely extraordinary paintings made by the Aborigines of the central desert, which began to be well known in the 1980s. They represent the itineraries, or fragments of itineraries of these totemic figures when they first emerged from the earth's surface and did things that shaped and ordered the landscape.

Large diablada mask, representing a horned monster, with large eyes, and a two-headed dragon mounted on top

Here, we have a mask that strikes me as completely characteristic of what I call the analogist ontology. Why? Because it is a chimera, that is, a being composed of attributes of extremely diverse origins. What does analogism do? It tries to make compatible and connect qualities, properties, attributes, elements of the world that are very different in origin, in order to weave them together into a meaningful whole. The chimera allows for this insofar as it borrows elements from different registers. Here we have a mask from the Diablada of Oruru in Bolivia, which represents “diablada,” a devil. One sees the iconographic elements that belong to the Christian pictorial tradition: goat horns, slightly cleft goat ears, etc. But there are also elements that belong to the indigenous tradition, i.e., to Andean cultures: the portrayal of Wari, a divinity of the underworld, a chthonic divinity associated with batrachians, reptiles, etc. There are always snakes and frogs; here, there's a two-headed dragon on the mask. There is also a bat snout, the bat being obviously associated with caves and the subterranean world. It is a combination of attributes that comes from extremely different worlds.

By comparison, to return to animism, one can see the difference between the two masks. This mask comes from the Yupik of Alaska. It's an aquatic bird. It was worn during various rituals. The bird's head is drawn very clearly. Inside, the phenomenon of commutation is very clear: one has only to raise one's head to see inwardness, or to lower it to see nothing but a body.

Consequently, these two masks, which seem at first glance to be composite entities, are in reality two very different things. In one case, we really do have a composite being, a

chimera. In the other, we have a single being that can be viewed from two angles. The idea that one's gaze can be educated to discern these little details is, I think, one of the exhibit's important propositions. In a way, my hope is that the public, after visiting the exhibit, will look at these magnificent and numerous objects with a somewhat different eye.

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