

What Constitutes Jewish Expression in Art and/or Design

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Point of Departure

Taking my point of departure in contemporary Jewish philosophy addressing the vital significance of the *visual imagination* for Jewish theology, especially in Midrash and Kabbalah, I wish to address the question from a phenomenological perspective, connecting it with contemporary theories of the image and of the visual arts. I thereby propose a methodological definition of what is “Jewish” in aesthetic expression rather than one based upon questions of historical, national, or religious identity, or upon considerations of content or style, resulting in alleged characteristics of Jewish art as “abstract,” “sublime,” or other. My starting point for the discussion will therefore not be the classical theological injunction against images or sculptures, invoking the Second Commandment to justify an alleged suppression of the visual imagination in Jewish tradition, but rather a position formulated in modern and contemporary Jewish scholarship dealing with the semiotic structure of Torah as a “holy text.”

Gershon Scholem

Gershon Scholem in his work on 12th and 13th century kabbalistic sources defines the structure of Holy Scripture as an infinite semiotic system open to infinite readings. Kabbalistic sources claim the “written Torah” to be a “garment” of the “four-letter-name,” taking its black letters to be figurative and interpretive traces of illegible origin, “black fire on white fire,” semiotic signs originating in the space “in-between” the words. Holy Scripture, according to Scholem,

• The thesis outlined here is presented in depth in my recent book, *Vom Aufstand der Bilder. Materialien zu Rembrandt und Midrasch*, 2006.

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constitutes “a hieroglyph of infinite hieroglyphs.” For a text to be holy, its original traces must in essence be *illegible*. Upon the alleged meaningless crowns of the letters (*ketarim*), Rabbi Akiva and all future generations will anchor their interpretations, says a famous Talmudic midrash in *Menachot*.

Roland Barthes

In the late sixties and early seventies of the last century, Roland Barthes published two essays that seem to me of pivotal importance for the question under our scrutiny: “Is Painting a Language?” (1969) and “About the Semiography of Andre Masson” (1973). He therein presents the semiotic structure of what he considers to be a uniquely *visual* phenomenon. Aiming at the multiplexity and infinity of visual references, he calls for the definition of a utopian text that frees itself entirely from the constraints of any translation into verbal references. The only semiotic texture that could veritably claim to exist “for its own sake” (“the utopia of the text”) is one that harbors a plenitude of *indefinite* references. As such, its semiotic structure must, in principle, be illegible. Roland Barthes concludes that it is *painting* that constitutes the ultimate utopia of the text. “The work of Andre Masson tells us: For Scripture to reveal its inner truth (and not its instrumentality) it must be illegible.”

The “Utopia of the Text”: In-definite Semiotic Structures

In striking phenomenological analogy to Scholem’s definition of Torah as illegible semiotic texture, Roland Barthes exposes *painting* as the ultimate utopia of a text that frees itself from any instrumentality of reading. In contrast to the in-definite semiotic structure that Holy Scripture assumes in Scholem’s work, however, Barthes presents his idea of the “insignificant semiotic praxis that painting is” in blatant *contrast* to any text that consists of lingual signs, letters, consonants, vocals.

Taking seriously the phenomenological and hermeneutical analogies between Scholem’s and Barthes’ respective understanding of what the holiness of Scripture and/or the utopia of the text means, however, we will not be able to uphold the boundaries between literary and aesthetic semiotic phenomena. In opposition to the still widespread thesis that Jewish expression in the visual arts consists in a transcendental, metaphysical abstraction from figurative expression, I wish to argue the following:

Thesis

Jewish expression in the visual arts, on the contrary, may result in a radically non-utilitarian concept of artistic expression, if we claim that Holy Scripture can indeed be understood as “divine flesh,” as “autonomous material presence,” as an “illegible semiotic system.” A semiotic system that safeguards the autonomy of its visual and figurative forms is one of the consequences of a tradition in which a Holy Text is claimed to represent the divine flesh. To be sure, in both *Jewish* and *Islamic* mystical tradition one would come to the same conclusion: the text does *not* refer to the *logos*, to a verbal message, hidden in the text, but rather materially represents the illegible, untranslatable, cosmic presence of the divine. Not all painting can claim to partake in the autonomy of visual expression, and not all writing consists in communicating a verbal message.

To sharpen the eye for the autonomy of visual expression may paradoxically be the task of a Jewish and Islamic aesthetics in which Scripture is taken to be incompatible with words.