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Thinking Europe Visually. A Schizophrenic Certitude

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Europe and its Images

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Contents

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Thinking Europe Visually.
A Schizophrenic Certitude

The absence of a shared cultural identity in Europe is a subject of frequent lamentation. This sentiment is widely endorsed, with many asserting that culture alone possesses the potential to transcend economic and administrative frameworks. Advocates argue for a focus on fostering unity of values and beliefs rather than solely prioritising financial considerations. Consequently, there has been a notable call for historical research to address this issue, particularly since the late 1980s. Historians have actively contributed to the European integration project by endeavouring to demonstrate the constructed nature of nationalistic ideologies and the transnational nature of cultures.[1] As a participant in this intellectual movement, I willingly endeavoured to secure public funding for transnational studies in the late 1990s and the early 2000s. It was a source of pride to contribute to the scientific substantiation of the futility of nationalism. However, it is important to note that while pursuing a European culture was underway, the affirmation of its existence was not explicitly endorsed due to reservations about aligning with political agendas. Consequently, the predominant outcome of these efforts has been the illumination of national divisions rather than the clear emergence of shared fraternity.

Has there been, and is there still, a truly common European culture that could contribute to unity among our peoples? Some seek this culture in religious affiliations (Christianity); others prefer to find it as "high culture" in literature and the arts, while initiatives like Eurovision promote a popular European culture. In the academic and institutional world, since the aftermath of the Second World War, two notions have gradually gained prominence: that of a *Weltliteratur* ("world literature") and that of a *Musée imaginaire* ("imaginary museum"), two notions theorised at a time when it was urgent to demonstrate that the continent could base the pursuit of peace on a shared culture.

The concept of *Weltliteratur* was derived from Goethe to make it a contemporary and historical reality - with the establishment of collections like Martin Bodmer's collection of books and manuscripts in Geneva, as well as critical theories with utopian significance.[2] Indeed, the notion of "world literature" illustrated a superior universal culture capable of uniting peoples and contributing to Immanuel Kant's project of universal peace, if not healing the wounds of previous decades, including book burnings and the disregard for the Enlightenment ideals. *Weltliteratur* also embodied the possibility of a liberated humanity. As Jérôme David has argued, this ideal inherited from the Enlightenment took on its full significance during this period, becoming a key concept in literary studies and a

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[1] Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism. New Perspectives on the Past.* New York Oxford: B. Blackwell, 1988. Anderson, Benedict R. O'G. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism.* London; New York: Verso, 2006.

[2] Martin Bircher, *Fondation Martin Bodmer – Bibliothek und Museum.* Cologny: Fondation Martin Bodmer, 2003.

humanistic - perhaps even revolutionary - slogan.[3] On North American campuses, it became the focal point of an educational project aimed at cultivating a spirit of openness among students and emancipating the working classes.

Simultaneously with the development of this conviction that texts unify peoples, the idea that images contribute to a shared culture also spread in Europe. The French writer André Malraux presented "world art" as a means of preserving "world culture."[4] World art referred to what constituted the *Musée imaginaire* (imaginary museum) of peoples, a concept that Malraux popularised as early as 1947. The expression was positively received, and Malraux further developed the notion during his tenure as the Minister of Culture in France after 1959. Internationally, institutions such as UNESCO and the Council of Europe exerted considerable effort to illustrate this common imaginary museum. UNESCO exhibitions, global policies for disseminating reproductions, and exhibitions organised by the Council of Europe were implemented. [5] These initiatives aimed to illustrate a shared art history while also highlighting the unique contributions of specific cities that served as exhibition venues.

The concept of "Weltliteratur" and the notion of a universal art presented through UNESCO's travelling exhibitions have faced criticism, particularly for their Western-centric perspective. It is worth noting that these initiatives were predominantly European creations indeed. In this context, their actual purpose may have been more directed towards Europe than encompassing the entire globe. In a period marked by Europe's pursuit of peace, the cultivation of unity, and the negotiation of its position amidst

emerging global powers such as the USSR, USA, China, and the decolonising "Third World," asserting European cultural goods as a global phenomenon aimed to reaffirm European influence despite its inevitable decline. By default, additionally, it sought to demonstrate the existence of a distinct European culture. This is a recurring paradox in post- and decolonial criticism. Challenging the Western-centric nature of the global culture concept implicitly suggests the existence of a coherent European-Western culture, with Europe positioned at its centre. One cannot help but question the validity of such hypotheses. Take, for example, the journey of the Mona Lisa from the USA to Japan in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Was it a representation of European artistic culture, or did it primarily function as a symbol of French soft power? Are there truly distinctive European images that can be identified and universally recognised? These inquiries challenge the notion of a unified European cultural identity and prompt us to critically examine the complexities and nuances that underlie discussions of shared visual heritage.

Reciprocally, it is worth contemplating whether images have not merely reflected but also played a causative role in the formation of Europe and whether they have contributed to the emergence or perpetuation of a collective continental consciousness. This inquiry may appear to be an unending quandary reminiscent of the age-old debate surrounding the primacy of cause and effect. Nonetheless, it is imperative to confront it head-on. The present volume delves into this topic from dual perspectives, recognising that circulating images may both bear witness to a European culture and play a part in its construction.

The articles assembled in this volume operate on the premise that an image transforms as it circulates, resulting in diverse receptions across geographical, social, and cultural contexts.[6] This understanding leads to the proposition that if specific images have shaped Europe, they have done so through multiple channels facilitated by the unique

[3] Jérôme David, *Spectres de Goethe. Les métamorphoses de la 'littérature mondiale'*, Paris: Les Prairies ordinaires, 2011. See also Erich Auerbach, Philologie der Weltliteratur', in Walter Muschg and E. Staiger, eds., *Weltliteratur: Festgabe für Fritz Strich zum 70. Geburtstag,* Bern: Francke, 1952, pp. 39-50. Translated into English as 'Philology and Weltliteratur', trans. Edward and Marie Said, *The Centennial Review*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (Winter 1969), pp. 1-17.
[4] Violette Morin, 'La culture majuscule: André Malraux', *Communications*, 14, 1969, pp. 70-83. DOI: https://doi.org/10.3406/comm.1969.1195; quoted p. 74. See also Rosa Da Silva Edson, 'André Malraux au Brésil: le rôle de l'art', *Revue de littérature comparée*, 2005, 4 (No 316), pp. 443-8.
[5] Chiara Vitali, "How to build a World Art: The Strategic Universalism of Colour Reproductions and the UNESCO Prize (1953-1968)." *Artl@s Bulletin* 10, no. 1 (2021): Article 6. https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/artlas/vol10/iss1/6/. And in this volume: Lefteris Spyrou," Europe as a celebrated community of culture. The Council of Europe's Art Exhibitions in the 1950s".

[6] Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel, "Circulation and Resemanticization: An Aporetic Palimpsest," *Artl@s Bulletin* 6, no. 2 (Summer 2017), pp. 4-17. http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/artlas/vol6/iss2/13.

nature of artworks, artifacts, and images, allowing for various interpretations. Consequently, we find ourselves embracing a paradoxical, schizophrenic certainty. On the one hand, the uniqueness of images fosters a plurality of identities, while on the other hand, it suggests the existence of a singular identity. Simultaneously, we acknowledge the constructed nature of the notion of a shared European culture *and* the possible reality of common European images.

As a result, the studies compiled in this collection delve into three distinct modes of image existence in relation to the complex and enigmatic concept of Europe: Witness or referential images, constructed images, and circulating images. Firstly, despite various theoretical turns, it is impossible to escape the theoretical and historical dilemma of witness images. Some images are more concretely shared by certain countries or regions than others, contributing to their identification, influence, and perception. The column and the pediment, images that can be traced back to Greek origins, have become effective symbols widely used abroad to reference European experience and heritage, often associated with the term "Western."[7] These architectural elements transcend cultural boundaries and have been closely linked to classical legacy, democratic ideals, and the broader concept of the West. Furthermore, they are emblematic of practices in commerce and societal governance, encompassing institutions such as parliaments, banks, courts of law, museums, and, in specific historical periods and countries (particularly the late 18th century), Western Christian churches, which have served as representative establishments and pillars of European societies. This architectural and institutional framework, developed predominantly during the 18th and 19th centuries, is an integral part of Europe's cultural heritage and an apparent reference to Europe. Past clothing represented another category of referential images. Although they may not have been intentionally designed to symbolise one's own perspective within the European

context, they have been viewed and represented as indicative of collective European identities, in contrast to the perceived "savage" others. This can be observed in costume books.[8] Images also served and still serve as visual translations by creators of certain shared practices, consciously or unconsciously. For instance, the motif of the square or piazza represents such a witness image in cinema. These images serve as visual references, providing insights into how Europe has been perceived and represented by others or Europeans.[9]

Secondly, the articles in the volume delve into what could be called constructed images, sometimes self-conscious images, primarily built in relation to others. Surprisingly, such kinds of European images could be national or dynastic in nature. An example is the case of the image of the Americas, as constructed in France during a time when the British Kingdom was challenging the continental dominance of Spain, France, and Prussia.[10] The construction of images is not solely a matter of discourse about others or oneself through visual images and sartorial practices or discourse through theatre, scientific treatises, or novels. It is also the result of the circulation of objects, where their appropriation, reproduction, interpretation, or reinterpretation have shaped the multiple layers of a palimpsest in which what is now considered national cultures or legacies are intertwined.[11] The role of elites is significant here, as their historical culture and transnational networks facilitated the circulation of objects and their representations. This is demonstrated in the case of the medieval chandelier, which transitioned from being depicted in 19th-century historical paintings representing the (fantasised) Renaissance to becoming designs for artists and, eventually, concrete objects produced by artisans in response to specific aristocratic commissions.[12] These commissions served

[7] In this volume: Areti Adamopoulou, "The Column and the Pediment: The Persistence of Values?"

[8] In this volume: Emilia Olechnowicz, "Fashioning Europe: Identity and dress in the early modern costume books."
[9] In this volume: Paolo Villa, "War and Peace. The Film Iconeme of the Urban Square as Image of Europe in Transition, 1944-1948."
[10] In this volume: Catherine Dossin, "The New World Debate and the 18th Century Images of America that Brought Europe Together."
[11] Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel, "Circulation and Resemanticization."
[12] In this volume: Evelyn Deneer, "A Light on Europe. The International and Intermedial Trajectory of a Medieval Chandelier at the Turn of the Nineteenth Century."

as a silent yet effective political discourse, at least in consolidating the desired self-image that specific dynasties wanted to maintain. This image encompassed royal or even imperial lineage, distant ancestry dating back to the Middle Ages, and the spirit of chivalry and poetry. Additionally, it is sometimes through the representation of the other that one constructs oneself. This can be observed in the production of visual and theatrical discourses that were produced in France about the Americas or in the case of the exhibitions at the Jeu de Paume in the 1930s.[13] The Jeu de Paume exhibitions served not only as strategies of artistic diplomacy but also as a means to affirm France's cultural dominance over its neighbours.

Finally, gaining a deeper understanding of the circulation of images and cultural productions is of utmost importance. In the realm of cultural productions, there is a growing recognition of the significance of comparative approaches to European cultural life. Such approaches allow us to discern both the commonalities and disparities among countries, regions, and metropolises. They offer a deeper understanding of how the circulation of certain plays or opera authors, for instance, is not only a result of their initial success but also intricately tied to the increasingly decisive economic dynamics associated with what Christophe Charle has referred to as the cultural deregulation of the late 19th century.[14] Turning to the domain of visual representations, the distinction between images as testimonies and images as constructions is challenging due to the transformations images undergo in both meaning and appearance as they circulate. Furthermore, images are themselves products of continuous exchanges and circulations. The study of circulation becomes indispensable in addressing complex questions such as the process through which an image becomes European, the role played by images in the circulation within Europe, and the insights derived from the analysis of

image circulation, including its channels, gaps, and chronology, in relation to a potential shared European culture.

The Visual Contagions project aims to understand the global circulation of images comprehensively. In an extensive corpus of millions of images published in the illustrated press between the 1880s and the 1960s, it is evident that certain images circulated more widely in Europe compared to other regions during this timeframe, as well as in specific periods. This was the topic of a three-year research and teaching program IMAGO, funded by the European Union. As we have demonstrated in two exhibitions, one for the Digital Creation Space at (current!) Musée du Jeu de Paume,[15] and one for Europeana,[16] comparing the types of images circulated in the illustrated press from the 1800s to 1960 and their international dissemination, it becomes evident that religious and art images are the only visual content across this entire period that enables the consideration of a common visual printed heritage. For instance, images depicting the Virgin Mary endured throughout the entire duration. More precisely, reproductions of artworks have traversed borders throughout all historical periods, including times of continental wars. Other types of visual artifacts are also well-represented internationally, notably sculpted busts. However, photographs of busts were, although reproduced in waves, virtually disappearing by 1945. [17] This disappearance may be attributed to their association with a discredited worldview resulting from the profound impact of World War II and the Holocaust. Conversely, there is a gradual increase in the printed representation of consumer goods —Gramophones, typewriters, cameras, bicycles, and automobiles. The subject requires further research to better identify which specific images and objects or brands were truly

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[13] In this volume: Elena Rizzi, "Le Musée des Écoles étrangères dans l'Entre-deux-guerres et le spectre de la guerre en Europe.»

[14] In this volume: Christophe Charle, «Perspectives on Changing Cultural Spaces in 19th Century Europe.»

[15] https://jeudepaume.org/evenement/contagions-visuelles/

[16] https://www.europeana.eu/en/exhibitions/the-images-that-shaped-europe. See also Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel, «Une Europe des images ?» *Hermès, La Revue*, 2022/2 (90), pp. 124-130. URL: https://www.cairn.info/revue-hermes-la-revue-2022-2-page-124.htm.

[17] Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel, Nicola Carboni, Adrien Jeanrenaud, Cédric Viaccoz, Céline Belina, Thomas Gauffroy-Naudin, Marie Barras. «Un œil mondial ? La mondialisation par l'image au prisme du numérique – le cas du projet Visual Contagions», *Sociétés & Représentations* (L'Œil numérique), 55 (2023), pp. 203-226. https://www.cairn.info/revue-societes-et-representations-2023-1-page-203.htm.

circulated in Europe and, consequently, seen across the continent. This volume includes an article that delves into the case of automobiles:[18] images featuring automobiles were disseminated in Europe starting from the late 1890s, eventually extending their circulation on a global scale. In contrast, the enduring dissemination of art images across Europe is striking.

Hence, there is value in studying art images and their European dissemination, both from a distance and up close, in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of whether this potential shared heritage was consistently perceived in the same manner.[19] Images of art, renowned for their ability to transcend borders even in times of conflict, potentially owed their widespread circulation to the internationalised nature of the European elites who avidly consumed them, in contrast to other social strata. As part of this project, we present a contribution that studies the most frequently depicted artistic images in European illustrated press from the years 1880 until the 1960s.[20] It becomes evident that the circulation of images and cultural objects is not a spontaneous process. The role of mediums is significant - these vehicles on which images have been able to circulate, such as magazines, artworks, books, cinema screens. . . Moreover, it requires specific structures to facilitate their dissemination, visibility, reproduction, and reinterpretation. The role of specific cultural entrepreneurs is also important, as highlighted in each contribution, which encompasses various individuals from theatre, literature, criticism, illustration, costume and set design, and filmmaking. In Christophe Charle's contribution, a distinguished expert in transnational and comparative cultural history, the significance of cultural entrepreneurs in the 19th century is further contextualised.[21] They played a vital role in disseminating specific repertoires within a framework of commodification that prioritised commercial success.

This emphasis on commercial viability solidified the status of classical works, which became even more prominent as theatres and operas relied less on support from the courts and public commissions. This period of deregulation and radical changes in the conditions of cultural circulation, particularly within the opera sphere, marked one of the early instances of broad international cultural engagement in Europe. However, disparities in circulation also led to discrepancies between different geographical spaces. European culture underwent a complex evolution characterised by multiple layers and overlapping periods. Certain spaces advanced in cultural epochs are, and were, perceived as preceding or succeeding others, thereby embodying distinct degrees of "progress" as articulated in modernist discourse. This temporal discordance shaped cultural dynamics and fostered unique creative potentials and productive outcomes. The case of the Turnus exhibitions, organised in Switzerland after 1850, provides a compelling illustration of this phenomenon until the 1920s. During this time, while other exhibitions were embracing abstraction, the Turnus exhibitions prominently featured Impressionism and landscape painting.[22] This temporal discordance facilitated catching up, bridging gaps through circulation, and fostering innovation, particularly in modern and avant-garde painting and cultural administration.[23]

I firmly believe that adopting a circulation-focused approach is the most effective way to analyse images as both testimonies and constructions while acknowledging the potential for resemanticization that images carry and the resulting cultural changes

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[18] In this volume: Nicola Carboni, "The Mediatization of the Early Automobile: A Visual Analysis of the Illustrated Press in the late 19th and Early 20th century."
[19] A preliminary series of publications on this topic will be available in Saint-Raymond, Léa (ed.). *La circulation des images en Europe*. Paris: Mare & Martin, 2023.
[20] In this volume: Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel, Marie Barras, & Nicola Carboni, "Une Europe par les arts ? Les périodiques illustrés au-delà du musée imaginaire."
[21] In this volume: Christophe Charle, "Perspectives on Changing Cultural Spaces in 19th Century Europe."

[22] In this volume: Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel, and the Digital Humanities Class at Université de Genève. "Les expositions Turnus, une page d'histoire transnationale des beaux-arts en Suisse à la fin du XIXe siècle. Et comment découvrir les humanités numériques."
[23] I will refer to my research on the globalization of modern art and avant-garde practices, including the strategies of detour through foreign countries. These practices have had an impact on careers and the institutionalization of *anomie* and the cultural avant-garde, particularly evident in the 1960s, as demonstrated by Nicolas Heimendinger, when avant-garde figures were appointed to leadership positions in cultural institutions in the USA, Germany, and France. See Nicolas Heimendinger, "L'Etat contre la norme : le tournant des institutions publiques vers l'art d'avant-garde, 1959-1977 (Allemagne de l'Ouest, Etats-Unis, France)." Unpublished Ph.D. Disseration. Paris 8 University, 2022. Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel, "The Time Discordance of Art Globalization (at work and in artworks)", *Revista de História da arte,* 09, 2021, Instituto de História da arte, Faculdade de Ciencias sociaais e humanas – UNL, Lisbon, pp. 8-18. http://revistaharte.fcsh.unl.pt/. Christophe Charle. *Discordance des temps. Une brève histoire de la modernité*, Paris: Armand Colin, 2011.

they can bring about. Instead of limiting images to the roles of pure testimonies or mere instruments of overarching strategies, a circulatory perspective allows for the inherent visual efficacy of images and objects to be recognised.

And precisely because it is necessary to preserve the efficacy of images, I sought the testimony of the Adeline Rispal workshops to conclude this volume. They were entrusted with a public commission to design and produce images that would visualise the French presidency of the Council of Europe in 2022.[24] How does one approach a political commission in an era of widespread scepticism towards constructed images that seek to portray desired identities rather than reality? Adeline Rispal's approach was not to propose a singular image but to reclaim the images already adopted by countries, such as flags, and reintroduce them into circulation.

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[24] https://adelinerispal.com/conseil-de-l-union-europeenne-presidence-francaise/