

Figuration and its Modalities

by Grégory Delaplace

Images are nothing but figurations of our relationship to the world, that is, of our ways of worlding. P. Descola demonstrates this in a monumental study that does justice to the diversity of cultures, time periods, and artworks.

A review of: Philippe Descola, [Les formes du visible. Une anthropologie de la figuration](#), Paris, Seuil, 2021, 761 p., 35 €.

Among the admirable qualities of Philippe Descola's thought, the least contestable are certainly regularity and consistency. Regularity: a little less than ten years separate Descola's manifesto *Beyond Nature and Culture* (2013) from his initial formulation of the argument in a short 1996 article¹; a little more than ten years separate his latest book, *Les Formes du visible* (2021, *Forms of the Visible*), from his first comparative work on the anthropology of images published in 2010 to accompany an exhibition at the Quai Branly Museum.² Consistency: *Les Formes du Visible* is the exact continuation of *Beyond Nature and Culture*, for it further develops the book's comparative analysis of the "forms of worlding"³ and takes up its model of four

¹ P. Descola, "Constructing natures: Symbolic ecology and social practice," in P. Descola and G. Pálsson (eds), *Nature and Society: Anthropological Perspectives*, London, Routledge, 1996, pp. 82-102.

² P. Descola (ed.), *La Fabrique des images. Visions du monde et formes de la représentation*, musée du Quai Branly and Somogy Éditions d'Art, 2010. In reality, the exhibition concluded a series of lectures on figuration and images at the Collège de France that began just after the publication of *Beyond Nature and Culture* and ended the year of the exhibition (2005-2011).

³ What Descola refers to as "forms of worlding" are the different modes of "composition of worlds" (p. 8), namely the set of conceptions and practices by which (human or non-human) beings, and therefore the distinctive world they come to constitute for a given collective, are created. According to this conception of anthropological comparison, there is not just one world, a "self-sufficient totality awaiting

ontologies (animism, totemism, analogism, naturalism), introducing only two “variations” which allow for some of these ontologies to hybridize with each other.

Ontological Pluralism

Let us briefly recall the terms of the ontological pluralism proposed by Descola, for it is essential to grasp and accept—at least hypothetically—this proposal in order to follow the argument of his latest book. When considering the diversity of modalities by which human populations (no matter the scale of the “collective” these may form) perceive, classify, and interact with the world, it becomes clear, for Descola, that these modalities vary according to the continuities and discontinuities that each human subject is able to identify (via cognitive schemes internalized in childhood) with beings in the world around it. To put it more simply: My ontology depends on the proximity or distance with this particular tree, snowflake, fox, tapir, or stone that I am used to perceiving. Are they made of the same matter as me? Do they think? Do they form societies? etc.

“[...] this bird that towers over me, this bank of mist that envelops me little by little, this overflowing pot, do they have intentions, aspirations, desires of the same kind as mine? Are they speaking to me? Do we have qualities of form or temperament in common? Do we share the same essence or origin? Are we made of the same components?” (pp. 52-53).

Since, as Descola continues, each individual’s identification of the continuities and discontinuities with other existents is simultaneously assigned to the planes of interiority (thought, emotions, the faculty to communicate) and physicality (the configuration of bodies and matter), it *logically* follows that there are four human ontologies:

- Animism: continuity on the plane of interiority (all beings share the same subject quality) and discontinuity on the plane of physicality (beings are distinguished by the variability of their bodies);

to be represented from different points of view” (p. 8), but several worlds, each resulting from the perceptive and classificatory habits that a population transmits to its members as they learn to see and think their environment.

- Totemism: continuity on the planes of interiority and physicality (human and non-human beings descend from common ancestors and share their essential behavioral and bodily qualities);
- Analogism: discontinuity on the planes of interiority and physicality (the world is composed of a heterogeneity of singular existents, which institutions such as lineages, churches, states, and others aim to organize according to a certain pairing grammar);
- Naturalism: discontinuity on the plane of interiority (humans have unique intellectual and emotional faculties) and continuity on the plane of physicality (the world is entirely composed of the same matter).

Images, taken here in the broadest possible sense of figurations of beings, do indeed seem like an ideal site to deploy the ontological model of identification schemes and, above all, to reaffirm its validity. If images figure and recreate the configuration of the world embraced by the populations that produce them, then they constitute an ideal medium for the anthropologist who wishes to compare human ontologies—the diversity of which is relative, as should be clear by now. Indeed, what could be more revealing of the animistic perception of things than an animistic image of beings?

Consistency: Despite receiving heavy criticism regarding the foundations of his quadripartite ontological model,⁴ Descola continues, unperturbed, to pull the comparative threads of the theoretical matrix that he has been refining since the mid-1990s. Moreover, despite the foreword's reference to trials and errors, dead-ends, and even "a long wandering" (p. 18), we are half-surprised and half-amused to read in the final pages of *Les Formes du visible*, published in 2021, a short reflection on heraldry and pictography that had already given substance to the first pages of *La Fabrique des images* (The Making of Images), published in 2010. Incidentally, the structure of the two books is the same, even though the order of exposition is different: The key modalities, developed in 2021, by which modes of identification and modes of figuration coordinate with one another in each ontological ensemble, were already enunciated in 2010.

An Anthropology of Figuration

⁴ See, for instance, T. Ingold, "A Naturalist Abroad in the Museum of Ontology: Philippe Descola's *Beyond Nature and Culture*," *Anthropological Forum* 26/3, 2016: 301-320.

We must not be too quick to give in to the temptation to criticize such an ambitious and daring theoretical and comparative work as Descola's. The 700-odd pages of text take the reader on a fantastic journey through human iconographic traditions and styles, from the cave paintings of Chauvet and Altamira to the most recent creations of contemporary Inuit or European art, through a variety of artistic productions from British Columbia, Persia, and Australia at different periods of their history. Descola does not shy away from the heterogeneity of types of figurations: He does not limit himself to painting and statuary, but neither does he restrict himself—and this is more delicate—to the artworks that used to be considered by the history and anthropology of art. The book deals with handcrafted utensils, of course, but also, among other things, with the geography of Ila villages in southern Africa or with brain imaging in Euro-American neurology.

Yet, if Descola's book is indeed a masterpiece, it is not only, or not really, because of its monumental character, or because of the erudition with which it mobilizes ethnography, aesthetics, art history, and psychology to describe with finesse and curiosity—and indeed with great enthusiasm—a variety of images, some of which are unexpectedly brought together and others surprisingly set apart. The book's tour de force is to simultaneously extend and restrict the field of inquiry, to find the *right comparative measure* in the anthropology of figuration it proposes. In other words, it is to define "figuration" in such a way as to avoid considering *only* the kind of cultural production that was once referred to and distinguished as "art" (because the criteria for this selection always lead to viewing human iconographic productions through the lens of our own conceptions of figuration), but *also* to avoid widening the field of comparison so radically that embracing it by thought would become difficult (this being the rather fair criticism leveled by Descola at Alfred Gell's famous work⁵).

The object of the book is figuration understood as "an operation common to all humans by means of which a particular material object is instituted as the iconic sign of a being or process [...]" (p. 27). The book is thus clearly concerned with representation (despite the reluctance that this term may create among proponents of the ontological turn⁶), and more precisely with the way in which human populations have made visible the beings that constitute the world they inhabit.

"Figuring is thus a way of making visible the ontological structure of reality to which each of us has adapted based on the habits that our gaze has acquired of

⁵ A. Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998.

⁶ See, for instance, A. Henare, M. Holbraad, and S. Wastell (eds), *Thinking Through Things: Theorising Artefacts Ethnographically*, London, Routledge, 2007.

following this or that fold of the world—a phenomenon, a quality, an object stand out in the flow of our sensitive experience—while remaining indifferent to other discrete cues that other human subjects, in distant places or in earlier times, have actualized and that are charged for them with a meaning that essentially escapes us.” (p. 52)

Is the book’s ambition, then, to trace the thread of human figurative choices so as to reconstitute, based on the artworks to which these choices have given rise, the particular worldview that presided over their making? Not really, although the ambiguity is never completely dispelled. After announcing that “The inquiry into figuration presented in this book aims to show that the objects and relationships depicted by iconic images [...] express in broad strokes the properties of one or other of the four great regimes of worlding [...]” (p. 26), the author denies wanting to “apply” an “iconological grid [...] to any kind of image such that it can find its place in a formal typology” (p. 62). Moreover, in the very last lines of the postscript, he deems it necessary to reaffirm the need to “dispel the illusion that each image necessarily reveals a particular ‘vision of the world’ for which it proposes a decipherable signature” (p. 654).

Thus, Descola refuses to treat human iconographic productions as clues whose ontological referent can be inferred abductively, as fire is inferred from smoke or animals from footprints. One must therefore be familiar with the cultural environment of a collective to be able to interpret its figurative choices: In other words, one must be at least somewhat familiar with the perceptive and classificatory habits of a population to be able to detect them in the images that this population produces (p. 62). At most the author ventures to point out the proximity between aboriginal representations of dream beings and animal images in Upper Palaeolithic iconography, thus suggesting—without being able, in this case, to base his hypothesis on ethnographic or historiographic knowledge of the image-producing population concerned—that the artists of the Chauvet or Altamira caves were in fact totemists (pp. 595-598).

Iconographic Reason

In all other cases, and thus in the book as a whole, the interpretation of images is subordinate to the place that Descola has chosen to give, on the map of ontological distinctions, to the collectives that produced them. Ontologies are, in fact, always *already there* in the description of iconographies: None of the artworks that the author collected during his many years of meticulous and scholarly investigation appears to have destabilized his previous knowledge of the kind of worlding specific to the

population in which it emerged. None seemed so surprising that it ought to have been considered atypical, exceptional, or even contrary to the expectations of the identification scheme it served to illustrate. The demonstration unfolds perfectly, the reasoning progresses effortlessly, the argumentative scenario is so smooth, in fact, that it ends up lacking a few twists and turns. Even the “variations” struggle to really modulate the quadripartite ontological model that structures the book as a whole and guides the analysis of each individual image. While the “hybrid” cases described in the book do sometimes occur where the mode of figuration has presaged the mode of identification,⁷ and thus testify to a possible discrepancy between the two, they exit the type only to reintegrate it immediately, for in reality they illustrate an ontological advent that Descola has already identified *a priori* (the advent of naturalism in the seventeenth century and its possible hybridization with a new analogism today).

One might want to conclude that the theory perfectly matches the object. When the materials under consideration seem to happily confirm, one after the other, the author’s working hypotheses, obediently encouraging him to refine his comparative device without ever threatening its foundations, is this not good news for the proposed theory? Or should one instead reproach the author for excessively matching the object to the theory, thus evoking the risk, pointed out by Pierre Bourdieu,⁸ of crossing the methodological Rubicon by sliding from the model of reality to the reality of the model? At the very least, let us say that the analytics of *Les Formes du Visible*—the heuristic power that Descola lends to the four ontologies—ends up having the effect of closing the model in on itself. Images are interpreted in the light of the ontology specific to the population that produced them—and the way in which this mode of figuration illustrates a certain mode of identification in turn corroborates the ontological belonging of the image-producing population. Ontological identification is *both* the foundation and the end of the analysis.

Thus, *Les Formes du Visible* presents a striking contrast between, on the one hand, the proliferation of iconographic descriptions, the multiplication of theoretical references, the variety of periods and scales of the collectives considered—and indeed the *monumentality* of the book’s format—and, on the other hand, the simplicity of the

⁷ Though more rarely than the tantalizing foreword suggested: “I had [...] underestimated the possibility that images might exist in a mode of identification independent of that which can be portrayed using historical and ethnographic documentation, and had thus failed to pay sufficient attention to their capacity to prefigure the ontological and cosmological shifts that are made evident by the transformation of visual culture yet whose reflexive expression does not appear in texts until much later” (p. 18).

⁸ P. Bourdieu, *Esquisse d’une théorie de la pratique*, Paris, Seuil, 2000 [1972], pp. 249-255.

proposed argument. In essence, each mode of figuration is a reflection of its corresponding ontology:

- In animist regimes, image producers figure existents in such a way as to highlight the (human) interiority they all share *and* the specific corporeality that distinguishes them from one another (the Inuit did this by depicting bodies that were recognizable and *clearly* in movement; the Kwakwaka'wakw, for their part, favored transformative masks, wherein an animal head could suddenly reveal a human face);
- Totemic populations, effectively found in Australia, use various pictorial techniques to highlight the physical and behavioral qualities shared by the (human and non-human) members of each totemic class and the ancestor from whom they descend (most emblematically figured by the so-called "X-ray" paintings of north-west Arnhem Land), or else to map the traces left by the ancestor on the territory, the knowledge of which is essentially what distinguishes his descendants;
- Representatives of the analogical archipelago—by far the ontological regime that concerns the largest number of populations and the largest number of humans on the planet—produce iconographies that simultaneously reveal the intense heterogeneity of the world's components *and* the all-encompassing principle by which they can be ordered (chimeras exemplify this, as do the composite altars (*mesas*) of Central America and the microcosmic mountains of medieval Taoist China);
- Lastly, naturalist image producers are quite explicit in their efforts to illustrate both the physical continuity of the great chain of beings (for instance, in painting, through the figuration of a commensurable inhabited space) *and* the singularity of the human subject which translates into highly embodied individualities.

Some of the demonstrations by which the author links a case with the mode of figuration to which it presumably belongs are particularly deft and pleasing to the mind. Thus, if the Katsinam dolls of the Arizona Hopi are analogical, it is not really because of what they figure individually, but by virtue of the effect of the series into which they are collectively inserted as standardized singularities, because of the family resemblance they each globally exhibit. Other demonstrations seem a little less convincing: This is the case with the distinction established between Arcimboldo's

portraits, deemed analogical in that they are composites, and other earlier or contemporary portraits, presented as emblematic of the advent of naturalism. All specialists, whether art historians or anthropologists, can engage in the required objections and rectifications—some have already done so during the years of preparation of this book, which acknowledges the many discussions and collaborations that have nourished it.

Powers of Figuration

I certainly did not expect that on closing a 700-page book, I would regret that some passages had not been developed further—it is inconceivable to reproach a book of this size and scope for being *too short*. Yet, the work's greatest interest, its most courageously ambiguous contribution, so to speak, lies in its briefest considerations. Indeed, each of the book's four sections is subdivided into three chapters: The first chapter, which is always the longest, examines what might be called the image's "content" (p. 63), namely the particular way in which what is being figured in it can be recognized. While Descola does not really provide a term to designate this aspect of figuration, we might refer to it as the *economies of iconicity* of images. I have been primarily discussing this aspect so far because it really is the main subject of the book. Yet, to this are added two other aspects of figuration that are more discreetly addressed by the author, each of which is the subject of a shorter chapter in the book's four sections. On the one hand, there is the configuration of the space of representation, what Descola refers to as "geometries of figuration" (p. 63), namely the various perspectival effects and transformative operations by which the thing represented makes itself seen by the spectator. On the other hand, there is the image's "powers of action" (p. 81), what Gell called "agency," that is, what figurations are made *capable* of by virtue of a set of potentiating processes which provide the material for these chapters.

Compared to the economies of iconicity, the geometries of figuration and the powers of action constitute the sites of analysis wherein the method (and even the ontological quadripartition) seems the most open and the most promising of—yet-to-be determined—future elaborations. The short chapters that conclude each section are those in which the description is the least oriented, even the least classificatory. On reading them, one cannot really determine what sort of perspective or what type of

agency truly characterizes each ontology.⁹ One is stimulated and pleased, but also a little surprised that they end so abruptly; they could have lasted a little longer, not to draw conclusions or provide further specifications, but to let the reader dwell a little more on the curious complexity of the problems raised and the fruitful ambiguity of the solutions proposed.

There are, of course, many possible pathways through the rich material presented in the book. Some readers will seek—whether to appreciate or criticize it—an anthropology of images that can help to renew the understanding of human ways of figuring. Others will prefer to dwell on the author’s florid style, the meticulous and joyful descriptions of objects, which are made so fully and pleasantly available in the impeccable and generously illustrated edition of this remarkable book. There is no doubt that readers will be delighted by this new, ambitious, and significant step in a grand anthropological project that continues to unfold before our very eyes.

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⁹ The synoptic table in which the author lays out, in the conclusion, the types of “representational geometry” (p. 606) according to the ontologies is highly evocative for it confirms the complexity of truly synthesizing what distinguishes in this respect the four modes of figuration from one another.