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Constructing Reality in Ancient Mesopotamia: A Review Essay of The Infinite Image

Zainab Bahrani, *The Infinite Image: Art, Time and the Aesthetic Dimension in Antiquity*, Reaktion Books, 2014, 264 pp., numerous illustrations, \$49.00 US (hbk), ISBN 9781780232775.

This new book by Zainab Bahrani, the Edith Porada Professor of Ancient Near Eastern Art and Archaeology at Columbia University, New York, is based on the Slade Lectures in the Fine Arts delivered by the author at the Department of the History of Art, University of Oxford in 2011. In a style that retains much of the vitality and looseness of the spoken word, the book elaborates on the view previously articulated elsewhere by the author,¹ that art in ancient Mesopotamia was about presence and reality rather than imitation and representation, i.e., that images were understood as active components of the physical world. In *The Infinite Image*, Bahrani now explores more specifically how images were used to influence the temporal dimension of reality, bridging the present with the past and the future.

Ancient Egyptian and Near Eastern practices that intended to escape the constraints of space and time through the use of images have been the subject of many recent studies.² However, while most scholars emphasize the cultural and historical specificity and otherness of ancient responses to art, Bahrani seeks to find their nexus with the present. Thus, she is to be commended for pursuing not only a new look at ancient Near Eastern visual culture, but also a better understanding of the power of the visual in a contemporary world full of images that claim to be real.

¹ See, in particular, Zainab Bahrani, *The Graven Image: Representation in Babylonia and Assyria* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003). A critical discussion of Bahrani's earlier views on the power of images in the context of related scholarship is provided by Frederick Mario Fales, "Art, Performativity, Mimesis, Narrative, Ideology, and Audience: Reflections on Assyrian Palace Reliefs in the Light of Recent Studies," *KASKAL: Rivista di storia, ambienti e culture del Vicino Oriente Antico* 6 (2009), 235-293.

² See, for example: Angelika Berlejung, *Die Theologie der Bilder: Herstellung und Einweibung von Kultbildern in Mesopotamien und die alttestamentliche Bilderpolemik*, *Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis* 162 (Freiburg, Switzerland: Universitätsverlag Freiburg Schweiz / Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1998); Irene J. Winter, "Agency Marked, Agency Ascribed: The Affective Object in Ancient Mesopotamia," in *Art's Agency and Art History*, eds., Robin Osborne and Jeremy Tanner (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), 42-69; and Michael B. Hundley, *Gods in Dwelling: Temples and Divine Presence in the Ancient Near East* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2013).

The book is divided into eight chapters preceded by an introduction. Bahrani's diversion from art-historical, archaeological, and anthropological orthodoxies is obvious from the outset: she identifies the efficacy of ancient Mesopotamian images as her focus but ascribes this efficacy to the aesthetic. She believes that "art," redefined as a means for resisting oblivion and death, is neither an exclusively modern category nor an exclusively Western one; it existed in antiquity (9). Against this background, Chapter 1, "Ancient Art: The Aesthetic Dimension," is devoted to a nostalgic call for the revitalization of aesthetic discourse on ancient visual culture. The ancient Near East entered this discourse when early twentieth century avant-garde artists (Surrealists, Cubists and others) "discovered" Sumerian art through its masterpieces that were multiplying in Paris, London, and New York (15-27). In Bahrani's view, such an "uncanny encounter with the work across the vast expanses of time" (25) succeeded in capturing the "vital presence" (15) intended by the ancient Mesopotamians, but it soon fell out of fashion, overwhelmed by positivist archaeological research. Archaeology remained faithful to the aesthetic glorification of classical Greek art and reduced ancient Near Eastern art to an immature early stage of Western art worth studying only as historical evidence. This reductive view was fueled by a more general belief in the mimetic nature of art, which was in conflict with what is now known about the role of images in the ancient Near East (35).

Bahrani's justified critique seems, however, to underestimate the role of the aestheticizing art-historical paradigm, from which classical archaeology emanated, in the idealization of Greek art. Early twentieth century artistic perceptions of ancient and non-European images also did their own part in fostering the clichés of primitivism and exoticism that justified colonialist agendas,³ as Bahrani admits (26), although these artistic perceptions had emerged as a vehicle for anti-bourgeois and anti-colonial opposition. Furthermore, it is important not to forget that Western artistic encounters with ancient art during that time were possible through the acquisition of antiquities by large European museums applying colonialist and imperialist policies. The esteem for ancient artifacts as timeless aesthetic objects divorced from their ancient contexts created—and sustains to the present day—an antiquities market for the products of looting and smuggling.⁴

It can be argued, therefore, that current constructions of ancient Mesopotamian art are the expression of more general, and more fundamental, Modernist attitudes affecting all sorts of scholarly or artistic engagement with ancient art. These attitudes are rooted in the sharp metaphysical distinction between reality and representation, a distinction that invested reality with qualities of existence, originality, and truth, and reduced representation to a second-rate imitation—a substitute of reality that is merely meant to amuse through its formal and technical perfection. The development of representational realism in classical Greece thus came to be considered the highest achievement in the history of art, crediting its initiators with formalist aesthetic motives they hardly possessed. Plato was still a solitary pioneer when he introduced the concept of *mimēsis* to the discourse on art; aesthetic appreciation began, in practice, with Hellenistic and Roman elites who collected works of earlier Greek sculpture for their formal qualities rather than their original ritual efficacy.⁵ In

³ See, for example, Patricia Leighton, "The White Peril and *L'Art nègre*: Picasso, Primitivism, and Anticolonialism," *The Art Bulletin* 72:4 (1990), 609-630, esp. 610.

⁴ See, for example, David W. J. Gill and Christopher Chippindale, "Material and Intellectual Consequences of Esteem for Cycladic figures," *American Journal of Archaeology* 97:4 (1993), 601-659.

⁵ Jeremy Tanner, *The Invention of Art History in Ancient Greece: Religion, Society and Artistic Rationalisation* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

the Middle Ages, the religious significance of images prevailed once again, but Christian theorists of art, particularly during the Byzantine iconoclastic controversy, were careful not to confuse images with the ontologically, gnoseologically, and ethically superior world they visualized; thus, the divide between representation and the represented widened even further. With the Renaissance artist and biographer of artists Giorgio Vasari, belief in the mimetic nature of painting and sculpture passed into the discipline of art history. Thus, a *sui generis* attitude toward images was established in the Modernist West. As ethnographic and anthropological research around the world has otherwise shown, both the belief in the ability of images to affect reality and the performance of rituals in application of this belief are quite common among cultures.

The most forceful challenge to the aesthetic paradigm has come from anthropological theories of agency focusing, for a couple of decades now, on what images *do* as opposed to what they mean or represent. Considering that ancient Near Eastern images were intended to stimulate erotic desire, guide one into the afterlife, ensure health and longevity, and create a sense of liminality, among other things discussed in the rest of Chapter 1 (40-48), a more substantial engagement with Alfred Gell's influential *Art and Agency* (38-39) and the German *Bildakt* theory (166, 168) would have been beneficial for Bahrani's argument; for instance, in distinguishing dynamic agency from static meaning, a distinction blurred later in the book (173-174). After all, ancient descriptions of artifacts often consider the beauty and other formal characteristics of objects as a prerequisite for the proper functioning of images, as Bahrani notes (43-45), rather than an incentive for disinterested aesthetic appreciation.

Through an analysis of borderline cases of artworks and textual evidence, Chapter 2, "What Is/Was an Image?," explores the limits of ancient Near Eastern conceptions of the image and how these conceptions relate to their modern counterparts. Artifacts such as Levantine Neolithic human skulls with plaster and shells in the place of flesh and eyes, Roman wax masks (*imagines*, sg. *imago*, from which *image* derives) molded from the face of the deceased, or Damien Hirst's bull preserved in formaldehyde in a gilded case conceal the distinction of the represented from its representation (49-58). Specifying Jean-Pierre Vernant's anthropological approach to this distinction as a classical Greek invention, Bahrani points to a certain Platonic kind of images that are mimetic but still exist in their own right (*phantasmata* or *eidōla*); in her view, these images can be compared to the *simulacra* in Roman, Judeo-Christian, and Islamic thought, to Baudrillard's postmodern, hyperreal *simulacra*, to modern products of virtual reality, and, finally, to *šalmu*, the Akkadian term for image used in Assyrian and Babylonian texts (70-74) to designate "an ontological category rather than an aesthetic genre" (68).⁶ Chapter 2 ends with a stimulating discussion of the ruler's body as the favorite field of application for the idea of independent images (77-85). The image of the ruler's body, rather than the ruler's physical body itself, is the source of royal power, as Louis Marin proposed in his study of the portrait of Louis XIV (81).

After discussing ancient Near Eastern beliefs about the creational power of images, Chapter 3, "In the Time of Lapis Lazuli," brings up the issue of how this power was used to manipulate one particular aspect of reality: the aspect of time. Once again, the analysis begins with modern practices such as Aby Warburg's *Mnemosyne*, an unfinished collection of images from different periods organized to map the afterlife of ancient visual culture. Bahrani argues that Warburg's unconventional way of bringing historical images into the present has much in common with ancient Mesopotamian forms of engaging with the past through the use of material objects. These forms include the withdrawal of images in foundation deposits

⁶ For a more extensive discussion of *šalmu*, see Bahrani, *The Graven Image*, 121-148 (Chapter 5).

as well as their subsequent recovery and return to circulation as highly symbolic, otherworldly objects; Babylonian field campaigns to discover architectural, artistic or textual remains of the past; complex architectural rituals ensuring the permanence of monuments; the conservation and restoration of buildings and artifacts; and the carving of reliefs on rock outcrops. These carvings were, in Bahrani's view, "performative acts that inscribed the timescale of history into nature itself" (111). At the end of the chapter, the author returns to the modern practices of heritage management, as well as to recent views on collective memory and the role of materiality in the construction of identity, suggesting that these practices and ideas have their equivalents in ancient Mesopotamia.

Chapter 4, "The Double: Difference and Repetition," takes up the blurring of the distinction between the original and the copy as another aspect of the merging of the representation with the represented. An insightful analysis of repetition, multiplicity, and circularity in Assyrian reliefs, Mesopotamian cylinder seals, the Uruk Vase and the Achaemenid Persian reliefs at Persepolis (115-132) reveals how these formal choices enabled Near Eastern craftsmen to construct an infinite space in which the eternal omnipresence of kings, their followers and subordinates, and their supernatural protectors could be enacted. The analysis also reveals how the cult of originality, individuality, and innovation in Modernist aesthetics not only led to a gross misunderstanding and discrimination of ancient Near Eastern art as repetitive, monotonous, and primitive, but it also legitimated the physical dismembering of composite sculptural monuments and the dispersing of the pieces as independent artworks to different destinations.

Chapter 5, "Realms of Art," broadens the focus to include the role of writing in Mesopotamia and Egypt as a technology of representation (145-147), the implications of Bahrani's approach for the study of artistic exchange across the cultures of the ancient world (147-150) and, most notably, the significance of formal qualities of ancient art for the analysis of its formative power (150-168). Here, an insightful discussion on the formal order and decorum in ancient art, particularly Egyptian art, as "a means of ordering the world" (166) may be read as a constructive attempt to find a middle ground between the analysis of form and the pragmatics of image production and consumption.

Chapter 6, "The Monumental Force of the Law," explores the emergence of the monument as a special artifact that elevates a real human, object, or idea to the level of timelessness and permanence. Bahrani believes it is contradictory to seek to understand how an artifact transcends its historical context through contextual analysis and suggests instead to look for answers in the object itself (173-175). Again, Gell's conception of agency as "relational and context-dependent, not classificatory and context free,"⁷ would have helped Bahrani avoid the pitfalls of pure, almost fetishistic aesthetics.

In the rest of Chapter 6, artworks with a "historical" subject matter are explored as a generic class; therein the author includes not only Roman historical reliefs but also the Stele of Naram-Sin, "one of the first works in the world to formulate, intentionally, a historical image" (178-179). A sensitive analysis of accentuated corporeality, hieratic perspective, and turbulent composition highlights the visual means by which the stele defines royal power as sovereign power over life and death in Foucault's and Agamben's biopolitical sense (179-182). A similar analysis of monumentalization in the Law Code Stele of Hammurabi, which defines itself as a point of reference for legal cases, demonstrates how the abstract ideas of public law and the king as its custodian are literally materialized (183-189).

⁷ Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford; Oxford University Press, 1998), 22.

In Chapter 7, “The Speaking Image,” Bahrani considers examples of artworks that have been defined as such through a verbal medium, e.g., an inscription. Examples extend from archaic Greek statues marking graves to Robert Rauschenberg’s provocative “portrait” of Iris Clert. Following this analysis, a discussion of votive offerings in animal form, the Uruk Vase, the Enmetena Silver Vase, several statues of individuals, and other artifacts (196-216) comes to the conclusion that these artifacts aimed to perpetuate the act of sacrifice, the donor’s name or the person represented. Here, a more thorough analysis of the artistic means through which this goal was achieved would have been useful.

Chapter 8, “Twilight of the Idols,” is focused on ancient encounters with material remains, images and texts of an even earlier past. Anthropological concepts such as “the social lives of things”⁸ or “the cultural biography of objects”⁹ would have added considerably to the understanding of ancient artworks as agentive components.¹⁰ For Bahrani, instead, such cases testify to the existence of “a deep historical consciousness” (222) and “the knowledge of history and chronology in things and images” (223) among ancient cultures. The author concludes the chapter, and the book, with a dreadfully prophetic comment on the destruction of ancient Near Eastern art after the 2003 invasion of Iraq (233-238). *The Infinite Image* had hardly been published when a new series of even more destructive attacks against the ancient cities of Nimrud and Hatra, the Mosul Museum and other cultural heritage sites in Iraq and Syria were committed by militant groups of the self-proclaimed Islamic State. Bahrani contextualizes such events in a long iconoclastic tradition of severing bonds with the past.¹¹

As a whole, the book makes a powerful intervention in an ongoing, thorny discussion on how art history can overcome the encrustations of its Modernist and colonialist heritage. However, while Bahrani criticizes Western perceptions of the ancient Near East as “the cradle of civilization” and the “birthplace of art,”¹² in the end she expands the list of Western features thought to have their origin in Mesopotamian antiquity to include concepts such as art, nature, and the sublime, as well as artistic genres such as historical reliefs and memorials, and even archaeology and antiquarian collecting. An overall assessment of Bahrani’s approach against common standards of scholarship is also difficult, considering her often rejective stance against almost all previous research on ancient art and her preference for artists such as Alberto Giacometti and Henry Moore, or the poet Laurence Josephs, as allegedly more authentic and unprejudiced guides to the subject. On the other hand, Bahrani does not reject traditional claims to validity. More theoretical precision, more painstaking analysis of empirical data from material and textual sources, a broadening of the focus beyond the individual masterpiece, and a systematic engagement with previous scholarship would certainly have strengthened these claims.

⁸ Arjun Appadurai, “Introduction: commodities and the politics of value,” in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. A. Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 1986), 3-63.

⁹ Igor Kopytoff, “The cultural biography of things: commoditization as process,” in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. A. Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 1986), 64-91.

¹⁰ For an overview of both approaches, see Janet Hoskins, “Agency, biography and objects,” in *Handbook of Material Culture*, eds. C. Tilley, W. Keane, S. Kuchler-Fogden, M. Rowlands and P. Spitzer (London: SAGE Publications, 2006), 74-84.

¹¹ For more extensive data and analyses of iconoclasm in the ancient Near East, see Natalie N. May, ed., *Iconoclasm and Text Destruction in the Ancient Near East and Beyond*, The University of Chicago Oriental Institute Seminars 8 (Chicago: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2012).

¹² Such perceptions have recently made a powerful comeback in statements by politicians, cultural heritage officials, and archaeologists against the deliberate destruction of cultural heritage in Iraq and Syria.

With the development of the digital technologies of virtual reality, if not already with the rise of television in the 1960s and 1970s, the divide between reality and representation began to close—Baudrillard even holds it to have vanished. At the very least, it lost its heuristic value for the entire history of visual culture. Heidegger’s phenomenological ontology redefined art as a dynamic means of creating truth in human culture, whereas a number of voices have been suggesting that “no art and no sensation have *ever* been representational,”¹³ that “nature is a product of art and discourse,”¹⁴ that images are “the basic building-blocks of social worlds,”¹⁵ and that consequently a history of images as “encounters with another order of reality entirely” needs to be written.¹⁶ *The Infinite Image*, written by a scholar with postmodern and postcolonial sensibilities, paves the way for further specialist research that might bring such a history of visual culture closer to fulfillment.

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¹³ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 196 (emphasis added).

¹⁴ N. Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols*, 2nd Revised Edition (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1976), 33.

¹⁵ Barry Sandywell and Ian Heywood, “Critical Approaches to the Study of Visual Culture: An Introduction to the Handbook,” in *Handbook of Visual Culture*, eds. I. Heywood and B. Sandywell (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012), 1-56, esp. 27.

¹⁶ Michael Camille, “Simulacrum,” in *Critical Terms for Art History*, 2nd Edition, eds. R. S. Nelson and R. Shiff (Chicago: The university of Chicago Press, 2003 [1996]), 35-48, esp. 44-45.

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