Conclusion: A Communal Vision through Broken Images

'NO ONE EVER writes something meaningful that is not [also] a love letter' (2019, 308), Marie-José Mondzain writes. This book is my love letter to cinema, especially to its images and sounds at the edge of representability and its potential as a means for sharing complex and challenging experiences. It is also a reflection on the power of images to create or destroy a communal vision. Images can create it by hinting at that which cannot become a completely accessible image and destroy such a vision through excessive mimesis and the obscenity of the showing it all. In this scenario, iconoclasm has proven to be a particularly suitable tool for investigating the ways in which we conceive and relate to images. While historically iconoclasm carries a violently destructive drive directed against the other's point of view, in the arts it can become a stimulating, potentially ethical perspective to challenge more habitual forms of image-making and image-viewing. In positing the existence of an unbridgeable gap between an image and its model, iconoclastic stances highlight the ethical limits of artistic mimesis and the persistence of a contradictory attitude, among others, in the West: a yearning for an easily accessible representation which, however, most often ends up being interpreted as an appearance far removed from truth. Entangled in an ancient dichotomy, the contemporary image at once enjoys the status accorded to the *eikōn* and suffers the deficiencies of the *eidōlon*.

Examining a tendency which sinks its roots in ancient philosophy and medieval theology, this book has instantiated the potentialities and ethical correspondences that the cancellation of film images can have, thereby contributing to current debates on images and the technologies of vision through the fascinating prism of iconoclasm. The existence of a conflicting attitude about cinema which recalls the *eikōn-eidōlon* dichotomy constitutes the premise of this book.

Throughout, I have established an iconoclastic aesthetics of cinema that comprises various gestures and techniques, which range from the literal manipulation of the film strip to the metaphorical dismantling of film as mimetic moving images of a recorded reality. What had started as an exploration of iconoclastic acts directed towards the visual image in the cinema eventually also developed into my becoming enamoured with disruptive approaches to film sound. The films discussed, in fact, accompany a reflection on the visual image with a privileging of the aural dimension – a privileging which can develop in terms of intelligible voices to counterbalance the falsehood proper to the image, as in the works of Guy Debord, Jean-Luc Godard, Marguerite Duras and, to some extent, Isidore Isou, or it can unfold as language's failure to articulate meaning, thereby aurally paralleling the visual destruction of figuration, as in the films of Carmelo Bene, Derek Jarman, Ingmar Bergman and Krzysztof Kieślowski. Hence, the study of cinematic iconoclasm progressed as an investigation of the lacerating, intimate yet conflicted relation that the film image can establish with sound.

This iconoclastic aesthetics also carries ethical concerns, which include Isidore Isou's chiseled images against war, Guy Debord's *détourned* images of consumer society, Carmelo Bene's absurdist critique of moralist standards via a frenzy of anti-mimetic images and sounds, Jean-Luc Godard's composite images apt for the expression of the unrepresentable, Marguerite Duras's de-synchronised images of desire, and Derek Jarman's, Ingmar Bergman's and Krzysztof Kieślowski's monochromatic screens for a non-spectacular rendering of the other's suffering. In all these cases, an imaginative effort is required from spectators to overcome and make sense of the audio-visual impasse displayed in the films.

This book has also emphasised that cinema (and, in general, any visual medium) cannot account, always and in all cases, for every possible reality. While cinema should be able to consider everything, it needs, nonetheless, to match its images and sounds to its content. Accustomed to images' pervasive presence and our distracted viewing, the halting of a mimetic, accessible audio-vision that cinematic iconoclasm provokes can elicit more pensive engagements with images and can promote a taking on of responsibility in regard to the visual field – to what we allow to enter and therefore share. Issues of image-making and image-consuming go back to ancient philosophy and find one of their most forceful, literal expressions in the destruction of icons of Christ during the Byzantine controversy. Significantly, many of the iconoclastic destructions in the analysed films occur on the face – faces literally destroyed through the physical aggressions against the film strip (Isou, Debord, Bene); faces slowly plunging into blankness (Godard, Bergman, Kieślowski); visually absent faces (Duras, Jarman); faces lacerated by superimpositions (Godard).

In all these cases, iconoclasm echoes its historical roots: from Christ's icon to cinematic close-up, the face remains the privileged site for destruction.

From Christ's Icon to Film Images: A History of Destroyed Faces

This book has explored some iconoclastic approaches to cinema and cinema's ability to subvert historical iconoclasm's violently destructive force against the other into a means for reflecting on film images and their ethical potential. More specifically, the emphasis on the dichotomy between the image as *eikōn* and the image as *eidōlon* has allowed me to investigate different facets of the film image in its relationship with a model, situating the image at the centre of a web of relations: What does an image represent? Who makes film images of what? Who watches these film images?

Visual images are the object of intense debate because of their being placed within such a relational system (involving model, image, image-maker and image-consumer), which I have briefly unfolded in the Prologue. Plato's concerns about images of art as copies of a copy (Idea → sensible thing → image) and their consequent potential for deception originate from the series of relations in which the image finds itself and which involve the model, the maker of images (imitator), the image (imitation of an imitation) and the viewer. In a similar manner, the Plotinian revaluation of images, which become intermediaries between humans and the One, derives from their relational character; that is, images and the One, as well as the viewer, belong to the same realm, only at a different ontological level. However, in both Plotinus and Plato, the image is ultimately inadequate to represent intelligible models – Plato's ideas and Plotinus's the One are, in fact, beyond any possible mimetic rendering. Subsequently, the Christian theology of the image reworks Platonic and Plotinian philosophy, together with the Biblical ban on graven images and the Christian concept of the incarnation of God. As a result, a division opposes those who allow the material image to figuratively represent God to those who fully reject such a position, interpreting it as idolatrous. Therefore, the image can be an intermediary between two elements otherwise separated (*eikōn*), but it can also be inadequate, blasphemous or obscene (*eidōlon*) – a binary which persists in some contemporary Western attitudes about visual representations.

Cinema, for its being founded on moving images, is a privileged medium for the study of the image in its troublesome relationship with a referent. Cinema's original contribution to the debate on iconoclasm is its possibility of showing the very process of image destruction and not solely the result of destruction thanks to its being in motion. That is to say, cinema has always the option of

temporalising the *eidōlon* and the *eikōn* and, as such, it provides a variety of devices to destroy images. Techniques such as slow-motion and freeze-frame can be used to dismantle mimetic movement; similarly, through fades, colour and monochromatic screens, cinema can display the sudden disappearance of figurative images into a monochromatic screen (an image of imagelessness). I have therefore focused my analysis on cinema's broken images – broken in their mimetic relation with a model that eschews figurative reproduction. Cinematic iconoclasm, thus, constitutes a possible answer to the modern and contemporary iconic overload so reliant on a mimetic aesthetics.

Part I centred on explicitly destructive approaches to cinema, which are reminiscent of philosophical and Christian iconoclasm in their fierce critique of the film image as deceptive copy. The cinema of Isou, Debord, Bene and Godard consists in a questioning of the film image's status, its complicity with dominant ideology and its ability to represent reality. Their iconoclastic aesthetics underlies ethico-political concerns and an overall distrust about certain self-evident, mimetic images which are understood as illusory *eidōla*. Already in the playful and anarchic spirit of Isou's *Traité de bave et d'éternité* is it possible to find defaced images expressing a condemnation of war and French foreign politics, as well as an attention to cinematic iconoclasm's potential for a refreshing relationship between film images and spectators. Political critique is the main thrust behind Debord's films, which aim at demolishing a capitalist worldview and promoting critically active forms of spectatorship via a consistent use of *détournement*. From his first to his last film, Debord subverts the images of capitalism (and consequently, also that of narrative and auteur cinema for their supposed connivance with dominant ideology), making films that are difficult to sit through because of their aesthetics of displeasure. Bene's ecstatic embracing of non-sense, which encompasses the narrative, visual and aural domains, carries out a fierce attack against society and moralism. Thus, in *Our Lady of the Turks*, aphasia and apraxia proceed to tear apart Catholic precepts, social decorum and the idea of subjectivity itself. Finally, in Godard's oeuvre, political and ethical preoccupations mingle not only to complexify those film images which reiterate a capitalist ideology, but also to interrogate cinema's ability to represent reality. In his films, a critique of the illusionism of certain film images – the *eidōla* of capitalism – is accompanied by a belief in relationships between images able to convey something about the world – the iconoclastic *eikones* of a cinema 'that can't be seen' (*Histoire(s) du cinéma*, 1988–98).

From Isou's appeal for the destruction of cinema to Godard's multi-layered images, in Part I, I have engaged with some of the most explicit stances against the film medium: 'I proclaim the destruction of cinema', Daniel/Isou argues in

Traité; 'the cinema, too, must be destroyed!' Debord insists in *Sur le passage* (1959); 'Cinema should be destroyed', Bene emphatically declares ([1970] 2011e, 60); 'let us destroy that [i.e., of the bourgeoisie] image', Godard urges in *British Sounds* (1969). What is more, through the analysis of Isou's *Traité de bave et d'éternité*, Bene's *Our Lady of the Turks* and some of Debord's and Godard's films, I have discussed the major iconoclastic devices at work in the cinema, that of the blank screen, which consists in an image of imagelessness and can qualify as a metaphor for an impossible image, altered motion, which goes against cinema's reproduction of habitual perception of movement, image-sound disjunctions, which mar the harmonious, comprehensible relation between the image track and the sound track, and the voice as *phoné*, which hinders the more traditional status of the verbal in film as that which conveys meaning.

Such disruptive aesthetic forms are also found in the films discussed in Part II, where the film image's complex relation with reality is further tested through invisible and unrepresentable referents which resist mimesis and strongly call into question the domain of ethics. Duras's *Le Navire Night* disassociates image and sound because of the threat that figuration poses to the sharing of desire; thus, the film unfolds the impossible relationship between desiring voices and desired bodies. Jarman's *Blue* articulates an utter rejection of spectacular images of persons with AIDS by means of a monochromatic ultramarine blue screen to preserve the individual experiences of the disease as irrecoverable to mimetic representation. Bergman's *Cries and Whispers* and Kieślowski's *Three Colours: Blue* insert sudden audio-visual hiatuses in their overall figurative fabric to render the otherwise unrepresentable experience of suffering. In all these cases, mimesis results insufficient to represent the others' emotional life without running the risk of producing an obscene representation.

In Part II, I have paid particular attention to the ethical value of iconoclastic *eikones*, arguing for an ethics of (in)visibility that such images encourage. It is an ethics of both image-making and image-viewing which insists on the importance of interrogating our complicity in the construction and destruction of a shared vision. On the one hand, *Le Navire Night*, *Blue*, *Cries and Whispers* and *Three Colours: Blue* refuse a mimetic, accessible representation in favour of images at the edge of invisibility that could preserve the partially unrepresentable character of the model. On the other hand, spectators of these films 'share the invisibility of a sense' (Mondzain 2019, 177) in the absence of self-explanatory images and are therefore free to imaginatively fill the visual gaps on screen. Part II complements the analyses of Isou's, Debord's, Bene's and Godard's films in Part I, making explicit the ethical charge that, in cinema, iconoclasm can present as a way to challenge uncomplicated representations of reality. That is,

cinematic iconoclasm puts into crisis the value of those images which, through mimesis and distracted attention, contribute to the destruction of a communal vision. The broken images of cinematic iconoclasm, instead, have the potential to elicit more reflective, ethically imaginative responses by giving space to the invisibility required for a shared vision. At the edge of the unrepresentable and the ineffable, iconoclastic film images are powerful means at our disposal to actively engage not only with the cinema, but also with the current visual sphere in which we live and build relationships.