



Origins of Iconocracy Notes on the Margins of Marie-José Mondzain's *Image, Icon, Economy*

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Abstract: In *Image, Icon, Economy*, Marie-José Mondzain builds a three-fold argument regarding the ontology, hermeneutics, and destiny of the image, both natural and artificial. First, she argues that the iconoclast controversy around the legitimacy of representing God was a battle between secular and ecclesiastical powers over authority and control, focused around power over the use of the visual medium. Second, she demonstrates that the debate was over economy (*oikonomia*) as a universal hermeneutic: that is, a dialectical understanding versus a nondialectical hermeneutic supporting a hieratic vision. Third, she claims that our politics of the visual originates in the iconic triumph in the Byzantine controversy. Following Mondzain's elaborate investigation, I find most compelling her questioning of truth and of the destiny of our world: A reign established on the truth of the image cannot be a reign of ontological truth.

Keywords: Mondzain, Marie-José; economy; icon; image; iconoclastic controversy; iconophile; iconic gaze; idol; photography; shroud of Turin.

In *Image, Icon, Economy*,¹ Marie-José Mondzain builds up an intricate argument regarding the ontology, phenomenology, hermeneutics, and destiny of the image, both natural and artificial. Each great convulsion of religious and political thought brings up the question of the legitimacy of the image; the iconoclastic crisis was not studied until the Reformation, which involved a calling into question of pontifical power and consequently a fight against ecclesiastic iconocracy that supported that power (*IIE* 5). This connects with how Mondzain justifies the contemporary relevance of her investigation:

since today the consideration of the icon concerns all in the lay and profane world it is necessary to return to its sources and demonstrate that its philosophical field is independent of the religious domain: for Nikephoros the cause of thought is sacred and the icon is sacred because it founds the possibility of thinking. [*IIE* 3]

She argues that a consideration of the image is a sacred cause today because the fate of thought and liberty are at stake in it. "The visible world/the one given to us to see: is it liberty or enslavement?" (*IIE* 3). Mondzain sets up a complex scenario to demonstrate that the iconoclast controversy around the legitimacy of representing God has been a battle between secular and ecclesiastical powers over authority and control, focused around power over the use of the visual imaginal/ imagination, a power which grounds authority and

¹ Marie-José Mondzain, *Image, Icon, Economy: The Byzantine Origins of the Contemporary Imaginary*, trans. Rico Franses, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005, 264 pages. [Henceforth cited as *IIE*]

control over the conscious and unconscious responses of its subjects, the viewers of the depicted images. Iconoclasts and iconophiles employed the same textual sources, constructed opposing arguments, and mutually condemned one another as idolaters. In spite of the fact that the iconoclastic position was more reasonable and cogent, while the iconophile position seemed naturally idolatrous, the latter triumphed. What spurred its triumph over its adversary was, according to Mondzain, its masterful use of the concept of economy (*oikonomia*). Mondzain considers unraveling the enigma of economy crucial, not only for understanding it as the ground of the controversy over images of God, but also as the wellsprings of Western authority and hegemonic control of the world.

Although Mondzain claims that economy is a Platonic rather than Hegelian dialectic, her claim must be qualified. Certainly, like time, economy is the moving image of eternity. This Platonic statement must be understood in a Hegelian perspective: as the divine plan of revelation to the world which is taken up at every level of manifestation from a divine Trinitarian economy, to an economy of incarnation, of crucifixion as economic sacrifice, of creation and providence, of the mystery of evil, and the economy of implementation of divine will in ecclesiastical strategy, in imperial deployment of power and authority. It is as such a dialectics of necessity and freedom, divine Word and human words, eternity and history, divinity and humanity.

Mondzain notes that the dangers of economic interpretation are numerous: a self-established "epistemological elitism" à la Plato, censorship of information, opportunism, inauthenticity, guile, deceit, and fraud. In the iconoclastic dispute, the source of power over thinking was at stake: either secular imperial power supported by the iconoclast emperor Constantine V or ecclesiastical powers. Here Mondzain's primary text source is Nikephoros' *Antirrhetics*, with references to earlier texts of John of Damascus and John Chrysostom. While the iconoclasts did not use economy in support of their cause—in fact they were opposed precisely to the notion of economy—iconophiles used economy as a main interpretative tool in support of a rhetorical and sophistic argument: they even condemned the iconoclasts for being idolaters.

The dispute seemed to be a masquerade in which the deconstructive or operative element was economy: once economy dictates the rules of the game, the game is won by the most skillful hermeneutician of economy.

Everything stands both for itself and its other in the twists and turns of economical maneuvering. A universal *magia* of prestidigitation: a corruption of *Hoc est corpus meum!* into hocus pocus. Transubstantiation itself is a matter of economy, is economical. The iconoclastic side argued for a separation of powers, secular and ecclesiastical, with the former ruling over the latter; the iconophilic side argued for Caesaropapist power united under the authority of the church. According to Mondzain the debate was ultimately over economy as a universal hermeneutic, that is, a dialectical understanding of divine-human, eternity-temporality, visible-invisible, freedom-necessity, versus a non-dialectical, thus rigid, dogmatic hermeneutic. On the one hand, an incessant metamorphic transformation of interpretation of all the articulations of the world in its infinite complexity; on the other, a dogmatic stable, hieratic vision. Mondzain's view of economy during the iconoclast controversy approaches the "pinching and seizing of truth" so well exemplified by Alain Badiou's Paul in his construction of Christianity or Christian truths.²

The iconoclastic crisis in Byzantium was essentially a Constantinopolitan political crisis over the symbolic foundation of authority, or rather, ultimately an economic crisis. Mondzain analyzes the crisis on the basis of the polemic formulated in Patriarch Nikephoros' *Antirrhetics*. These texts concern both theoretical issues (relationships, mimesis, the imaginal voice, the transfiguration of form) and political issues (pedagogy, strategy, the appropriation of territory). Both sets of issues define the operational field of the concept of economy as it was applied to the image and the icon. In question were the natural image and the fate of the artificial image.

While nearly all the different interpretations of the political crisis imply that the debate over the icon was only a pretext, Mondzain proposes her own hypothesis: what if this political crisis was a crisis of iconicity? Iconicity must be understood as linked to symbolization in general and to politics specifically (*IIE* 2). What was the philosophy of the image versus icon in relation to the notion of economy that was operative in the Greek system of thought at the time and how was it reconciled with the demands of faith. While our world is founded on visibility, its essence or meaning is itself invisible. It was necessary to establish a system of thought that set

² Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003.

the visible and invisible in relation to each other. This relation was based on the distinction between image and icon: the image is natural and invisible, the icon is artificial and visible. Economy became the concept of their relation: the image is eternal similitude, the icon is temporal resemblance. Economy was the embodied theory of the transfiguration of history (IIE 3).

The concept of economy encapsulates a disquieting polysemy: although primarily administrative and juridical, intended for the management of the affairs of the real world, it also concerns the mystery of the Trinity, of the incarnation, and of the plan of redemption. During the crisis, questions of economy and image could not be separated; indeed, a leitmotif of the texts defending the legitimacy of icon was the insistence that whoever rejected the icon rejected the totality of the economy (IIE 3). The term economy supports the edifice in which the icon constitutes the final stake—intellectually, spiritually, politically (IIE 4). Mondzain recreates the theoretical architecture of the imaginal economy, then the iconic economy, in order to clarify what was at stake in the polemic between emperor and patriarch as they attempted to impose their own conceptions of symbolic hegemony.

The only texts that we have about the iconoclasts' hostility to artificial images are testimonies of their adversaries, for example, quotes of Nicaea II when it became necessary to refute the iconoclast theses of the Council of Hieria (754 CE), and fragments transmitted by Nikephoros, which are the work of Emperor Constantine V. The iconoclasts invoked biblical texts that prohibited the painted or carved image, but their position was driven by a political concern rather than a spiritual one. As they were seeking to separate spiritual from temporal power, they did not explore the foundations for a doctrinal and political unity of the Christian state. Iconoclast thought was a noneconomic conception of the natural image. Once the doctrine of the icon/artificial image had decreed the economic distance separating the visible from ontology, iconoclasm fought against it. Iconoclasm rejected the systematic unity of the concept of economy, which became the reason for its failure (IIE 5). Only embracing economy would allow for the simultaneous administration and management of law, belief, and the goods of this world. Only the image and the icon together could become its cornerstone (IIE 5).

The stakes of the image are political and philosophical. For Patriarch Nikephoros who adopted economic thought—a form of relative realism—the

matter concerns the nature of all images and the impossibility of thinking and ruling without them (IIE 8). The question is, who will be master of the images? He who will be faithful to the natural image, will respect the natural image within the artificial image, and will continuously practice guile between faithfulness and unfaithfulness in order to draw from that artifice all benefits, since in all things it is God who sets the example, and it is he whom one imitates (IIE 8).

Part 1 of the book is devoted to the notion of economy (*oikonomia*) as key. Mondzain observes that God was cited to exemplify the original model of economy, which in part explains the difficulties of translating the term *oikonomia*:

Economy is a manifestation of existential wisdom: every act of interpretation and adaptation to circumstances that chooses never to separate thought from life, or the concept from the flesh that manifests it. Economy is a manifestation in history but it is not limited by history, it reveals the meaning of history itself: the economy is the historical modality of the configuration of truth for fallen souls and that until the end of time. The model of every economy is God himself who offers us the image of his Son and the model of his actions. Once saved, we will see God no longer in the economic enigma adapted to our weakness, but face to face. [IIE 48–9]

God's Trinitarian being and his self-revelation from creation to redemption involved an economic manifestation which demanded an economic hermeneutic. Economy explained divine unity and divine plurality, Trinitarian economy and Christological economy, and became the strategy necessary for the management of history. Thus the son was viewed as the economy of the father; it designated not only the second person of the Trinity, but the whole of the redemptive plan, from the conception of the virgin to the resurrection, including Christ's evangelical life and his passion (IIE 21). The incarnational economy was the spreading out of the father's image in its historic manifestation, which was made possible by the economy of the maternal body.

The economy of Christ led from the word to the legitimacy of its icon: God had a historical need for the son; the son for the church; the church for temporal power. On the model of God, who used all the means familiar to a father, doctor, teacher: speech, remedy, guile, condescension, punishment, lie—all means are acceptable on condition one remains loyal to the spirit of the divine economy (IIE 21). God is the *oikonomos*, the

supreme administrator and manager, and the ensemble of his creation in the universe is *oikonomia*. The clash of the concept of providence with the existence of evil and suffering is solved through divine economy. The notion of a divine plan with the aim of administering and managing fallen creation, thus saving it made the economy interdependent with the whole creation from the beginning of time: economy was nature and providence and became the solution to inconsistency, opportunity, and scandal, the art of enlightened flexibility (*IIE* 14), a science of context, making possible the adaptation of the law to its manifestation and application in reality, operating the reconciliation of truth and reality. It soon became the concept of the management and administration of temporal realities whether spiritual, intellectual, or material (*IIE* 22). During the iconoclastic controversy, economy became the central hermeneutic of iconophile defense, and expressed itself in arguments about the management of the relation of the sacred and profane, the visible and the invisible, the rigor of the law and the adaptability of the rule.

Christ is economy par excellence (*IIE* 34). He intrinsically forms a part of the trinity; he makes manifest the union of word and flesh; he condescended to annihilation and became the instrument of the father in the plan of salvation. By means of christology the economy becomes the dominant concept of thought concerning similitude; by means of trinitarian doctrine it remains faithful to thought concerning the organization and management of divine operations throughout the world and history (*IIE* 34).

The Christological economy proceeds from the trinitarian economy, as Cyril of Alexandria demonstrates against Nestorius, and cannot be separated from the virginal womb: the virgin gives birth to the image (*IIE* 32). The virgin's body, the physiological receptacle of the word, participated in the economic plan of redemption by agreeing to bring the image of the father—that is, his economy—into the world (*IIE* 40). The economy is an operative concept defined by its living fertility, which takes for its historical model the fertility of the virginal womb. The virgin was not a material cause in Aristotelian sense of the term, since in order for flesh to be capable of being fertilized by the father's Word, it must already be inscribed in the economy of the natural image: as a new Eve, her virginity is imaginal in its essence (*IIE* 100). Incarnation emerges as the redemption of the image by the image.

During the iconoclastic crisis, the emperor

ordered the destruction of religious images and their replacement with imperial iconography. As a response, Nikephoros constructs an anti-icon of the iconoclast emperor Constantine V's body, an antitype of iconic economy (*IIE* 43, 107). Nikephoros's anti-icon shows us what an enemy of the gaze and speech is, an iconographer of the devil inscribed in a breviary of hatred, a model of abjection excluded from the sacred, excluded from nature, and excluded from reason (*IIE* 110–2). As an adaptation of the law to real life, of means to ends, of transcendence to history, economy was a conquering strategy because it did not stop defining itself as being in the service of life (*IIE* 46–7). As economy managed the organization of truth that takes into account circumstantial parameters, opportunism became a political and spiritual virtue that served the interests of the church (*IIE* 53). Therapeutic, military, and pedagogic models were used as a manner of talking, a way of teaching in order to save, a method of subduing (*IIE* 56–7).³

Body and emotions participate in the *oikonomia*. The church fathers realized that the listener's emotion must be cultivated and critical reason must be suspended to welcome grace and martyrdom. This insight became the principle of all propaganda and publicity: how to obtain agreement without reserve, conviction and obedience without objection. To seduce means to force a path not only in the spirit but in the entire body of the listener or spectator, and in occupying it, to become the master of what it digests and rejects (*IIE* 59). Mondzain explains economy in powerful terms as a metaphysical dualism:

The economy is truly the commerce of God and the devil in a sort of life annuity based on the durability of both parties but the eternity of only one.... Thus the *oikonomia* becomes the sublimation of the diabolical, with the forces of satanic ensnarement and menace diverted and put to the service of the good. [*IIE* 60]

Mondzain's principal claim is that iconoclasm failed because it rejected the systematic unity of the

³ Mondzain adduces three examples that served the church fathers as references in their justification of their practice of truth: Origen's idea of divine accommodation to human circumstances and capabilities; Basil of Caesarea's silence on the subject of the consubstantiality of the Third Person understood as strategic accommodation to circumstances, and John Chrysostom's economic guile and deceit—for great is the value of deceit (*IIE* 49)!

concept of economy, which enables administration of law, belief, and worldly goods. Instead of using economy as a hermeneutic tool, the iconoclasts invoked Pseudo-Dionysian apophaticism as appropriate theology. The philosophical iconophile responded to the challenge of negative theology by adducing affirmative theology economically interpreted, thus founding modern iconic or symbolic thought (*IIE* 23). Certainly, as Mondzain observes, the crucial question remained one of the moral control of economic practice and its doctrinal limits. Since economy manages thinking, life, and history, it can be opened up to the world only based on an ethics of mimesis, for which the icon is the model (*IIE* 65).

One of Mondzain's most pertinent analyses is devoted to iconic gaze. She addresses the economy of the icon, discussing the ontology of the icon in relation to the image as one of consubstantiality, which justifies the power of the gaze: looking at the icon one encounters the invisible gaze coming from the invisible natural image (*IIE* 82). She adduces Nikephoros's definition of the icon, according to which to be an image is to aim toward a model, indeed, to be toward it.⁴ Hence Christ is not in the icon: the icon is always toward Christ, who never stops withdrawing, thus becoming both eye and gaze (*IIE* 88). Seeing implies being seen; the icon contemplates us, for it is God's gaze at the contemplator, who gets caught in an informational and transformational circuit of relationships. The icon acts: it is an effective instrument and not the object of a passive fascination (*IIE* 98). "Whoever sees it is seen," Mondzain explains, "the icon derives a particular power from its relational and theoretical status that explains the role that it was then able to play in Byzantium in civic, administrative and juridical life. It functioned as an effective presence, the presence of a gaze that provides guarantees and cannot deceive" (*IIE* 91).⁵ The human similitude is

important because it is completely differentiated from the simulacrum, even if it is symbolic. Nikephoros cites canon 82 of the Quinisext Synod, which demanded that the lamb be replaced by Christ's human face; thus the Old Testament simulacrum, confined to symbolic representation, was replaced by New Testament mimesis.

Since traditionally icons depicted Christ or virgin mother and son, Mondzain discusses the ecclesiastical initiative of globalizing the image: optocracy, or the theocracy of the visible as a key to all culture (*IIE* 162, 166). This was a program of universal conquest through the icons of the mother and son: the virgin of contact or tenderness, and the virgin of noncontact or Oranta (*IIE* 168). The woman as mother and virgin represents *khora* as well as the church. Mondzain notes the contradiction between having the woman as a key element in the plan of salvation and the secondary role that real women were constrained to play in history. The imaginal life in the icon produces the economic concept of the virginal womb: carrying the image within itself, the icon is the virginal womb. Fertilized by the grace that speaks to it in the voice of the annunciation, it becomes the fertile womb from which all future images will be born. Woman becomes the place of choice for the body of the whole imaginal economy because in order to pass from the state of natural, invisible image to icon for the gaze, it is necessary to have a womb (*IIE* 100). She was the circumscribed envelope of a circumscribable son without suffocating the uncircumscribability of his imaginal nature.

That is the reason why ruling out docetism was philosophically important. By furthering economic reasoning, Christ's image cannot be dissociated from the femininity of the temporal institution that makes his economy visible, the church itself. Christian discourse taken as a whole is nothing other than an immense ordering and management of the question of the image, whether it is flesh, sin, women, nature, or art that are concerned (*IIE* 101). Mondzain writes, "Henceforth, the image will form part of all plans for redemption in the universe as a whole. It will prevail over all other modes of communication. It is the discourse of silence and submission, the discourse of emotion, and conviction, the discourse of proof and non-contradiction" (*IIE* 169).

one's own eyes, to see and be seen by the deity. "Seeing" in this religious sense is not an act that is initiated by the worshiper. Rather, the deity presents itself to be seen in its image.

⁴ Interestingly, the icon, Mondzain observes, is the best historical introduction to abstract art (for instance, Mondrian) since it is indifferent to empirical reality as it is to an ideal beauty (*IIE* 88).

⁵ Here Mondzain's claim can be substantiated by adducing the notion of Hindu and Buddhist darshan into the present discussion of the iconic gaze. For Diana Eck, darshan means "seeing and being seen by the divine." See Diana L. Eck, *Darshan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1998, pp. 3-10. In the Hindu ritual tradition darshan refers especially to the visual perception of the sacred. The central act of Hindu worship is to stand in the presence of the deity and to behold the image with

Such a discourse demands monopoly over its production. The iconocrat as master of the image(s) gains the monopoly on its production, assumes omniscience, knows what is good and equitable to render visible (IIE 169). Mondzain argues in Nietzschean fashion that the invisible has a universal value and to legitimize iconic hegemony a dogmatically sanctioned means of making it visible was necessary. To compensate for the problem or the loss of logocentrism, the image offers the "consolation of a federative universal and pacifying *techne*" (IIE 170).

Part 3 of the book, on "Idols and Veronicas," contains three disparate reflections on Byzantine and contemporary idols (The Idol's *Delenda est*), the history of the shroud of Turin in connection with photography (GhostStory), and the political and symbolic significance of the face and frontality (The Jew Frontally and in Profile). In the first reflection, Mondzain engages in musings on our idolatrous nature, loving and killing all our idols from Moses to Marilyn Monroe and Michael Jackson. Though she well might have, she does not enter a theological conversation that would have to consider Rene Girard's and Paul Tillich's interpretations of the Christic sacrifice as an attempt at foreclosing idolatry by annihilating the medium of revelation, nor does she engage with contemporary thinking in the aftermath of the death of God theology, nor does she take up French or American thinkers who write of God without Being (Jean-Luc Marion), name and event (John D. Caputo), the thinking now occurring (D. G. Leahy) or God as a possibility (Richard Kearney). Mondzain explains that idols have always been selected from among the categories excluded from being like us and denied full human personhood: she mentions women, actors, artists, and Jews. Without alluding to them, she echoes Arnold van Gennep's and Richard Kearney's phenomenology of the fascination cum dread for the stranger, the other.

In the second reflection, connecting icons and photography, icons emerge as *acheiropoietia* images, as miraculous events of divine artistry not made by human hands. Mondzain refers to the shroud of Turin (Holy Sudarium) as a false *acheiropoieton*, and a second moment and metaphorical illustration of iconophile triumph: hidden in plain sight for centuries, in 1898 the image of Christ surfaces from darkness and the negative of the photographic plate into the light as a "writing in light" (*photo graphia*). What appears though is a contour of a crucified body, a trace of death that becomes dialectically—economically—a proof of life eternal, of

the resurrection. Scientifically proven spurious when, in 1980, it was dated to approximately 1260–1390 CE, the shroud of Turin nonetheless continued its magic unhindered by any such interferences, even generating a science of its own: *sindonology*.

Mondzain connects the shroud controversy to the debate over iconic economy in the Byzantine controversy. For an iconoclast, the Holy Face was a sign of and memorial to divine humanity that prohibited any other portrayal, hence it would not have been an argument for figurative portrayal. For an iconophile, conversely, the shroud was a sign of divine assent to the criteria of similitude and the redemption of that similitude. In conformity with the economy, the cadaver becomes a sign of life, the shadow a source of light, the invisible is promoted to visibility (IIE 203). As during the iconoclastic crisis, the church embraced it, defended and protected the photographic image, which has power not because it is true, but rather becomes true because it has power.

Mondzain engages in a hermeneutic play on the theological-political significance of photography. Photography seemed a magical operation, capturing the invisible, a natural image or *acheiropoieton*, the *veronicas* (*vera icona*). As such it is linked to a history of credulity in and attachment to the real presence or existence of what it shows (IIE 201). It becomes an authenticating technique thanks to its essential features: resemblance; two-dimensionality; passage from light to darkness and from revelatory darkness to the light of presence; the symmetric and the specular nature of the image in respect to its model; the seizing and holding of the moment that evokes eternity; the image of what died yesterday and remains alive today; the image of what will live always despite everything that annihilates us today; this opposite world so similar to ours that is shown to us mimetic and painless. Photography is the "modern tool of transubstantiation" *par excellence* and a "chemically apophatic, silent and magical art" in which the magic of desire equates the image with the word, a making consubstantial with a saying (IIE 204). *Perpetuum silentium* is the condition before the image that speaks a discourse of univocal, frontal, and mimetic evidence (IIE 202).

In the third reflection, on frontality and the Jew, Mondzain maintains that anti-Semite propaganda was based not on an archaic or puerile structure, but rather a reversal of Greco-Christian idealization, itself an ideological discourse about body and territory (IIE 210). She argues that it is important today to link the dreadful

construction of the Jewish body to an ideological system powerfully formulated by the foundational authorities and institutions of the West: Greek thought or reason, and Christian vocabulary or the Church. Mondzain calls for a Nietzschean transvaluation of all Western values, of Greek thought and Christian vocabulary alike, and imagines salvation coming from a mythical (post-apocalyptic?) America: "It can only be hoped that America the Redemptive will be able to provide American Jews with a harmonious body finally worthy of immunity and salvation" (*IIE* 219–20).

Ultimately it is the question of truth and of the fate of our world today that Mondzain intends to address. A reign established on the truth of the image cannot be a reign of ontological truth. Truth is an image: there is no image of truth (*IIE* 222). However she hopes that the future is ours to choose: between Parousia or spectacle, communion or communication (*IIE* 223). She warns against a "back to nature" temptation, back to an era of decontamination, global moralization, the salvational hygiene of a return (*IIE* 224–5). Alluring as this last temptation may be, she argues that this is the worst of the ideological consequences of the disarray engendered by the despondency of philosophical thought (*IIE* 225). Instead, she proposes a radical challenge to the church to renounce either message or authority (*IIE* 224).

There are moments of great insight that this scholarly study illumines through a hermeneutic of suspicion: the concept of economy; iconic gaze; women as *khora* and their role in salvation and ecclesiastic economy and history; a Nietzschean call for the transvaluation of values; insight into photography as acheropietic art; our idolatrous nature; the ideological construction of iconoclastic anti-portraits and anti-icons.

Ultimately though, it is not clear why Mondzain takes the Byzantine church dispute to be the original

source or root of contemporary imaginary. Had the iconoclastic emperor Constantine V won, an iconoclastic Christianity would have been the result, similar to its Islamic contemporary and to subsequent Western Lutheranism and Calvinism. While it is true that our new docetic era of imaginal hegemony or idolocracy and its global political power and authority is upon us, Christian theology and economy that emerged in the iconoclastic controversy is not its undisputable and unique source. While ecclesiastical power, I would argue, is not the arch-enemy of the free world and "cosmicisation" (Jean-Luc Nancy's term) or alternative globalization. If she stopped here, Mondzain's book would be an intriguing hypothesis, a thought experiment and speculation, as well as an intellectual and mnemonic exercise, rather than a convincing demonstration—and one probably more Nietzschean than she imagines—a bringing into light, a photo-graphia as such, of significant moments of the Byzantine history.

However, Mondzain's book is most valuable for its militant humanism of her calling forth an apocalypse of artificial images, placing their false ontology on display, thus calling into question the ontology of the visible, the Platonic appearances and the Kantian phenomena (our contemporary icons) as well as the nature of the ideal or noumenal dimension of phenomena/appearances (the natural image). Taking a labyrinthine detour, Mondzain brings under judgment the nature of the political manipulation and control of images, the global hegemony over the unconscious of the planet's population. She thus joins Baudrillard's suspicious hermeneutics of the ontological and ethical value of contemporary simulacra, the docetic nature of our worldwide webs.