

# ***Genesis***

*Science, Religion and the Image*



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## *Introduction*

It feels necessary, as I set out to write this paper, to provide the reader with a greater context to the ideas contained within. While I have learned a great deal in the past year regarding the image and the vast pantheon of theory associated with it, this knowledge pales in comparison to the personal revelations that have been made. Chief among these discoveries is the extent to which all facets of my mental life are enveloped in paradox. What makes this so ironic is that for most of my life I have considered myself to be an open book absent of contradiction and hypocrisy, yet this year has shown me to be anything but.

I mention all of the above because I feel that it is important both to give the reader some forewarning of the switchbacks that lie ahead and to establish the narrative voice for this text. It is this notion of voice that has been particularly difficult as it presents a rather daunting challenge. On the one hand there is a strength to be derived from the baroque flourishes and objective distance of the academic voice. While on the other it is difficult to extricate ones self from a body of work that represents an entire year's worth of time, thought and energy. My hope is to navigate some kind of third path between these two poles and provide a text that is both informed and well thought out while also managing to be humble and grounded<sup>1</sup>. Hopefully the following pages will conform to this vision.

Finally, I want to acknowledge the temptation to present this text as a kind of eulogy. After all, this paper represents my final act as an MFA candidate and as such cannot help but bear the weight of the past two years. This fact, in conjunction with the

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<sup>1</sup> My fear, however, is that this piece may come off as the exact opposite: narcissistic, pompous, unfounded and ungrounded.

text's postmortem relationship to the thesis work itself (its body still lying in state as I write), creates no small anxiety within me to capture my thoughts as poetically as possible. Obviously, to give in to this impulse completely be a total disaster, however the sentiment is worth acknowledging and I will do my best to keep the linguistic flourishes to a minimum. Instead I would like to propose that this paper be taken as a kind of epilogue, one that is both a summation of a personal and academic epoch as well as the precursor to a future body of works.

## *Genesis*

...we cannot do *without* images, intermediaries, mediators of all shapes and forms, because this is the only way to access God, Nature, Truth and Science.<sup>2</sup>

It is this statement, above all others, that can be seen as the origin<sup>3</sup> of my thesis work. Until reading Bruno Latour's text from the *Iconoclash* catalogue<sup>4</sup>, I had never thought to position the images of religion (which I hold so dearly) and the images of science (which I respect so greatly) within the same context. My concept of the scientific image was very much in keeping with those described by Latour:

Contrary to religious ones (images), they simply describe the world in a way that can be proven true or false. Precisely because they are cool, they are fresh, they can be verified, they are largely undisputed, they are the objects of a rare and almost universal agreement.<sup>5</sup>

As such it was a revelation to see the scientific and the religious presented as parallel spheres equally engaged with the creation of images for the purpose of giving form and meaning to that which would otherwise remain formless and unarticulated. While I had long ascribed this notion to religion, and indeed formed much of my practice around it, the idea that science was equally entrenched in this process presented new vistas of exploration. This is not to say that I am ignorant or naïve when it comes to the nature of science as a system of belief. Indeed my time spent studying psychology as an undergraduate revealed that science can be as dogmatic and divisive as any religion.

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<sup>2</sup> *What is Iconoclash?*, Bruno Latour, p.16

<sup>3</sup> or genesis, if I may be allowed to indulge myself in just one pun

<sup>4</sup> Latour, Bruno. "What is Iconoclash?" *Iconoclash*. MIT Press, 2002. 16-40.

<sup>5</sup> *What is Iconoclash?*, Bruno Latour, p. 21

Rather I feel that I was beguiled by the illusion put forward by science that the images it presents “are not even images, but the world itself”.<sup>6</sup>

Intrigued by this newfound perspective, I felt compelled to integrate the juxtaposition of scientific and religious imagery into my thesis work. And while the ultimate configuration of these juxtapositions took several forms before reaching their final state, the alternating dialogue associated with the final piece was a key element of even the earliest works. While there are other elements to *Genesis* that are of equal importance (which will be discussed in the following pages), I believe it is important to present the work, first and foremost, as a visual discourse between the diagrammatic images of science and the iconic images of religion.

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<sup>6</sup> Latour, p.21

## *Revealing the Hand*

While the core of my thesis work pertains to the parallel nature of the image within science and religion, this is not to say that the work is without additional layers of significance. Chief among these is the presence of the hand within the piece. Once again Latour's text proved instrumental in the formation of this idea within the work. In it he describes the term *acheiropoiete*, that which is "not made by any human hand"<sup>7</sup>, as the inherent belief behind the images of both science and religion.

Thus to *add the hand* to the pictures is tantamount to spoiling them, criticizing them. The same is true of religion in general. If you say that it is man-made you nullify the transcendence of the divinities, you empty the claims of salvation from above...the critical mind is one that shows the *hands* of humans at work everywhere so as to slaughter the sanctity of religion...The same is true of science. There, too, objectivity is supposed to be *acheiropoeite*, not made human hand. If you show the hand at work, in the human fabric of science, you are accused of sullyng the sanctity of objectivity, of ruining its transcendence...in the two cases of religion and science, when the hand is shown at work, it is always a hand with a hammer or with a torch: always a critical, a destructive hand.<sup>8</sup>

At the same time however, Latour puts forward a concept that resonated with me greatly, speculating that counter to this notion of the hand as defiler perhaps the hand was "actually indispensable to reaching truth, to producing objectivity, to fabricating divinity?"<sup>9</sup>. I found this idea to be incredibly powerful, not only because it dovetailed so perfectly with my own beliefs, but because it provided a possible explanation for a core tenant of my art practice.

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<sup>7</sup> Latour, p. 18

<sup>8</sup> Latour, p. 18

<sup>9</sup> Latour p. 18

For as long as I have been creating work, it has been important to include elements that reference the human hand, often through the use of broad, gestural marks. Even when my work became more centered in electronic media, I found it important to include some reference to the hand at work. It seemed only natural then, that *Genesis* should involve the human hand in direct and immediate way. However, unlike previous works in which the hand was made manifest visually within the work via the inclusion of indexical marks, I decided early on to integrate the hand directly via interactivity. Not only did this further strengthen the connection between my work and Latour's writing, it also provided me with a vehicle with which to pursue the second major facet of my work.

## *Authorship and Aleatory*

In the days proceeding the installation of *Genesis*, I had the opportunity to speak with Gunalan Nadarajan<sup>10</sup> about my work and some of the ideas I've been attempting to articulate. One of the key insights gained from this exchange related to my personal attitudes on the authorship of the image. Much like my fixation with the presence of the human hand, my approach to authorship as stemming back to some of my earliest works. It was Nadarajan who helped me to make the connection between the aleatoric processes I find so intriguing and the *acheiropoeite* image making discussed by Latour.

Just as idol makers of past times sought "to generate objects which are not of their own making"<sup>11</sup>, so too have I been compelled to create works who's scope exceeds my own determinism. While I would not go so far as to claim that my work is the product of some divine agency, I am fascinated with the push and pull that exists between the notion of artist as Author<sup>12</sup> and artist as Medium<sup>13</sup>. This too is echoed in Latour's writing in which the tensions between the creating artist and the creating god is presented as the ultimate paradox of the iconoclast and image-maker:

...is this made by your own hands, in which case it is worthless; or is this objective, true, transcendent, in which case you cannot possibly have made it? Either God is doing everything and humans are doing nothing, or the humans are doing all the work and God is nothing.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> the recently appointed head of MICA's Office of Research

<sup>11</sup> Latour, p. 23

<sup>12</sup> ie the Author as the exalted modernist subject/object.

<sup>13</sup> which is to say the channel through which the external world is synthesized and made manifest.

<sup>14</sup> Latour, p. 23

Within this context *Genesis* can be seen as the latest iteration in a continuing effort to navigate this paradox in such a way as to allow for both the hand of the artist and the hand of god (whomever or whatever that may happen to be) to act upon the work equally. Obviously this approach is not without its own complications (see the section titled *Conflict*), however it remains important to situate my work in a space that is not wholly of my own making. This could be attributed to a fundamental lack of confidence on my part in my own inherent ability to create a worthwhile image, however I am more inclined to see it as a addendum of Latour's edict that "Either you make or you are made"<sup>15</sup>, to which I reply, "I am both".

Unlike previous projects however, *Genesis* doesn't seek to merely introduce a selection of variables to mere chance. Instead, by integrating interactivity into the piece the potential for chance is multiplied by the numerous anonymous actions of the participant. This gives rise to a kind of triple authorship: one belonging to myself, another to the participants and a third resting purely within the abstract notion of aleatory. The inclusion of an image gallery as part of the piece furthers this notion as it elevates the work of the participants to that of co-creators. Indeed the images on display in the gallery are the only artifacts of the interactive process, their endless progression forming the only evidence of an otherwise ethereal and transient process.

By presenting these archived images as a kind of "public memory", I not only commemorate the actions of the participants, I am providing a venue through which *Genesis* can be viewed as a completed image as opposed to a fragmented experience. Within this context the work takes on yet another form: that of digital palimpsest.

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<sup>15</sup> Latour, p.24

Through the revealing and overwriting process of the interaction, the final images presented in the archive are a collision of scientific and religious images. No longer confined to the alternating dialogue of the interaction, the preserved images represent a complex interweaving of disparate parts into a new and complex whole. If the interactive component of *Genesis* is to be seen as a kind of didactic exercise, physically guiding the participant through the dual narratives of science and religion, then the archive can be seen as a crystallization of the overarching juxtaposition.

Once again, the influence of Latour upon the development of this concept is crucial. While much of this text is based upon the first half of his essay *What is Iconoclasm?*, in which Latour establishes his concept of the Iconoclasm, much of the user interaction can be seen as an enactment of the second half of the text. It is here that Latour engages in a kind of taxonomy of iconoclasm<sup>16</sup>. Simply referring to these various categories by letters ( A People, B People, etc.), Latour covers a wide range of iconoclastic acts, from the classical “people who are against all images”<sup>17</sup> (A People), to the jeering masses who “doubt the idol breakers as much as the icon worshippers”<sup>18</sup> (E People). In *Genesis* however the focus is specifically on B People, who Latour describes as those who are opposed only to the elevation or “freeze-framing” of a single image. For Latour B People are convinced that, “the only way to access truth, objectivity, and sanctity is to move fast from one image to another, not to dream the impossible dream of jumping to a non-existing original”<sup>19</sup>. As such, the perpetual

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<sup>16</sup> or as he calls it, “A Rough Classification of the Iconoclastic Gesture”

<sup>17</sup> Latour, p.27

<sup>18</sup> Latour, p.30

<sup>19</sup> Latour p. 28

revealing and overlaying that takes place within the piece can be seen as yet another enactment of Latour's concepts.

## *Conflict*

Having outlined the three major concepts behind the work, I feel its important to take a moment to discuss some of the unresolved aspects of the piece. One of the key insights I gained from creating *Genesis* is the extent to which interactive works (particularly those based in electronic media) exist within a perpetual state of flux. Since code can rewritten ad infinitum the normal limits of creation (such as the limitations of material, etc.) cease to apply. As such, it becomes possible to devote incredible lengths of time to modifying and revising code. I readily admit that in the case of my project this was a particularly seductive problem. Even now I find myself contemplating a future revision of the work based upon a more sophisticated interface. The consequence of this perpetual reworking is that it can overshadow some of the more fundamental aspects of the piece.

While I stand behind the strength of the images used in the piece, I readily admit that they posed the greatest challenge within the work, and as such, could be seen as the most direct casualty of the distractions posed by interactivity. As I mentioned earlier, the major thrust of *Genesis* was to juxtapose Scientific and Religious imagery in such a way as to lay bear their mutual relationship with the image. To this end the imagery I selected can be seen as following the parallel narratives of science and religion as they seek to explain the origins of human life. When I first conceived this idea I believed that both the Judeo-Christian creation myth (Genesis) and the conventional scientific accounts of the universes creation and subsequent evolution of biological life, would be readily accessible to all individuals. However, I soon found that the selection of images,

particularly within the context of juxtaposing science and religion, was a far more difficult and provocative task.

Most notable (and personally surprising) was the extent to which the scientific images I selected were scrutinized for appearing overly juvenile or simplistic when placed alongside the religious woodcuts and illuminated manuscripts I had partnered them with. Admittedly the religious images, having been largely selected from medieval and early renaissance works, showed a greater degree of artistry, however I remain convinced that both sets of images are equally complex in their own regard. Ultimately I followed the urging of my peers and included scientific images that possessed greater degrees of aesthetic sophistication. Having said this, I do find the debate that emerged to be a very telling in regards to the apparently latent privilege that is given to the religious image even by those who would actively describe themselves as non-religious.

In addition to the difficulties of pairing images from two chronologically and conceptually divergent sources, there is also the issue of image selection itself, particularly in the context of an otherwise open and aleatoric process. As I mentioned in the section *Authorship and Aleatory*, one of the broader ideas explored within *Genesis* was the potential that exists within interactive digital work to become complex mediations of collaboration and chance. This concept however was directly at odds with my chosen execution of the underlying concept of paralleling the images of science and religion. In establishing a set narrative in which a particular set of images was to be directly followed by yet another specific image set, I was ultimately undermining the aleatoric process that I was embracing in other facets of the piece. Since juxtaposing

scientific and religious imagery was my primary concern, I am comfortable with the choice that I ultimately made, however I have already started to look into relinquishing control over the selection of images in future variations of the piece.

## *Revelations*

What would happen if, when saying that some image is human-made, you were *increasing* instead of decreasing its claim to truth? That would be the closure of the critical mood, the end of anti-fetishism. We could say, contrary to the critical urge, that the more human-work is shown, the *better* is their grasp of reality, of sanctity, of worship.<sup>20</sup>

As I mentioned previously in the section *Revealing the Hand*, Latour's speculation on the presence of the hand as an empowering force had a profound effect upon how I came to understand *Genesis*. Given the highly polarized nature of the relationship that exists between Science and Religion (particularly in the United States), it can be difficult to view *Genesis* as being without a specific agenda to either elevate or diminish one over the other. While this was never my intent, subsequent conversations and critiques seemed to bear witness to this underlying tension. Latour's conjecture on the power of the human hand (and one could assume by extension the heart and mind) in the creation of images provides a means of mitigating these tensions while simultaneously unifying many of my own thoughts on the image.

What matters most about the images I have brought together in *Genesis* is not their unique aesthetic qualities or their technical sophistication, but rather it is their common pursuit of that which is ultimately unobtainable. Whether one chooses to call this thing "truth" or "divinity" is of less importance than the overarching universality of the pursuit itself. It is this constant that runs through all cultures and times, and as such is as worthy of the labels of "truth" and "divinity" as any individual belief system. Ultimately this pursuit can be seen as typifying the whole of human existence, transcending the

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<sup>20</sup> Latoupr, p. 18

boundaries of dogma and revealing what is quite possibly the closest thing to a universal truth.

My hope is that this universal pursuit for understanding may be evoked through *Genesis*, and that by participating in the piece the viewer may come to see science and religion not as a cacophony of competing gods and ideas, but as an ecstatic exploration of existence. These aspirations are magnified for my fellow artists and image makers, as their role in this pursuit is just as great as those of the scientists and theologians. After all, it is the artist who must give the gods their faces and bring form to the theoretical aether of quantum physics. While these images bear all the weaknesses of the hands that created them, they are also the beneficiaries of the hearts and minds that conceived them.