

Icons and Images

We live in a very visual age. They never cease to remind us. And what are these images? Obscene, grotesque, daubed with excrement, glittering with jewels. Our basest instincts are aroused; we glory in kitsch. Where is the depth of Rembrandt, the “fire” of Van Gogh? Well, let us content ourselves with a well-painted can of soup or an unmade bed. The *cliché* of criticism are as inert as the Art we crowd to “experience”. A thrill is surely the best test of artistic vitality?

Yet my kitchen wall is plastered with picture-postcard reproductions of the art of the past, and I wonder whether the lot, soiled as they are, aren't worth more than an original Tracey Emin or Damian Hurst. These are reminders, reminders of many visits I have made to the nowadays disparaged galleries filled with pictures and awed silence. Silence is itself now seen as an aid to the promotion of elitism as any public library will testify.

We live in a visual age. Yes, indeed: for one picture is worth many thousands of words, as our news-gathering media proclaim. So it was when, some years ago now, I opened my copy of *The Radio Times*, to see a double-page spread advertising a new programme about the Holocaust. On one page was the photograph of a man who had, with a companion, escaped from Auschwitz, whilst on the other was a photograph of Adolf Eichmann: only the captions had been reversed—Eichmann's name was in the place of the escapee, and vice versa. And so we were left to contemplate the wickedness and the heroism of the wrong people. But after all you could read just as much evil into the one face as the other!

A young girl, looking back from a train appears for seven seconds on a film of a transport bound for Auschwitz . . . so the story of Settela, a Sinti (Gypsy) girl, is announced on the back of my copy of Aad Wagenaar's account of his search for the identity of the girl in the photograph. Almost everyone had taken her to be Jewish, and as such she has become, and remains (rightly in my opinion), one of the most haunting, and lovely, images of the Holocaust, an iconic image indeed. Shifting the plane from tragic history to aesthetics, I want to record my conviction that there is more Art in this transient image, however arbitrarily obtained, than in all the conscious and unconscious ingenuity our proud British art-scene can provide. The portrait of Settela is on a par with many a portrait by Rembrandt.

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