

*The Concealment of Erotic Images in Art History:
An Inquiry Inspired by Cave Paintings at the Brazilian
Archaeological Site of Serra da Capivara*

*El ocultamiento de imágenes eróticas en la historia del arte:
una investigación inspirada en las pinturas rupestres del sitio arqueológico
brasileño de Serra da Capivara*

Artículo recibido el 2 de junio de 2023; devuelto para revisión el 14 de marzo de 2024; aceptado el 15 de abril de 2024, <https://doi.org/10.22201/iie.18703062e.2024.125.2865>.

Paulo Masella Instituto Federal do Paraná, Paraná, Brazil, paulomasella@gmail.com, <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6866-9577>

Lines of research Epistemology of communication; freedom of speech; ethics and politics.

Líneas de investigación Epistemología de la comunicación; libertad de expresión; ética y política.

Most relevant publications “A comunicação dos afetos no tango: função, improvisação, sexualidade e ambivalências na linguagem da dança”, *Intexto*, no. 32 (jan.-apr. 2015), <http://doi.org/10.19132/1807-8583201532.83-101>

Abstract Since Brazilian cave paintings with erotic content are barely published in art history books, questions arise about the reasons for their absence: Are these images being censored, or are they simply unknown? Are they being concealed on account of their erotic or even pornographic content? In what fields of knowledge is one authorized to see and talk about these images? Such inquiries led this research towards issues such as the relationship between artwork and sexuality, as well as between visual art and the technical image, in addition to considering the hypothesis of a post-colonialist approach in the case of their simply being unknown. Thus, the aim is to address the place of erotic pictures in the artistic context, as well as the very meaning of visual arts in a world full of technical images.

Keywords Philosophy of art; sexuality; art censorship; pornographic images; technical images; post colonialism; ontology of the image; epistemology of communication.

Resumen Dado que las pinturas rupestres brasileñas con un contenido erótico no se publican ampliamente en los libros de historia del arte, surgieron preguntas sobre las razones de su ocultamiento o posible censura: ¿se ocultan estas imágenes o simplemente se desconocen? ¿Se esconderían por su contenido erótico o incluso pornográfico? ¿Qué campos del saber están autorizados para ver y hablar de estas imágenes? Tales indagaciones llevaron esta investigación hacia cuestiones como la relación entre obra de arte y sexualidad, así como entre arte visual e imagen técnica, además de considerar la hipótesis de un abordaje poscolonialista en el caso de su desconocimiento. Se pretende así abordar el lugar de las imágenes eróticas en el contexto artístico, así como el significado mismo de las artes visuales en un mundo lleno de imágenes técnicas.

Palabras clave Filosofía del arte; sexualidad; censura de arte; imágenes pornográficas; imágenes técnicas; poscolonialismo; ontología de la imagen; epistemología de la comunicación.

PAULO MASELLA
INSTITUTO FEDERAL DO PARANÁ

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Epistemological constraints based on the observation of technical images

The invention of photography facilitated the technical reproduction of objects in the form of images. The consequences of this have become widely discussed, especially since the iconic text by Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility*.¹ So strictly speaking the images we are concerned with here are not the cave paintings as such—or categorized as any particular sort of visual art: they will be dealt with as technical images—ones that entail distinct forms of representation with different epistemological approaches. Likewise, in the wake of Benjamin's text, polemics about the effects of the mass media as regards democratization or social domination took new directions. This debate has widened even further with the advent of the internet and the possible shift from linear thinking

1. Benjamin's cited text can easily be found in several editions, e.g., Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), 19-55.

(based on writing) to a two-dimensional logic of surfaces in a world full of images.²

None of this is exactly what concerns us at this point. In agreement with Benjamin, we admit that the technical image—unlike woodcut, engraving, or lithography—gains autonomy from mechanical reproduction, just as aspects previously enshrined in the uniqueness of the artwork are profoundly altered. However, disregarding these differences, we will refer, as images, to both the original paintings and the ones we now have access to through technical reproducibility. It is thus important to stress that, despite such indistinction, what we are considering here are only the technical images to which we have access and, furthermore, whether their non-circulation in media such as printed and digital art books is linked to censorship or to “concealment”, aimed at restricting their availability to certain users.

After all, one will hardly have access to the landscape context of the Serra Capivara, in northeastern Brazil, to better interpret the cave paintings from the perspective of their geographical and cultural contexts. So, we are talking about reception; and the circuit to be interrupted by potential censors is found there because, even with the inevitable epistemological constraints in the interpretation of a work, its observation depends on free access to these images through several media.

Therefore, our research starts from the observation that even though they have been known to archaeologists since the 1970s, the erotic cave paintings located in Serra da Capivara are barely mentioned in works of art history or textbooks.³ On the other hand, references to cave images of an erotic nature have been frequent in scholarship from the interface between the areas of archaeology and anthropology.

2. See, for example, Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962), and especially Vilém Flusser, *Into the Universe of Technical Images* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011) among other works of this author.

3. It is worth mentioning that this article stems from the academic research of Carla Maciel that I had the opportunity to supervise. See Carla V. Maciel, “Imagens proibidas: a arte rupestre do Parque Nacional Serra da Capivara (PI),” Hoppen Tonial, Débora Mergen Lima Reis, *Anais da XII Contextos e Conceitos: Mostra de Produção Científica e Extensão*, 12 (Palmas: IFPR, 2022), 565-576, <https://ifpr.edu.br/palmas/about/menu-institucional/eventos/contextos-2/anais-do-evento/> (accessed March 2023).

In Brazil, the academic analysis of these images stems initially from the work of French-Brazilian archaeologist Niède Guidon who, together with other researchers,⁴ promoted the creation of the Parque Nacional da Serra da Capivara, covering an area of approximately 130,000 hectares designated by the Instituto do Patrimônio Histórico e Artístico Nacional [National Historical and Artistic Heritage Institute], and continues to gain some visibility due to articles by Brazilian scholars who have published on topics related to the Brazilian archeological sites.

Since we depend on technical images for our knowledge of paintings and other visual works, we face a double epistemological challenge as second-order observers. Thus, since the advent of photography, images have spread, but they are still subject to discourses that allow them to be seen only by certain people, under certain circumstances, and in certain places of exhibition. This can be noticed in Brazilian cave paintings with more erotic content that are not widely available in art history books, not to mention textbooks, suggesting censorship. Are these images being concealed, or are they just unknown? Are they ignored as a result of the geopolitics of knowledge? Are they being hidden because of their erotic or even pornographic content? What fields of scholarship are authorized to see and talk about these images?

To contemplate these issues, I address topics such as the relationship between artistic and erotic objects, as well as that between visual art and the technical image, in addition to considering the hypothesis of a post-colonial approach as the reason for the unawareness of these images outside Brazil. It should also be noted that, while archeology and cultural studies—each in its theoretical and epistemological domain—discuss the meaning of erotic images, art history still seems to disregard them. Thus, my aim is not only to make Brazilian cave paintings better known, to facilitate their interpretation by a wider audience, but also to discuss the place of erotic paintings in the artistic context, as well as the very meaning of visual arts in a world full of technical images.

The technical image implies the presence of an absence, which can cause us a certain epistemological awkwardness in dealing with objects of nature that are so alike and so different at the same time: an object informed by the idea

4. See Niède Guidon, "Peintures rupestres de Várzea Grande, Piauí, Brésil," *Éditions de l'École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales*, no. 3 (1975); and Anne-Marie Pessis and Gabriela Martin, "As Pinturas Rupestres da Tradição Nordeste na Região do Seridó, RN, no Contexto da Arte Rupestre Brasileira," *Clio Arqueológica* 35, no. 3 (2020): 18-59.

of authenticity and uniqueness, such as an artwork; and one as ordinary as a technical image. Being present in front of an artwork would mean being able to contemplate more accurately the details of its composition, its constitutive material, its dimensions, and even better to imagine the historical context of its production. In the case of cave paintings, the possibility of witnessing them *in loco* is even more significant, since, especially in the case of Serra Capivara, which is quite far from urban centers, we could hardly escape the impact of the surroundings, the ambience, allowing us to be impressed by its uniqueness. An image, on the other hand, produces a presence of the second or third order because it is mediated by third parties and by the mechanical apparatus of photography. The assumption of this reasoning is the belief that the ambivalence between the artwork and its image could be mitigated if the observer and the work could enjoy a mutual presence. However, such epistemological and ontological ambivalence is tangential to this research, since my inquiry is addressed to the possible moral and political reasons for the absence of these images, and not to their ontological nature.

My research is not intended to involve a systematic or quantitative survey of the literature to find out how much it offers or withholds erotic content, but seeks to understand the reasons for the concealment of these images. My inquiries about concealment or censorship of erotic images ultimately give us a pretext for discussing both the relationship between artwork and sexuality, and the meaning of the visual arts in the face of the ubiquity of the technical image.

The images we see—and don't see—in art history

Art history books seem generally to overlook rock art. They may mention the bison of Altamira, the bulls of Lascaux, as well as other images of rituals, where humans and anthropomorphic forms perform dance rites, kill animals in symbolic hunts, or carry out shamanic acts,⁵ but erotic representations are

5. See Laurie Schneider Adams, *A History of Western Art*, 5th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2011); Julian Bell, *Mirror of the World: A New World History of Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2007); Ernst Gombrich, *The Story of Art* (New York: Phaidon Press, 1951); Arnold Hauser, *Social History of Art, vol. 1: From Prehistoric Times to the Middle Ages* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999); H.W. Janson, *A Basic History of Art* (Hoboken, JC: Prentice Hall, 1971 revised and expanded by Anthony F. Janson), *History of Art*, vol. 1, 4th ed. (New York: Harry N.

not usually shown despite the many discovered in archaeological sites around the world in recent decades.⁶

The Brazilian cave paintings of Serra da Capivara form part of a broader context, called Tradição Nordeste [Northeastern Tradition], which includes the northeastern states of Piauí, Rio Grande do Norte, Bahia, Ceará, Paraíba, and Pernambuco, and even areas of the states of Minas Gerais, and Mato Grosso, and also entails certain stylistic features, such as the use of zoomorphic or anthropomorphic forms, different themes, and graphical representation.⁷

Admittedly, the erotic scenes in cave paintings in Brazil are of fairly recent discovery, and it is hard to say how many erotic images from other archaeological sites were unknown or deliberately hidden from art books. However, the fact is that classic art history books, written in the mid-twentieth century, by authors such as Ernst Gombrich, Arnold Hauser, and H.W. Janson, as well as earlier and more conceptual works that discuss the meaning of art such as *Principles of Art History* by Heinrich Wölfflin, or Erwin Panofsky's *Idea: A Concept in Art Theory*, do not emphasize or even contemplate erotic images from Greco-Roman antiquity discovered as long ago as the nineteenth century.⁸ Even if we disregard the re-editions of certain art history books that could have included these discoveries, we have more recent examples such as *Mirror of the World: A New History of Art* by art critic Julian Bell which was published in

Abrams, 1991); H.W. Janson and Dora Jane Janson, *The Story of Painting: from Cave Painting to Modern Times* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1977); and Grant Pooke and Diana Newall, *Art History: The Basics* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008).

6. See "Sexual Images in Prehistoric and Tribal Art", *Expression: Atelier Etno*, no. 15 (March, 2017), <https://www.atelier-etno.it/e-journal-expression/> (accessed June 6th); Joseph Ki-Zerbo, ed., *História geral da África, I: Metodologia e pré-história da África* (Brasília: UNESCO, 2010); Trond Lødøen and Gro Mandt, *The Rock Art of Norway* (Barnsley: Windgather Press, 2010); and Timothy Taylor, *The Prehistory of Sex: Four Million Years of Human Sexual Culture* (New York: Bantam Books, 1997).

7. See Gabriela Martin, "Casa Santa: um abrigo com pinturas rupestres do estilo Seridó, no Rio Grande do Norte," *Clio: Revista do Curso de Mestrado em História*, no. 5 (1982): 55-78; Gabriela Martin and Irma Asón, "A tradição nordeste na arte rupestre do Brasil," *Revista Clio: Série Arqueológica*, no. 14 (2000): 99-109; and Graça Proença, *História da Arte*, 18ª ed. (São Paulo: Ática Didáticos, 2021).

8. Heinrich Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History: The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2015); and Erwin Panofsky, *Idea: A Concept in Art Theory* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1968).

2007, but still does not mention either Brazilian rock art or any other that includes images of an allegedly erotic nature.⁹

The space of the erotic and its possible meanings

Regarding Brazilian cave images, before considering them an isolated case, we need to bear in mind that concealment, or even censorship of artworks, is not the prerogative of any time or place. Here again, we can resort to the words of Walter Benjamin about the tensions between cult value and exhibition value in which, in the first case, the works are only accessible to those initiated into magic or religion.¹⁰ At this point, the presence of the work of art, even if not seen, plays an important role in the power of seduction of those who hold authority over those who are content with the sign that is imposed on them.

In the case of mosaics, frescoes, works of architecture, as well as cave paintings, immobility is an impediment to their exhibition were it not for the possibility of their technical reproduction by photography. Therefore, in the age of technical reproducibility, the argument that cult value might govern the concealment of images would no longer hold. Nor can we say—as suggested by art history books about prehistoric records, visual representations, whether sculptures or paintings—that they necessarily have a character associated with magical, ritualistic, or religious practices. It seems to us that it is presumptuous to assume that the work of art must necessarily have this sacred and not profane character; elitist and non-trivial.¹¹

9. For instance, Proença's recent Brazilian textbook on art history introduces archaeological sites of the Northeast Tradition, but makes no mention of erotic imagery. See Graça Proença, *História da Arte* (São Paulo: Ática Didáticos, 2021).

10. For a better understanding of *cult value* and *exhibition value*, see Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility*, 19–55.

11. Cf. Patchen Barss, *The Erotic Engine: How Pornography has Powered Mass Communication, from Gutenberg to Google* (Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 2010); Hans Belting, *Art History after Modernism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); John Berger, *Ways of Seeing: Based on the BBC Television Series*; John R. Clarke, *Art in the Lives of Ordinary Romans: Visual Representation and Non-Elite Viewers in Italy, 100 B.C.–A.D. 315* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); John R. Clarke, *Looking at Lovemaking: Constructions of Sexuality in Roman Art, 100 B.C.–A.D. 250* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Arthur C. Danto, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997); R. Dale Guthrie, *The Nature of Paleolithic Art* (Chicago: The University of Chicago

Undoubtedly, there is a long philosophical tradition,¹² at least since Plato, that discusses not only the meaning of art but its place in the social milieu. This is not about advancing this aesthetic and epistemological debate, although it is up to art historians and professors to discuss the “ideological orientations” of the authors whose works circulate as references in art teaching. In this sense, it is intriguing to notice that authors of the Enlightenment and Marxist tradition carry the burden of a markedly elitist view of the artwork that has been progressively broken down under the influence of structuralism.¹³

Thus, based on this other theoretical record, we can state that the segregation of works of art follows a logic of inclusion or exclusion regarding what can be said and seen, and by whom. Foucault, in his archaeological method, never tired of exploring themes such as madness, prison, and sexuality from this spatial perspective. From this theoretical-methodological bias, the idea of an exhibition value is not necessarily conditioned by a capitalist mode of production, but it is enough to say that each time—and each place—has its way of organizing social practices: its places of exhibition and interdiction, its technologies of production of truths, its taxonomy and its syntax.¹⁴

Press, 2005); David Hockney and Martin Gayford, *A History of Pictures: from the Cave to the Computer Screen* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd, 2016); Catherine Johns, *Sex or Symbol: Erotic Images of Greece and Rome* (London: British Museum Publications Ltd, 1982); Susanne Kappeler, *The Pornography of Representation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986); and Timothy Taylor, *The Prehistory of Sex*.

12. See Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (London: Continuum, 2002); Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, *Estética: a lógica da arte e do poema* (Petrópolis-RJ: Vozes, 1993); Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*. vol. I. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988); and Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

13. For a striking example of this scathing critique of Marxist-biased elitism primarily associated with the theorists of the Frankfurt School (particularly Theodor Adorno), see Jesús Martín-Barbero, *Dos meios às mediações: comunicação, cultura, hegemonia* (Rio de Janeiro: Editora UFRJ, 2003). But, in fact, I believe that it is structuralism—as well as analytical philosophy and the philosophy of language—that offers a more forceful opposition to Marxism. Structuralism, and the theoretical lineages that follow it, make it possible to break with the teleological and/or metaphysical aspects contained both in the historical-dialectical method and in the philosophies grounded in consciousness that preceded it.

14. Eva C. Keuls, *The Reign of the Phallus: Sexual Politics in Ancient Athens* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) brings an approach to the erotic or even pornographic content of archaeological objects of Greek art, confirming Foucault’s point of view by showing that, although far more permissive and lascivious than the Judeo-Christian heritage, Greek culture had its own moral rules as well. Although not talking about art, Gale S. Rubin, “Thinking Sex:

However, before proceeding, we need a definition of what erotic art is. Foucault¹⁵ makes a detailed analysis of the concept of eroticism in Ancient Greece. Thus, although the term erotic does not explicitly appear in two Platonic dialogues dealing with love—*Phaedrus* and *The Symposium*—Foucault employs it when analyzing these two works. In *The Symposium* we read:

If someone decides to put himself at another's disposal because he thinks that this will make him better in wisdom or in any other part of virtue, we approve of his voluntary subjection: we consider it neither shameful nor servile. Both these principles—that is, both the principle governing the proper attitude toward the lover of young men and the principle governing the love of wisdom and of virtue in general—must be combined if a young man is to accept a lover in an honorable way. When an older lover and a young man come together and each obeys the principle appropriate to him [...] and when the lover is able to help the young man become wiser and better, and the young man is eager to be taught and improved by his lover—then, and only then, when these two principles coincide absolutely, is it ever honorable for a young man to accept a lover.¹⁶

Besides having a pedagogical aspect, Plato's passage above is exemplary of Foucault's argument concerning "the possible conversion—an ethically necessary and socially useful one—of the bond of love (doomed to disappear) into a relation of friendship, of *philia*",¹⁷ since it insists that the relationship between an older man (*erastes*) and his young beloved (*eromenos*) must be informed by something beyond mere desire.

Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality", in Carole Vance, ed., *Pleasure and Danger* (Abingdon: Routledge & Kegan, Paul, 1985), 267-319, brings forward an enlightening sample of these rules about sexuality and their political implications. See also John R. Clarke, *Art in the Lives of Ordinary Romans: Visual Representation and Non-Elite Viewers in Italy, 100 B.C.-A.D. 315* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); and Clarke, *Looking at Lovemaking: Kappeler, The Pornography of Representation*; Amy Richlin, ed., *Pornography and Representation in Greece and Rome* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

15. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1: *An Introduction* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978); and Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 2: *The Use of Pleasure* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990).

16. Plato, *Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1997), 468-469. The quoted passage is from the *Symposium*.

17. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 2: *The Use of Pleasure*, 201.

Such philosophical literature finds support in John Beazley's research on ancient Greek vases, followed by Kenneth Dover's interpretation, which establishes the possible rules of sexuality in Ancient Greece.¹⁸ These works certainly opened not only a flank of empirical investigation into sexuality in the field of human sciences but also made it possible to strengthen the relations between archeology and anthropology.¹⁹ In such an interface, we may observe a vast bibliography that deals with issues of gender, sex, and/or sexuality.²⁰ It can be said that, from the 1980s onwards, in the wake of post-structuralism and social constructivism, these issues have gained enormous repercussions in the academic world. What is intriguing, however, is that the impact of archaeological

18. See respectively John Beazley, *The Development of Attic Black-Figure* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986); and Kenneth James Dover, *Greek Homosexuality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978).

19. On this subject, Randall McGuire, *Archaeology as Political Action* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2008), 9, comments that "scholars have offered alternatives to current practices and achieved some success in transforming the discipline", but recalls that "less attention, however, has been given to issues of class within archaeology." That is, he understands the political relevance of these studies on gender and ethnicity in archeology and cultural anthropology, but, due to his Marxist orientation, he underlines the importance of a less fragmented view and reminds that, "Archaeology has traditionally been a middle-class practice that has served middle-class needs" and that "More and more, the discipline of archeology depends on a proletariat of teaching assistants, adjuncts, and field technicians whom universities and contract firms increasingly exploit." Thus, McGuire's demand can also be understood as an expression of concealment somehow.

20. See Douglass Bailey, *Prehistoric Figurines: Representation and Corporeality in the Neolithic* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005); Eva Cantarella, *Bisexuality in the Ancient World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002); John R. Clarke, *Art in the Lives of Ordinary Romans: Visual Representation and Non-Elite Viewers in Italy, 100 B.C.–A.D. 315* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); John R. Clarke, *Looking at Lovemaking: Constructions of Sexuality in Roman Art, 100 B.C.–A.D. 250* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Jones Dover, *Greek Homosexuality*; Roberta Gilchrist, *Gender and Archaeology: Contesting the Past* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001); Guthrie, *The Nature of Paleolithic Art*; Catherine Johns, *Sex or Symbol*; Keuls, *The Reign of the Phallus*; Ann Olga Koloski-Ostrow and Claire L. Lyons, eds., *Naked Truths: Women, Sexuality & Gender in Classical Art & Archaeology* (London & New York: Routledge, 2000); Trond Lødøen and Gro Mandt, *The Rock Art of Norway* (Barnsley: Windgather Press, 2010); Amy Richlin, ed., *Pornography and Representation in Greece and Rome* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); Robert A. Schmidt and Barbara L. Voss, eds., *Archaeologies of Sexuality* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000); Tracy L. Sweely, ed., *Manifesting Power: Gender and the Interpretation of Power in Archaeology* (London & New York: Routledge, 1999); and Taylor, *The Prehistory of Sex*.

discoveries, especially from the mid-twentieth century onwards, has not significantly affected the literature in the field of arts. One plausible hypothesis among others is that the academic environment itself not only has fragmented into new areas (or subareas) but also blurred the boundaries between them.²¹ However, as just mentioned, in the interface with archeology, it is basically cultural studies that seem to make headway in these discussions.

It is not by chance that Foucault uses the reference to archeology in relation to his method. It is a matter of seeing both hidden and sedimented layers that accumulate through historical movement. Therefore, a central aspect of Foucault's history of sexuality consists of the historical transposition that culture carries out from an *ars erotica* to a *scientia sexualis*. "In the erotic art, truth is drawn from pleasure itself, understood as practice and accumulated as experience", not depending on an absolute law or having a criterion of utility, but a knowledge "that must remain secret, not because of an element of infamy that might attach to its object, but because of the need to hold it in the greatest reserve, since, according to tradition, it would lose its effectiveness and its virtue by being divulged".²² Progressively, in the course of the modern age, a *scientia sexualis* then emerges. What is now sought is to produce a regime of truth about sex, dictating the procedures that order sexual practices according to a rigorous and scientific form of power-knowledge. Foucault does not think of censorship as repression, as a negative mechanism of exclusion that comes from the top down, but in its positivity which consists of the detailed exposure of sex, of a sex approved by population control devices. Everything that escapes this will be relegated to medical classification, or to remain hidden.

Everything would be easier if the Foucauldian approach were the only parameter for the epistemological analysis of sexuality and erotic images. The fact is that the metaphysical legacy introduced by Plato left both indelible

21. For a broader understanding of the relationship between archeology and other sciences, as well as its possible boundaries, we suggest the following: Philip G. Chase, *The Emergence of Culture: The Evolution of a Uniquely Human Way of Life* (New York: Springer, 2006), 169, who stresses the "interest in the way humans create the cultural coding that governs our behavior" and concludes that "it is necessary that Paleolithic archeology address the issue of culture" since culture is a more relevant adaptation process for the human species than for others; while Ian Hodder, *Archaeological Theory Today* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001) provides a broad panel of the diversity of contemporary archaeological theory, ranging from those that defend a more cultural approach to others closer to the natural sciences.

22. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, 57.

and ambiguous marks on the conception of the erotic and that of art, since he sought not to confuse sexual desire with love. In Plato's *Symposium*, we find an extremely metaphysical definition of love—and this is one that matters, since it is Socrates himself (in words attributed to Diotima) and not one of the other guests of Agathon, the host of the *Symposium*, who presents it—in which the whole process of searching for its essence implies the gradual abandonment of material aspects, subject to corruption, contained above all in the most carnal desires. It is an almost didactic application of his Theory of Forms in which the search for the intelligibility of ideas (*eidos*) is associated with the mimetic detachment of a world of appearances perceived by the senses.²³

Hence, an abyss opens up—which will deepen much more with Christian theology and which modern philosophy will not tire of trying to repair with the idea of representation—between a world of appearances (sensible) and essences (intelligible), or, between visibility and visibility.²⁴ Thus, much as art history books tend to aver in their introductions that the concept of art is something historically relative, deep down, in the choice of their images, they endorse the solemn and auratic character of works of art and artists, keeping a distance from the vulgarity of what fails to meet the canons of each time. As a consequence, fine arts—above all, painting and sculpture, which present not only an enormous visibility, but also a materiality that allows them to be often displaced from their original contexts of production, mostly inhabiting museums—seem to suffer from an exaggeratedly reverential attitude that favors their cult value and their consequent concealment as a necessary reverse side of this theological and metaphysical intention.

In this assumption, artistic genius appears as a consequence first of art patronage, then of the art market. It is no coincidence that works from earlier times always seem to be covered by this facade of the sacred and magic, as in the case of cave paintings.²⁵ Thus, if there has been a close relationship between

23. The Socratic understanding of love is found in *Symposium*, in Plato, *Complete Works*, ed. Cooper, 457-505. For a better understanding of the *Theory of Forms*, see John Cooper's introduction to the same book.

24. An epistemological distinction is often made between visibility and visibility. Visibility would be associated more with the mere sensorial perception of an object, while visibility would assume its intelligibility from a given historical and geographic context, and therefore from a theoretical framework. However, it would be beyond the scope of this article to delve further into this distinction.

25. See Schneider Adams, *A History of Western Art*; Bell, *Mirror of the World*; Donna L. Gil-

patronage and artistic production since antiquity, which, from impressionism onwards, began to obey the logic of a capitalist market surrounded by dealers and art critics, it is understood that an object of artistic appreciation in prehistoric times must also be necessarily surrounded by an equivalent artistic aura that is attributed to a basis in magical rituals and religion.

However, there are different approaches. The zoologist R. Dale Guthrie provides us with important insights into many Paleolithic images (e.g. pin-striped horses and polka-dotted reindeer) that tend to go unnoticed due to the habit of not questioning apparent truisms that are rather the result of the repetition of a canonical approach. Using the forensic technique, Guthrie finds that “many Paleolithic works do not seem to bear any obvious imprint of ritual and magic but, rather, express more casual and earthy themes;” and that “all ages and both sexes were making art, not just senior male shamans”,²⁶ thus deconstructing the theological bias that usually contaminates classic art history books that tend to value only those visual signs legitimized by artistic genius.²⁷ Corroborating our hypothesis of the concealment of images, Guthrie also states that: “There are many unskilled Paleolithic drawings that are rarely reproduced in art books”.²⁸

Drawing on Guthrie’s controversial considerations, science journalist Patchen Barss goes further by showing how pornography is the “driving force of communication” from cave painting to the internet era.²⁹ Finally, David Hockney and Martin Gayford propose a history of images rather than a history of art, subverting the usual categories of painting, art, photography, and

lette, Mavis Greer, Michele Helene Hayward and William Breen Murray, eds., *Rock Art and Sacred Landscapes* (New York: Springer Science+Business Media, 2014); Gombrich, *The Story of Art*; Hauser, *Social History of Art*, vol. 1; Janson and Janson, *A Basic History of Art*; Janson, *History of Art*; Janson and Janson, *The Story of Painting*; George Nash and Christopher Chip-pindale, eds., *European Landscapes of Rock-Art* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002) and Graça Proença, *História da Arte*. 18th ed. (São Paulo: Ática Didáticos, 2021).

26. Guthrie, *The Nature of Paleolithic Art*, ix.

27. Although this is not exactly our object of investigation now, we cannot fail to mention the complex relationship between the original and the forgery, respectively associated with the artistic quality of the authentic and the farce of the copy. An exemplary analysis is highlighted in Orson Welles’ film “F for fake.” Still, in another ontological record, one could put on the agenda the proposition of the Dadaists to question the concept of art via the displacement of objects from their contexts, especially in Marcel Duchamp.

28. Guthrie, *The Nature of Paleolithic Art*, IX.

29. Barss, *The Erotic Engine*.

film by an approach that understands them as different representations of the three-dimensional world on surfaces.³⁰ This kind of epistemological turn in studies on the relationship between image and art is supported by authors such as Hans Belting and Arthur Danto, who already denounced the end of art history in the 1990s,³¹ but, as we have already pointed out, it was announced much earlier by authors such as Walter Benjamin and Vilém Flusser. Anyway, what matters is to emphasize the possibilities of deconstruction of this overwhelming theological and metaphysical character that surrounds the artist and his work by an aura in a context in which art has lost its mimetic function and the artist his technical skill.

Concealment or Censorship?

Reports of censorship against culture or freedom of expression, in general, are certainly incalculable throughout history; likewise, throughout art history, erotic works have been censored in different societies, for different reasons, and in different contexts.³² A well-known example is *Lunch on the Grass* [*Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*], by Édouard Manet: “The public and the critics were outraged by the ‘absurdity’ of the theme (a naked woman among two dressed gentlemen) and the pictorial composition without chiaroscuro, nor relief, or flat color areas”.³³ While it was reasonable to paint nude muses, and goddesses, an ordinary woman looking at the observer would be a scandal. A painter who carried out such a “perversion” would only deserve mockery and exposure at the *Salon des Refusés*.

30. David Hockney and Martin Gayford, *A History of Pictures: from the Cave to the Computer Screen* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd, 2016).

31. Cf. Belting, *Art History after Modernism*, and Danto, *After the End of Art*.

32. See Giulio Carlo Argan, *Arte Moderna: Do Iluminismo aos Movimentos Contemporâneos* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1992); Barss, *The Erotic Engine*; Belting, *Art History after Modernism*; Jonathan Green and Nicholas Karolides, *The Encyclopedia of Censorship* (New York: Facts on File, 2005); Kappeler, *The Pornography of Representation*; Richlin, ed., *Pornography and Representation in Greece and Rome*; Gale S. Rubin, “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality”, in Carole Vance, ed., *Pleasure and Danger* (Abingdon: Routledge and Kegan, Paul, 1985), 267-319; Lisa Z. Sigel, ed., *International Exposure: Perspectives on Modern European Pornography, 1800-2000* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2005); Taylor, *The Prehistory of Sex*; and Jeffrey Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society: The Regulation of Sexuality since 1800* (London and New York: Routledge, 2018).

33. Carlo Argan, *Arte Moderna*, 94 (the translation is mine).

Still regarding visual arts, we could also mention Édouard Manet's painting *Olympia*; *September Morn* [*Matinée de Septembre*] by Paul Chabas; and the statue of the Venus de Milo, a source of controversy on several circumstances. One of the most famous cases, however, was the censorship in Nazi Germany which condemned modern art as degenerate, "cosmopolitan" (i.e. Jewish), or Bolshevik. Such works were confiscated without reimbursement, and removed from museums to be destroyed, although many are known to have gone to auction or simply ended up in the homes of Nazi leaders. Among the authors representing this "decadent art" were Picasso, Gauguin, Van Gogh, Kandinsky, Klee, Braque, Chagall and Munch. However, more recent requests for censorship also come from supposedly progressive flanks, as in the case of the feminist group "Women against Pornography" which, back in the 1980s, sought to show that pornography incited rape by objectifying women, contesting the idea that it was sexually liberating.³⁴

Following the traces of a possible archeology of censorship—at least in Western culture—it is quite plausible to accept that, from Rome, passing through the Church in the Middle Ages to the consolidation of the modern State, interdictions have an "ideological" rather than a "moral" motivation. From the Middle Ages to the Modern, control devices moved from the scope of religious power to the legal sphere, but censorship would be much more linked to the effects of political instability that a speech could cause than the speech itself.³⁵

The wider moral censorship that was to come as a product of the 18th and 19th centuries abandoned any connection with a breach of the peace but instead saw its purpose as simply to maintain control of "dirty books" (and, later, films, television and other media)—ushering in the modern concept of "obscene publications." [...] Here one finds the private moralists, each setting him or herself up as a regulator of mass behavior, both by pressuring the government and by running a personal and often vociferously supported campaign. This new style of censorship, designed to protect not the power of those at the top, but the alleged weakness of those at the bottom, was the creation of a rapidly changing society, a response by the emergent (and still insecure) middle class to the new, mass literacy of the era.³⁶

34. For these and other examples, see Green and Karolides, *The Encyclopedia of Censorship* and Richlin, *Pornography and Representation in Greece and Rome*.

35. See introduction of Green and Karolides, *The Encyclopedia of Censorship* (New York: Facts on File, 2005) for a better comprehension of this matter.

36. Green and Karolides, *The Encyclopedia of Censorship*, XIX.

Thus, we can assume that this systematic moral censorship is as much an effect of bourgeois culture as of a progressive circulation of technical images that will allow an overabundance of visual stimuli and a proportional increase in networked control devices. What Foucault called the positivity of discourse and biopolitics fit perfectly with this hypothesis, especially given the capillarity that the media have, emphasizing both the idea of a network and control over bodies. Censoring then becomes a watchword that can be uttered by all and, paradoxically, supported by a discourse of affirmation of freedom. It's as if we've gone from the slogan "It is forbidden to prohibit" to "I am free, therefore I can censor".

A few examples can be mentioned from the recent Brazilian political context.³⁷ In September 2017, the exhibition *Queermuseu: Cartografias da Diferença na Arte Brasileira* [Queer museum: Cartographies of Difference in Brazilian Art] was canceled by the sponsoring group itself [Santander Cultural], in the city of Porto Alegre, fearing the negative repercussions that had been propagated by social networks, especially by the Movimento Brasil Livre, strongly conservative. The exhibition was accused of being an apology for pedophilia, zoophilia, and religious blasphemy. Weeks later, the same exhibition was vetoed by the then mayor of Rio de Janeiro, Marcelo Crivella, bishop of the Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus [Universal Church of the Kingdom of God].³⁸ Only in 2018, could the exhibition be seen at Escola de Artes Visuais (EAV)

37. The last ten years have seen the growth of ultra-conservatism in Brazil, culminating in the election of a far-right politician, Jair Bolsonaro, to the presidency (2019-2022). In addition to the support of armed groups, landlords, the military, and a business sector eager for a neo-liberal economy, this government was strongly supported by fundamentalist religious groups with an extremely conservative agenda. Bolsonaro's campaign slogan was "Brazil above all, God above everyone". Not much different from what happened in the US in the election of Donald Trump, the use of social networks by the Brazilian far-right has been one of the most effective instruments for spreading fake news and undermining the democratic rule of law. What matters here is to show the linking of the far-right in Brazil with a moral agenda with a strong emphasis on censorship of sexuality-sensitive issues.

38. The Universal Church of the Kingdom of God [UCKG] was founded by Marcelo Crivella's uncle, Bishop Edir Macedo, and would be present in more than one hundred countries. The UCKG has been the target of constant allegations of corruption, money laundering and charlatanism, and supported Jair Bolsonaro for president in 2018. See Matheus Magenta, "Provas 'contundentes' apontam lavagem de dinheiro da Universal em Angola, dizem investigadores", <https://www.bbc.com/portuguese/internacional-57381793> (consulted April, 2023). For a better understanding of the relationship between religion, politics and fake news promoted by so-called evangelical churches in Brazil, see Julia Braun, "Eleições 2022: fake news sobre perse-

do Parque Lage, at Rio de Janeiro, through crowdfunding, even so with the recommendation by the Ministério Público (MP)³⁹ that children under fourteen should be accompanied by their parents or guardians.⁴⁰ In 2019, the same then-mayor of Rio de Janeiro provoked another enormous controversy when he ordered “the removal of the copies of [Jim] Cheung’s book from the Rio Biennial, for containing the image of a kiss between two male characters”, suggesting that, at least the comic books should “be packed in black plastic, sealed, and with a warning of the contents”.⁴¹

In both cases mentioned above, the irony is that such images with erotic content ended up spreading through all media (including the mainstream ones), significantly expanding their visibility when seen “outside the places” of intended destination: the museum; the biennial, etc. Such episodes raise—or revive—not only the debate about the function and place of the work of art, but its relationship with technical images which, by their nature, are ordinary. Thus, whether one likes Benjamin’s analysis of the nature of the artistic object or not, the question posed by him about the technical reproducibility of the image does not cease to be relevant.

Once again, it is worth reiterating that this research is not aimed at providing a systematic or quantitative survey of the literature on art in the sense of knowing to what extent it offers or withholds erotic content. However, as a first step, we can note that although a bibliography addressing issues related to sex, sexuality, gender, and eroticism does exist, it does not form a sufficiently expressive corpus to justify or legitimize its entry into the field of the arts with the same “naturalness” with which images of religious, military, bourgeois or noble character appear in art history books and textbooks. What we observe are efforts aimed at areas of specific interest, above all in the field of cultural studies, which emphasize aspects of prehistoric art that, in turn, approach or touch on topics of a supposedly erotic nature. However, even in these cases,

guição a evangélicos chegam a milhões via filhos e aliados de Bolsonaro”, <https://www.bbc.com/portuguese/brasil-62985337> (consulted April, 2023).

39. Equivalent to the US attorney general’s office.

40. Júlia Dias Carneiro, “Queermuseu, a exposição mais debatida e menos vista dos últimos tempos, reabre no Rio”, <https://www.bbc.com/portuguese/brasil-45191250> (consulted January, 2023).

41. Nathalia Passarinho, “Deveria contratar prefeito do Rio para promover meu próximo livro”, diz ilustrador de HQ censurada por Crivella”, <https://www.bbc.com/portuguese/brasil-49650286> (consulted January, 2023).

Brazilian cave images remain absent, which leads us to our questions: Are these images being hidden or are they simply unknown? Are they being ignored by the geopolitics of knowledge? Or are they being concealed due to their erotic or even pornographic content?

What separates the sacred, the erotic, and the pornographic?

In the history of art, a sacred, ritualistic, and solemn character is usually attributed to prehistoric images in which the erotic content tends to be suppressed, avoiding any “immoral” interpretation. However, Timothy Taylor explores sexuality without this modesty by approaching themes such as bestiality, transsexuality, and sadomasochism, and defends the thesis that our ancestors engaged in the search for contraceptive techniques, denoting a choice in separating sex for procreation and sex for pleasure.⁴²

An equally shameless view is provided by the cave paintings at the Serra da Capivara archaeological site. Michel Justamand says the following about the sexual character of the rock art of Serra da Capivara: “sexuality, in all its variants, was not repressed or hidden”;⁴³ “Sex scenes between couples are common, but there are scenes with three anthropomorphs and even groups. Also common are scenes with representations of zoophilia and pedophilia”;⁴⁴ and he also suggests that there are scenes of “male anal penetration”.⁴⁵

Gabriela Martin says something similar when referring to paintings from the Seridó region, in Rio Grande do Norte, Brazil.⁴⁶

42. See Taylor, *The Prehistory of Sex*.

43. Michel Justamand, Gabriel Frechiani de Oliveira, Antoniel Gomes Filho and Vanessa da Silva Belarmino, “Relações sexuais entre pessoas de mesmo sexo nas pinturas rupestres no Parque Nacional Serra da Capivara–PI,” *Revista Noctua – Arqueologia e Patrimônio* 2, no. 4 (2019): 23 (the translation is mine), <https://doi.org/10.26892/noctua.v2i4p13-26>.

44. Michel Justamand and Gabriel Frechiani de Oliveira, “Os falos nas pinturas rupestres do Parque Nacional Serra da Capivara/PNSC – PI/Brasil,” *Brazilian Journal of Development* 7, no. 5 (2021): 50587 (the translation is mine), <https://doi.org/10.34117/bjdv7n5-452>

45. Justamand, Frechiani de Oliveira, Gomes Filho and Da Silva Belarmino, “Relações sexuais entre pessoas de mesmo sexo”.

46. Although not located at Serra da Capivara, the Seridó region, in Rio Grande do Norte, Brazil, is part of the so-called “Northeast Tradition” which designates the set of archaeological works discovered in this region of Brazil.



1. *Toca do Caldeirão dos Rodrigues*. Breastfeeding Penetration Scene. Serra da Capivara National Park-PI. Image taken from Justamand, Frechiani de Oliveira, Gomes Filho and Da Silva Belarmino, “Relações sexuais entre pessoas de mesmo sexo” (*vid infra* n. 43), 18.
@Photo: Michel Justamand.

In studies on prehistoric cave painting, any topic with erotic content has generally been designated as a rite of sexual initiation. However, in Seridó’s drawings, sex is represented with a simplicity that apparently offers nothing of ritual: a male figure, for example, lying on the ground, rests his head on his left arm and masturbates in the shade of a tree; another, with an enormous member, simply holds it with both hands and proudly displays it.⁴⁷

In the figures above, although there may be doubts as to the exact correspondence between the captions and the images, the question remains about their absence in art history books and even in the English-language archeology or cultural anthropology literature. Even not knowing what the artist wanted to

47. Gabriela Martin, “Amor, violência e solidariedade no testemunho da arte rupestre brasileira,” *Revista Clio*, Série arqueológica, no. 6 (1984): 28 (the translation is mine).



2. *Toca do Caldeirão dos Rodrigues*. Scene of the representation of two men with an animal, with the possible penetration of an animal by a drawing of a man, and the penetration, apparently, of two male figures. It also shows that a male representation holds the phallus of another. Serra da Capivara National Park – PI. Image taken of Justamand, Frechiani de Oliveira, Gomes Filho and Da Silva Belarmino, “Relações sexuais entre pessoas de mesmo sexo” (*vid infra* n. 43), 18. @ Photo: Michel Justamand,

represent when the painting was produced, today, looking at it clearly reminds us of the sexual act. Evidently, it is not up to us to infer that what the image depicts is really sexual intercourse.

Pero hay que confirmarlo, nor that homosexuality was common practice, not least because the category “homosexual” seems to us to be a fairly modern “invention”. However, there seems to be evidence that such prehistoric images do not necessarily have a ritualistic connotation nor are they circumscribed to the space of the sacred.⁴⁸

48. The philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Ground of the Image* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), assigns a distinct meaning to *sacred*. He proposes an ambivalence inherent to the image which would always be sacred, not in the religious sense, but as the “distinct”, that which is separate, at a distance, not maintaining any form of bond with the other objects other than a paradoxical one. He wonders whether precisely such a “distinctive trait” would not be

Therefore, what should be highlighted is that the images need to be available so that archaeologists, anthropologists, and, above all, art critics, can make their opinions known, since their very concealment is already an index of exclusivity, that is, of confinement to a certain space of knowledge. Returning to Foucault, when referring to the act of censorship, what is not considered “normal” for a given period in force is confined to the “right places”. “If it was truly necessary to make room for illegitimate sexualities, it was reasoned, let them take their infernal mischief elsewhere: to a place where they could be re-integrated, if not in the circuits of production, at least in those of profit”.⁴⁹ In this quote, Foucault is referring to brothels and mental hospitals, but the same may apply to artworks and images in general. In fact, cave paintings are relatively out of the art market, insofar as they cannot be commercialized or inhabit a museum—unless this heritage is destroyed: a hypothesis that, after all, cannot be discarded. However, as a technical image they can obviously enjoy wide circulation and need not remain limited to a select number of people who have the knowledge and means to go and see them *in loco*.

Thus, the reasons for this restriction on the circulation of images remain in doubt, which leads us to the hypothesis that they are being hidden due to their erotic or even pornographic content, especially if we think that books of art history—not to mention, obviously, textbooks—are widely associated with teaching the arts in schools. In fact, the issue seems to be less about hiding or exhibiting eroticism and sexuality, but about knowing the places they should occupy, and the devices that should control them.

Perhaps it could be argued that images should be followed by captions explaining their historical context, in order for them to be considered artistic.⁵⁰ However, censorship has been such that perhaps not even the (artistic) aura can save them. Possibly this is yet another warning to rethink the relationship between the places of the visual arts in the face of the triviality afforded

a matter of art, which leads us to rethink the relationship between technical images and the visual arts. On the other hand, in another context, Berger, in *Ways of Seeing*, which dates from 1972, brings a narrative that mixes visual art with technical images, including those in motion, leading us to think about the role of the image nowadays.

49. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1: *An Introduction*, 4.

50. The question can be put in another similar way. Of the work of art as part of a frame, of a narrative that begins with Giorgio Vasari and ends—to start again with another frame—in the 20th century with the “ready-made” or, later, with pop art, Cf. Belting, *Art History after Modernism*, and Danto, *After the End of Art*.



3. *Boqueirão da Pedra Furada*. Scene of penetration/sexual intercourse between two anthropomorphs, probably representations of two men. Serra da Capivara National Park – PI. “Relações sexuais entre pessoas de mesmo sexo” (vid. supra n. 43), 17. @ Photo: Michel Justamand.

by technical images, insofar as artwork no longer seems to have this privileged space for poetic license. We should not, however, assume that censorship necessarily comes from the state apparatuses, that is, from the top down. As already mentioned, censorship today comes not only from all flanks and social strata that claim the right to act as judges but also from the current dilemmas of the field of art itself. Art history has been in the crossfire in the face of constant

accusations arising from identity groups such as gender, race, and ethnicity. Thus, it cannot be denied that, in seeking to be politically correct, art itself commits self-censorship. Identity groups shout for historical revisionism just as far-right groups yell for censorship of works that deal with gender and race. Over the last few decades, complaints seem to come from all sides. Last but not least, being dependent on sponsorship, art is far from free to express itself.

The hypothesis of concealment

Roughly speaking, since the US, Canada, and Europe are the main centers of knowledge production in the West, their research tends to be concentrated in their territories. Admittedly, the scholarly books of archeology and cultural anthropology perused were only a small sample; nevertheless not a single mention was found of the images of Serra da Capivara. In the case of classic art history books, these images certainly do not exist, as they were written in a period prior to the discoveries. But even in their new editions, no references to such images were found.

Language plays a fundamental role in the geopolitics of knowledge; only a tiny part of the literature in domains such as archaeology, cultural anthropology, and the arts is produced in Portuguese. Furthermore, very few articles by Brazilian authors in these areas have been published in English. Some Brazilian educational institutions also experience difficulty for having access to academic journal platforms since they lack agreements and covenants, resulting in prejudice to article submission. Last but not least, there is little incentive for research which, in Brazil, is basically restricted to the most prestigious public—or a few private—universities, and to some more profitable areas of knowledge.

In addition to the post-colonial issues addressed above, it is also clear that moral bias is an obstacle to the circulation of these images in the artistic context, especially when we consider it in its interface with the school environment. Archeology and cultural anthropology are part of higher education, reserved for “adults”, while the arts, which are part of the elementary school curriculum in Brazil, may have their content more subject to surveillance and control—both public and private—hiding or even censoring images of erotic content. As we saw above, even in the exclusive space of museums, images that can contain a hint of sexuality are subject to pass through the scrutiny of

political and religious authorities before being exhibited in view of the moralistic wave that Brazil has been going through.

This is a pointless ban, because, especially since the widespread use of the internet, it has not been possible to control what young people and children see. Furthermore, the claim that art—if there is still an exclusive field or domain for this concept—can lead to an “early sexualization” of children is at the very least paradoxical given that the cultural industry already does this albeit in a disguised way. Likewise, it hardly needs saying that access to pornographic sites on the Internet is easily achieved in view of the very few obstacles to doing so. Thus, when we step away from hypocrisy, we can see that Patchen Barss’ considerations⁵¹ are by no means exaggerated and that the seriousness or even the modesty with which certain art history books describe their images may not necessarily match their historical context. On the other hand, it cannot be denied that works open to an erotic, pornographic or immoral interpretation have their space, especially in contemporary times. Perhaps the most obvious example are Mapplethorpe’s “artistic nude” photos which, mainly because they were publicly financed, caused a considerable stir at the time.⁵²

However, once again we see that these works end up fitting into the space (taxonomy and syntax) of an artistic discourse that legitimizes them; it would, therefore, be worth insisting on the question of the place of images in the artistic context. Despite Dadaism and pop art, art continues to claim its aura. Thus perhaps, as proposed by Hockney and Gayford, considering that technical images allow us to get rid of that aura due to the possibility of infinite reproducibility,⁵³ it makes more sense to talk about a history of images rather than thinking of museums as the place of worship of the visual arts.⁵⁴ Also, following this reasoning, we have to think to what extent it is necessary to produce an art history for those images that are on the margins of history itself.

David Carrier says “It is surprising that there is not, as yet, an adequate world art history”, not even a fragmented one, and that “Although there are excellent surveys of long periods of individual traditions, there is no full account

51. Barss, *The Erotic Engine*.

52. See Schneider Adams, *A History of Western Art*; and Belting, *Art History after Modernism*.

53. Hockney and Gayford, *A History of Pictures*.

54. Cf. Danto, *After the End of Art*; and Belting, *Art History after Modernism*.

of the interrelationships of visual cultures”, just as there is “literature discussing imperialism, but not yet any comprehensive discussion of its effects on visual art.”⁵⁵ David Carrier also states that fascinating studies were made using Marxist, Foucauldian, and semiotic references, employing new interpretative strategies that changed the field of art, but always from European canons such that “Art from outside Europe remains marginalized.” He also observes that “Art writers concerned with China, India, or Islam frequently deal with European painting and sculpture. But only rarely do scholars of Western art discuss painting or sculpture from outside Europe.”⁵⁶ This gaze would still be too focused on a “Christian European tradition”, concluding that “In art history, as in ethics, atheism can be liberating.”⁵⁷ Perhaps, even for this reason, one can agree with the argument that authors such as Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, and Homi Bhabha, who are references in postcolonial studies, might still be considered Eurocentric.⁵⁸

Finally, books with a more didactic profile⁵⁹ may eventually expand their scope by including something from prehistory, a broader range of theoretical approaches, or even non-European art, but always avoiding mention of erotic images. Nonetheless, we may also consider that more contemporary ideas and methods with diverse theoretical approaches, such as Marxist, post-structuralist, psychoanalytic, semiotic, or even decolonial, have sought to overcome the monolithic view of classic books, including escaping the pattern of an art history centered on the European canon.⁶⁰

55. Carrier, *A World Art History and its Objects*, XXIII.

56. Carrier, *A World Art History and its Objects*, XXIV.

57. Carrier, *A World Art History and its Objects*, XXIV.

58. Cf. Bart Moore-Gilbert, *Postcolonial Theory: Contexts, Practices, Politics* (New York: Verso, 1997); Bart Moore-Gilbert, Gareth Stanton and Willy Maley, eds., *Postcolonial Criticism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013); Robert J.C. Young, *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West*, 2nd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2004); Edward W. Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (London: Penguin Classics, 2003).

59. See Schneider Adams, *A History of Western Art*; Janson and Janson, *A Basic History of Art* and Pooke; and Newall, *Art History: The Basics*; and Graça Proença, *História da Arte* (São Paulo: Ática Didáticos, 2021).

60. Cf. Belting, *Art History after Modernism*; Danto, *After the End of Art*; James Elkins, ed., *Is Art History Global?* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006); “Sexual Images in Prehistoric and Tribal Art”, *Expression: Atelier Etno, Italy*, no. 15 (March, 2017), <https://www.atelier-etno.it/e-journal-expression/> (consulted January, 2023); Eric Fernie, *Art History and its Methods* (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1995); Andrew Hemingway, ed., *Marxism and the History*

Final observations

Initially, we asked ourselves some questions that we believe we have at least partially answered. Yes, indeed, Brazilian cave paintings remain unknown both in art history books and in the literature on archeology and even anthropology at a global level. We agree that this concealment exists largely due to the universality of the English language in the academic sphere, since the few articles on Brazilian cave paintings are written in Portuguese. Nor can there be any denying that knowledge-producing centers guide objects, methodologies and theories, so that even when they flirt with a post-colonial discourse, they still suffer from accusations of Eurocentrism.

We also agree that there is censorship of the visual arts; however, we believe that the Brazilian cave paintings are rather a case of concealment. Regarding censorship, it would be more prudent to conclude that the artistic field seeks to keep its works in a space protected from possible attacks by “public opinion”—such as museums and art galleries—that guarantees them autonomy and discursive immunity. However, as we have seen, censorship, which previously seemed to come more from an ideological control of the spaces where power is exercised—be it from the Church or the State—for the maintenance of order and security, acquires with bourgeois culture a power of dissemination throughout society in which everyone comes to control what can be said and seen. Nonetheless, for this phenomenon to be operationalized there must be such a spread of texts and images that would not be possible without reproduction techniques and the advance of the means of communication.

Many religious images in the Catholic tradition can be interpreted as loaded with extreme sensuality, but both their sacred and artistic context have always prevented them from being the object of censorship other than by those who financed them. On the other hand, especially in times of social media, everyone feels entitled to accuse this or that work of art of blasphemy, heresy, or immorality. And, in these cases, the space of the artistic aura intervenes and seeks to save—when possible—the integrity of the work from the eyes of

of Art: From William Morris to the New Left (London: Pluto Press, 2006); Randall H. McGuire, *Archaeology as Political Action* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2008); Michael Shanks and Christopher Tilley, *Social Theory and Archaeology* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1988); Sam Smiles and Stephanie Moser, eds., *Envisioning the Past: Archaeology and the Image* (New Jersey: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2005).

“barbarians and unschooled people”. And although these screams and shouts come mostly from conservative flanks, it cannot be said that progressives do not equally defend censorship when it suits them.

The metaphysical tradition in philosophy also favors such ontology of art associated with the idea of the unique and irreproducible, if not magical and divine. This auratic character of the artwork certainly conflicts with the status of reproducibility of the technical image, making us think about the tensions between these two epistemological paradigms and about the ontological status of these forms of representation.

In fact, the Brazilian cave paintings serve as an inspiration and pretext for discussing the place of erotic images in the artistic context and the very meaning of art in a world full of technical images. We can understand the constraints of art history books in the choice and analysis of their objects as a result of their time and place, but it is doubtful that the post-colonial discourse can cure or even repair the “damage” and “injustice” resulting from colonialist policies. Could it be otherwise? What could a post-colonialist theory, even if produced by the colonized, propose differently in terms of art history if the very concepts of history and art do not belong to them? Furthermore, since when can it be said that colonialist policies have ceased?

Although built on class struggle, it would certainly be equally violent to destroy this “beautiful Western artistic heritage” in the name of historical revisionism. It would also be a great risk or even an injustice to disregard all the theoretical formulation produced, accusing it sometimes of being a “child of its time”, and sometimes of metaphysics. It remains for us, then, to discuss new epistemologies that manage to encompass the relationship—if still possible—between visual arts and technical images based on a new frame of reference. ♣