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Abstract:

The enormous variety of forms and uses of phenomena called 'image' has so far prevented the formation of a universally accepted concept of the image. It is even questionable whether a unified concept of the image encompassing all relevant phenomena is possible or whether the 'image' is not rather a historically changeable collective name of phenomena grouped by family resemblances. the image seems to occur in almost all cultures; for this reason alone, any study of the image should be differentiated not only historically, but also interculturally. But this is not always the case; therefore in this essay a certain Eurocentric bias in Western concepts of the 'image' is critically discussed. Firstly, it will be presented how 'image' is defined in certain mainstream discussions of image studies. Secondly it will be shown that there are Eurocentric blind spots in these discourses. The range of objects considered as images are restricted and thereby especially non-European types of images are excluded. Three of them will be mentioned: the tattoo, the mask and calligraphy and what their difference to hegemonic western notions of the image as separated from the body, to-be-looked-at and non-performative entails. Tattooing, calligraphy, the mask and much more could become the subject of research projects and courses. The problem with such research and teaching that reaches beyond the European horizon is twofold: *First,* simply not everything can be done; researchers and teachers must reduce the variety of possible objects. This cannot and should not lead to the exclusion of

THE NOTION OF 'IMAGE' AND EUROCENTRISM[1]

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non-European phenomena, but not everything can be included – complete inclusion is impossible. Therefore, only a local coordination process on what can be taught in modules such as 'Interculturality' or 'Global Media Culture' can be done. The paper ends with some short notes on the institutional and image-pedagogical consequences of this critique.

Keywords: Body, calligraphy, eurocentrism, masks, pedagogy, tattoos

1 This is a significantly revised English translation of Schröter 2022. In this form it is published for the first time.

1. Introduction

In this essay a certain Eurocentric bias in Western concepts of the 'image' is critically discussed.[2] Firstly (in 2) it will be presented how 'image' is defined in certain mainstream discussions of image studies. Secondly (in 3) it will be shown that there are Eurocentric blind spots in these discourses. The range of objects considered as images are restricted and thereby especially non-European types of images are excluded. Three of them will be mentioned: the tattoo, the mask and calligraphy and what their difference to hegemonic western notions of the image as separated from the body, to-be-looked-at and non-performative entails. The paper ends (in 4) with some short notes on the institutional and image-pedagogical consequences of this critique.

2. On the concept of the image

The image is one of the oldest cultural techniques of mankind, as indicated, for example, by prehistoric cave drawings. It seems to occur in various forms in all human cultures and plays a central role in many religions, e.g. already in the Christian creation myth: "So God created man in his *own* image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them".[3] Because of this centrality, the image was seen by Hans Jonas as an anthropological specificity of mankind or can at least be called a basic medium (cf. 1994; Venus 2014).
Images have central functions, by no means only in religion or the field called 'art' in 'Western'[4] cultures, but also in science, technology, medicine, entertainment, the state (e.g., photos in identity cards), economics, playful, every day or even magical practices, and much more. The ubiquitous distribution of images makes it impossible to map this diachronic and synchronic diversity in full. Likewise, the literature on images, their forms, techniques, practices, meanings, and the like has become unmanageable – at least since the 'pictorial turn' in cultural studies was proclaimed in the early 1990s and an independent *Bildwissenschaft* (*science*

2 On the definition of Eurocentrism, see Amin 2009 and Chakrabarty 2000. See also Shohat and Stam 2014.
3 Gen. 1:27, https://www.academic-bible.com/en/online-bibles/king-james-version/read-the-bible-text/ (Dec. 28, 2021.)
4 On the notion of 'Western culture', see Hall 2019.

of images; translation by the author) began to establish itself (see, among others Mitchell 1994; Belting 2001; Sachs-Hombach 2003).[5]
The enormous variety of forms and uses of phenomena called 'image' has so far prevented the formation of a universally accepted concept of the image (cf. Mersch 2014). It is even questionable whether a unified concept of the image encompassing all relevant phenomena is possible or whether the 'image' is not rather a historically changeable collective name of phenomena grouped by family resemblances. Nevertheless, there are admirable attempts at synthetic definitions – for example, Stefan Majetschak has proposed to define 'image' as follows:

> An image [...] is a texture of markings embedded in the formal latencies of any medium, which exhibits an internal differentiation that we regard, under given contextual conditions, *as* an analogically notated realization of a possible order of the visible (2003, 43; translation by the author).[6]

This formulation indicates the difficulties of a definition of the image, in any case all too simple attempts are problematic: The popular thesis, for instance in everyday understanding as well as in a vulgar-semiotic perspective,[7] that pictures are signs which, unlike linguistic signs for instance, essentially designate by *similarity to* the depicted, does not stand up to a closer examination. Two eggs are very similar to each other, yet neither is an image of the other. After his scathing critique of the theory of similarity,[8] Nelson Goodman, for his part, proposed a *symbol-theoretical* approach to the definition of the image. He conceives of images (as distinct from language and writing) as signs that exhibit a *syntactically dense symbolic scheme* (which is echoed in Majetschak's formulation of "analogically

5 For an overview see Günzel and Mersch 2014. However, 'Bildwissenschaft' is again a relatively specific development of the German-speaking world (even if, for instance, American authors are received), in other parts of the world there is rather talk of *visual culture,* cf. e.g., Mitchell 1995.
6 Remarkably, Majetschak refrains from describing the image as 'two-dimensional' in his definition (although he mentions two-dimensionality several times at the beginning of his text), a description that occurs frequently in other definitions and is already untenable in view of *sculpture,* cf. Schröter 2009.
7 This does not mean that semiotic perspectives on images are vulgar per se; rather, see Barthes 1977.
8 The theory of similarity is advocated, for example, in the aforementioned Jonas 1994, 107. For reference to Goodman, see Majetschak 2003, 30–37. See also Winkler 2021.

notated realization"). What is meant by this is that in (at least Western) languages (unlike with images) there is an alphabet that defines which kinds of markings are permissible and which are not. Thus, there are 'characters' A and B, but no character between A and B (syntactic differentiation). Also, each marker must be uniquely assignable to a character; there is no marker that corresponds to both A and B (syntactic disjointness) (cf. Goodman 1968). That is, any given mark can and must be assigned to a character – but it does not matter whether the A is, say, in green paint, or in an unusual font, or even made of potatoes laid out on the ground. The alphabet as a 'repertoire' is missing in images, however; any difference, no matter how subtle, in the thickness of a line, in a hue, could be relevant: While the disjunctive and differentiated syntactic symbolic scheme of writing is 'digital', the syntactic scheme of the picture, in principle and possibly infinitely finely graded, is 'dense' or 'analog'.
A completely different theoretical perspective, which instead focuses more on the relation of the image to seeing (without falling back into the theories of similarity), is offered by *phenomenological* theories, which conceive of images not as signs for (visible) objects, as semiotic approaches do, but as essentially visible conditions themselves, drawing for example on Edmund Husserl's phenomenological description of the process of perception (cf. Wiesing 2005, 37-43). Majetschak tries to account for this dimension with his reference to 'possible orders of the visible'. The diverse Western discussions about the image, however, agree that images have genuine potentials, 'iconic logics', that cannot be attributed to the signifying powers of language and writing, even though many images gain their meaning only through linguistic contexts – a central field of research in iconography and iconology (cf. Kaemmerling 1979). Regardless of whether a general definition of the 'image' is possible, the concept of the image can be made more precise through a series of internal differentiations: For example, *natural images* are distinguished from *artificial images*, with the former referring to phenomena such as shadows and reflections (cf. Eco 1988, who, however, denies that mirror images are images at all). Within the field of 'artificial' images, i.e., images produced by humans, a distinction can be made between *technical and non-technical images* (cf. among others Flusser 2011; Bredekamp, Schneider, and Dünkel 2008). With 'technical' images are then mostly meant the images from the invention of photography around 1839, over film and television to today's computer-generated images. With this distin-

ction also arises that between *still and moving images* – that is, images that change in time, such as those of cinema or television. The distinction *technical/non-technical* is questionable, however, insofar as all 'artificial' images are necessarily also 'technical'. Nevertheless, images can also be distinguished on the basis of their signifying functions: Thus, in the field of discussion of technical images, there is also the distinction *indexical/non-indexical images*, a difference derived from Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotics, which describes whether images are causally connected to what is depicted (as in photography, for example) or not (as in painting). Another differentiation with respect to the signifying function is that into *singular and general images*, that is, with respect to whether an image represents a concrete entity or a general class of entities – e.g., images in an encyclopedia to an article about a class of entities. But also, in advertising images are often used in a general way, e.g., a man in a car advertisement usually does not represent *that* man, but men in general. Moreover, the distinction between *fictional and non-fictional images* should be mentioned here, but there are many more (cf. Scholz 1991, 25-31; 70-72). Another, more sociological difference relates to the question of whether images belong to the field of art and insofar have no purpose except to exhibit and reflect their own pictoriality (this is central to modernist aesthetics, at any rate), or whether they are functionally involved in communicative processes (e.g., advertising) (cf. Majetschak 2005). This distinction between *artistic and functional images* is also problematic, insofar as, first of all, the demarcation is not clear-cut in many cases, for even images of art may as well be functional as stores of value, or were functional in the service of religious communication. Second of all, the distinction is historical: The emergence of an autonomous art system begins in the 19th century and is, in a sense, the precondition for the distinction (cf. Belting 1994). Nonetheless, the rich and differentiated history of artistic images has entailed equally rich aesthetics that have sought to highlight the potentials of the art image in very different ways. In the process, the image has often been ascribed a revealing power.[9]
The history of various image forms and the practices, modes of design, theories, aesthetics, and politics associated with them is by far too complex and too extensive to be even sketched here. Historical studies of

9 A classic example for the attribution of a revealing power to the image is Heidegger 2002a, esp. 13–16.

painting, photography, film, television, and computer images abound, as do histories of the functions of images in religion, art, science, and the mass media, to name only the most important fields. As the last example in particular – the field of mass media – illustrates, *images do not usually appear in isolation*, but in conjunction with other media forms such as sound or writing, with which they interact in complex ways. In addition, there are *special institutions and architectures* dedicated to the archiving and presentation of and/or trade in images, such as museums, galleries, and so on.

Until this point some aspects of standard discussions of the image in image studies were presented. But especially the last two mentioned points are by no means unproblematic. Images are often separated from their context and certain practices with images, e. g. Western "artistic" practices, which result in images isolated in museums, are privileged.

3. Eurocentrism in the concept of the image

As already noted at the beginning, the image seems to occur in almost all cultures; for this reason alone, any study of the image should be differentiated not only historically, but also interculturally. But this is not always the case; for example, the influential[10] volume edited by Gottfried Boehm in 1994, *Was ist ein Bild?* (*What is an image?*; translation by the author), *does not* contain a single text that deals decidedly with non-European image forms or image concepts. In his essay *Die Wiederkehr der Bilder* (*The Return of the Images*; translation by the author), Boehm remarks with a "view on non-European tribal art":[11]

> The older and non-European history of images possesses a wealth of forms that is by no means inferior to that of modernity. Oriental carpets, Japanese tea bowls, African seats, hand axes from the earliest times of man, etc. already allow us to critically test what images are and what determines them (Boehm 1994, 38; translation by the author).

10 This volume was chosen as an example because already the title makes a fundamental, ontological claim with regard to the question discussed here, and it became influential not least because of this. It is a good example of processes of canonization that are problematic in themselves.

11 A term like 'tribal art' is itself difficult.

Unfortunately, however, this thesis does not lead to a more detailed discussion of non-European pictorial forms in the rest of the book, especially since Boehm's formulations raise questions: *First,* it is noteworthy that he only gives examples of non-European pictorial forms that are closely related to objects of use, as if the "primitive" image could not emancipate itself from decoration. *Secondly,* he formulates that these examples only "already" show what pictures are – a mode of expression that makes the non-European pictorial forms appear, in a sense, as a childlike early form. In this respect, it is not surprising that Boehm, one paragraph later, mentions the "trials of modernity" that would have "considerably expanded our knowledge of the preconditions, of the flexibility, and of the mode of action, for example, of painting, of the art of drawing, or of sculptural design" (ibid.; translation by the author). But instead of arranging non-European art and modernism (European examples are Cézanne, Matisse, etc.) on a scale of progress[12] (as it seems here, at least), they can also be understood simply as different but equal forms.[13] There seems to be a certain Eurocentrism implied, in which not only the exclusionary gesture of the unfounded and unjustifiable exclusion of non-European image forms is problematic. Rather, this exclusion threatens to undermine the universal and global claim to validity in the ontological formulation "What is an image?". How can it be known what an image "is" if it is not known what "other-directed [...] image perception" or what "other thinking of pictorial representation" (Därmann 2005, 38f; translation by the author) exists. On the other hand, wouldn't "the use of such general categories as [...] 'image' [...] have to account for their specific foreign cultural meaning" (ibid 2007, 18; translation by author)? In this manner, for example, the ethnologist Fritz Kramer, in his important study *Red Fez: On Art and Obsession in Africa,* has undertaken the effort to compare "the Cokwe concept of the image with the elements of European aesthetics" (1993, 190 and passim). Heike Behrend has looked at "savage theories of film", that is, theories of photography and film which certain African cultures have developed (cf. 1990).[14] These examples come from ethno-

12 The question of what is actually meant by 'progress' is left aside here, cf. for example Taguieff 2001.
13 To be correct: There are other texts in which Boehm draws on numerous non-European artifacts, cf. Boehm 2012. The critique here is not meant to especiall criticize Boehm. The quote was used as an example.
14 On alternative forms of knowledge in the 'global South', see Santos 2018.

logy, but in recent years there have also been increasing approaches in art history to break down Eurocentric fixations,[15] which is evident in efforts to create a 'global art history' in which the question of culturally differentiated visual practices and concepts is explicitly raised (see, among others, Juneja 2012, esp. 10; Elkins 1998).[16] Beyond this, a polycentric description must be carried out, which transcends the notion of a European center that now adds global image forms to its canon (cf. Shohat and Stam 2014, 13-54).

Even if the extensive discussion between ethnology, art history and intercultural media research concerning the question of the image cannot be presented here,[17] some points should be noted: *Firstly,* it emerges that pictorial concepts that were once thought to be special European achievements are themselves the result of a history of global interweaving and give no cause for Eurocentric superiority habitus, such as the central perspective, which was often praised as a particularly significant European achievement (cf. Belting 2011). *Secondly,* it quickly becomes apparent that the 'canon' of phenomena subsumed under the category 'image' is different in other cultures. There, pictorial forms can be central that play no role in 'Western' history and historiography, which – for example – remain centered around painting. Some examples can be found for this:

a) The *tattoo*: Tattoos can easily be described with Majetschak's general definition of the image given above. In various cultural contexts they have central ritual and aesthetic significance and have gained increased acceptance in recent decades, even in the 'West' (cf. Schüttpelz 2006; Meyer 2011; Oettermann 1985; Därmann and Macho 2017; Kumschick 2021).[18] Nevertheless, they are comparatively underrepresented in image

15 Cf. on the relationship between ethnology and art history in this respect Mersmann 2012.
16 Cf. on the problem of global art history also Elkins 2007.
17 There are now a number of other initiatives in image and art studies, such as the professorship 'Bildwissenschaft im globalen Kontext' of Kerstin Schankweiler at the TU Dresden, the DFG network 'Entangled Histories of Art and Migration: Forms, Visibilities, Agents' and the mainly by Burcu Dogramaci initiated ERC Consolidator Grant 'Relocating Modernism. Global Metropolis, Modern Art and Exile (METROMOD)'. Furthermore, the Cluster of Excellence 'Asia and Europe in a Global Context. The Dynamics of Transculturality', led by Monica Juneja, and a sub-project of the DFG-SPP 1688 'Anachronie und Präsenz: Ästhetische Wahrnehmung und künstlerische Zeitlichkeitskonzepte im Black Atlantic', led by Gabriele Genge. With thanks to Anja Schürmann.
18 With thanks to Anja Schürmann.

studies research. Their connection with the body and even bodily, sexual pleasures seem to make them an inappropriate example for imagery. Tattos are not a detached vis-à-vis of the observing subject, what is central for the European conception of the image (see Heidegger 2002b, cf. critically Därmann 2005, 489-511). Moreover: Tattoos reverse the role of the notion of indexicality (in its relation to pictures). While in Eurocentric discourse, indexicality is normally only used to describe the relation between represented object and image (a painting is not indexical, while a photograph is). In sharp contrast to this, the tattoo is indexical in relation to a body.

b) *Calligraphy*: Although there are comparable phenomena in medieval European book illumination, calligraphy is a form that plays a far more important role in Islamic and Asian cultures. It is virtually unmentioned in classical European aesthetics. Calligraphy moves in the field of tension between image and writing and seems to question this distinction – so central to 'Western' discourse – itself (cf. among others Mersmann 2006; Elkins 1998, 30-34).[19]

c) The *mask*: A mask is a non-flat image form, which also exists in Europe in the forms of the death mask or of masks worn on the occasion of folkloric and carnival celebrations. However, similar to tattoos, masks seem to have (had) a more important role in other cultures. There is also a rather low consideration of the mask in discourses of visual studies (but see Belting 2014).[20] The example of the mask also shows a central problem of the European handling of different pictorial forms – to place a mask in a museum (to come back again to the institutions of the image) can mean to tear it out of its performative, but also intermedial contexts and thus just miss the pictorial specificity of the mask-space-image (see only

19 The centrality of the distinction between image and writing for Western culture can be seen, for example, in the Bible (Exod. 2, 32), where it is about the conflict between the word of God, written on the tablets of scripture, and the idol, the golden calf, around which the people of Israel dance.

20 Especially 119: "Western culture has not produced masks with which to identify itself since antiquity." (translation by the author) There are discourses on masks in other disciplines such as theater studies – for example, a well-known theater studies journal is called *Maske und Kothurn* (*Mask and Cothurn*; translation by the author). With thanks to Johannes Hardt.

Strother 1998).[21] The mask-image disrupts the dichotomy of functional and artistic, as of every day and magical images. The mask-image also destabilizes the clear-cut difference between technical and non-technical images and shows that there are cultural techniques much older as the technologies in the strict sense, which in Eurocentric discourse are often uses as examples of technology per se (as compared to so called 'primitive civilizations'). Finally, and strangely enough, a mask is an image which is visible to other people – but not to the person who wears the mask.[22] Therefore, the mask-image disrupts the regime of visibility associated with images in Eurocentric discourse.

This examples might show that the concepts of the image in the European tradition by no means need to be globally valid. Neither the distinction from writing (calligraphy) nor the assumption that an 'image' is at all an isolable object (mask) or one that the image is a detached vis-avis of the viewing subject (which is undermined by the mask as it is by the tattoo) is universally valid. Moreover, there are likely to be non-Western engagements with the concept of the image of which the West is unaware – the very assumption that all concepts are known in Europe is Eurocentric. The often pejorative characterization of non-European image practices as 'magical' (cf. Lévy-Bruhl 1956, 154-158; Därmann 2005, 38) represses the fact that there are also traces or even unfolded practices of 'magical' image understandings in European cultural contexts that are still effective today and were often only silenced.[23]
Despite all the necessity of avoiding the absolutization and universalization of European concepts of the image, problems remain: *First,* despite all the differences, a kind of commonality in the concept of the image must remain assumed, otherwise the various phenomena from different cultural contexts cannot even be related to one another *as different images* (cf. Kramer 1990).[24] From this it could be deduced that a global

21 With thanks to Anna Brus.
22 Looking into a mirror while wearing a mask is the obvious exception – and this case is interesting in its own right, since it shows that the artificial image of a mask can be seen (by the person who wears the mask) only by using the natural image of the mirror. In that sense the mask-image destabilizes the dichtomy between artificial and natural images.
23 In any case, this is how, for example, the 'punctum' from Barthes 1989
24 Here 33: "In the more general terms of spirit, image, and reality, however, African and European conceptions seem to converge." (translation by the author).

definition is necessary, such as that of Majetschak. However, terms used by Majetschak, such as texture and marking, must themselves be examined for their respective culture-specific meaning. Possibly, a transcultural and translocal negotiation has to be made strong, which does not start with a one-sided general term, but rather produces it in a kind of iterative recursion first of all. Such a process, however, is arguably still in its infancy. *Secondly,* the emphasis on cultural differences must not obscure the view that at present and in the future a global, capitalist, technological image culture covers the earth and that therefore a homogenization of image culture could be in the offing, in which divergent forms threaten to perish, as for instance Samir Amin has emphasized (cf. 1977),[25] even if the global image culture must always be appropriated locally (see Larkin 2008). At this point, the difficult question arises whether the emphasis on the role of a global, imperialist image culture does not fetishize it and, consequently, gets itself re-centered with respect to local practices. Thus, it must be emphasized that the expansive image culture of the centers is deformed by the agency of local image cultures, instead of being only unilaterally deformed (cf. Coronil 1996, esp. 61-68).

4. Institutional Conclusion

How should this situation be dealt with institutionally? In the following I have to discuss this from the perspective of media studies in Germany, since this is my institutional affiliation.[26] First of all, it is conceivable that academic, German-language media studies should pay more attention in research and teaching to questions of global media culture and, consequently, to questions about media that occur beyond European cultures. Tattooing, calligraphy, the mask and much more could become the subject of research projects and courses. The problem with such research and teaching that reaches beyond the European horizon is twofold: *First,* simply not everything can be done; researchers and teachers must reduce the variety of possible objects. This cannot and should not lead

25 Especially 18: "*Capitalism is the moment of negation: negation of use-value, hence negation of culture, negation of diversity*." (orig. emphasis). The text explicitly revolves around the question "whether our world was tending toward cultural standardization or was maintaining its variety."
26 Further discussions with colleagues from other disciplines are necessary to come to better "institutional conclusions".

to the exclusion of non-European phenomena, but not everything can be included – complete inclusion is impossible. Therefore, only a local coordination process on what can be taught in modules such as 'Interculturality' or 'Global Media Culture' can be done.

Secondly, dealing with non-European phenomena in media studies very quickly comes up against limits of competence: It is one thing to deplore, for example, Eurocentric narrowing of the concept of the image by appealing to secondary literature (as is also the case here), it is another to be able to understand, research and/or teach the operation of pictorial phenomena in a given, different culture as well. Limits quickly appear here, already of a linguistic nature – as can be learned from the research experiences of ethnology. In project research, cooperation with disciplines that are familiar with languages and cultures (e.g., African studies, East Asian studies, etc.) can help, even if other disciplinary problems of understanding are likely to arise. Joint teaching with researchers from other disciplines could be an option, as well as the hiring of experts for the media culture of other cultures. But this is again made more difficult by the scarcity of positions at media studies institutes, seminars, etc. Often there are simply no funds available to establish such positions – or at least this is put forward as an justification.

In class, the inevitable Eurocentric limitations should be pointed out, as far as it makes sense – an example that has always worked well in my classes, because it is so striking and surprising, is the *world map*. Different forms can be used to show, for example, how the Mercator projection displays the global north as relatively too large, while in a Peters-Projection the relative sizes are different (see fig. 1).

Maps can be shown where Europe is not in the middle, but at the edge and China, for example, is in the middle. *Upside-down maps* can be shown, in which the by no means neutral association of the North with 'at the top' is broken (see fig. 2).[27]

27 'To be at the top' is unavoidably a metaphor for success, being rich etc.

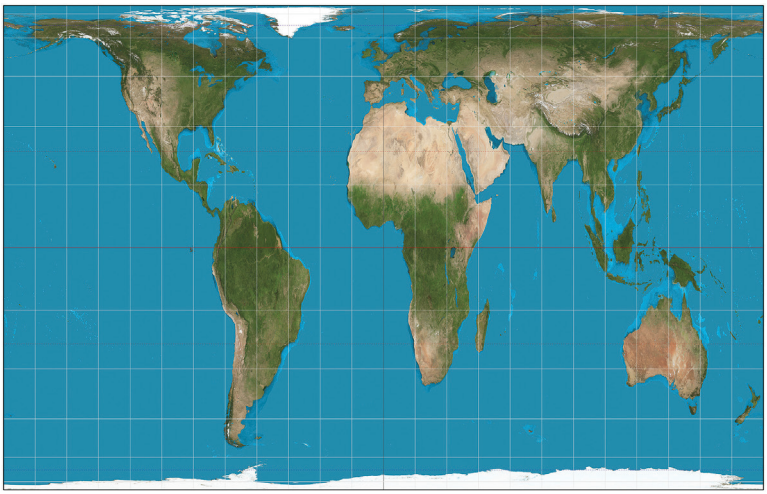

Fig. 1. Gall-Peters projection of the world map
Strebe, CC BY-SA 3.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0>, via Wikimedia Commons

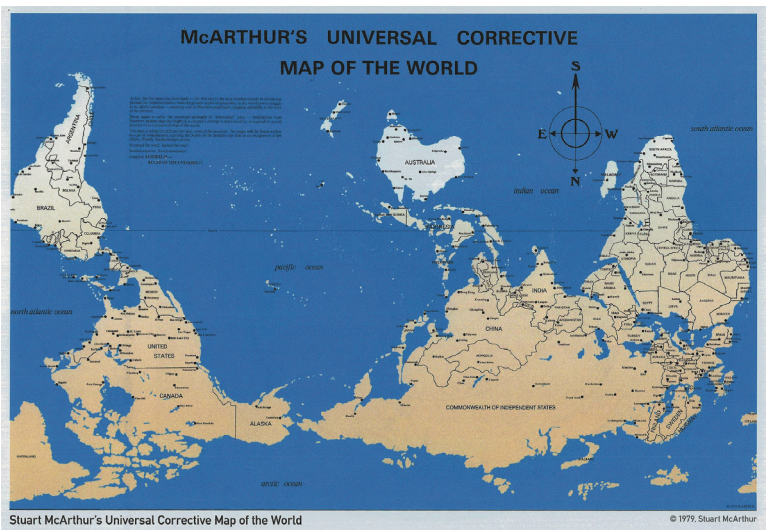

Fig. 2. McArthur's universal corrective map of the world, Stuart McArthur, 1979
http://www.topoi.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/weltbilder_exp15G.png

What is particularly interesting about this is that, on the one hand, in a strict sense none of these maps is 'more right' or 'wrong' than the other, but on the other hand, there could be wrong maps (e. g. where Munich is shown as the capital of China. From this much can be conveyed about situatedness and polycentrism (cf. Fiske 1993, 156-161; see also Bergermann 2010). The role of dealing with such basal categories as that of the image in other cultural contexts can lead to a necessary destabilization of being here:

> The impossibility or inevitability of never being able to start and set out from a place other than one's own does not have to and cannot mean to lull oneself into the universal security at the conti[n]gent place of one's own being here and to take cover from the intrusion of foreign interpretations of existence. (Därmann 2005, 487f; translation by the author)

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