

Introduction

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In 1999, the History and Images Congress was held at the University of Copenhagen. It was arranged as part of a research project initiated by the Faculty of Humanities under the heading *The Visual Construction of Realities*. Historians and art historians presented a variety of new approaches to research on visual material. The papers of the congress form the basis of this volume. The main object was, and remains, not only to show how the images may be understood as an equal partner to the text in historical research but also to demonstrate that imagery constitutes a separate category of source material with its own category of meaning and information and requiring its own interpretative methodologies. The subtitle ‘Towards a New Iconology’ indicates that traditional approaches to images are becoming inadequate. Historians who have expected art to reveal directly aspects of the historical society under investigation as a mimetic reproduction of the past, art historians who have looked solely at the aesthetic qualities of images, those who have investigated in iconography or iconology, all those who from Gregory the Great to the present day have linked image to text, all now seem insufficient.¹ The contributions to the present volume demonstrate that the visual construction of realities represents a unique temporally located world of our own times as well as the ‘reality’ of an historical past. And they demonstrate that this world of the eye is as complex and ubiquitous as the world of the word.

¹ Concerning an evaluation of the famous statement of Gregory the Great, see Jérôme Baschet, ‘Introduction: l’image-objet’, in *L’image. Fonctions et usages des images dans l’occident médiéval*, ed. by J. Baschet and J.-C. Schmitt (Paris: Le Léopard d’Or, 1996), pp. 7–26; Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory. A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990; repr. 1999), pp. 221–29.

It was *written* that in the beginning was the Word, but God soon felt obliged to place the prohibition of the making of images in the Ten Commandments on equal terms with the prohibition of killing. Modern research has discovered that among our five senses the eye is the most active. The eye sends ten million bits a second to the brain, the skin sends one million, the ear 100,000, the sense of smell 100,000, and the sense of taste only 1000 bits a second.² The sense of sight is then by far the strongest of our senses, sending enormous amounts of information to the brain. This in itself is a weighty argument for dealing with images. The text is also apprehended as an image by the eye, but being a visual representation of the linear system of the spoken words, the contents of a text is only understood in the course of time. A picture, in contrast, represents all its information within the same syntax.³

In the present volume, Keith Moxey argues for the establishment of Visual Studies: ‘Rather than seek consensus, it benefits from the radical disagreement between different styles of interpretation’. The contributions to this volume present many different approaches to research in pictures as images and art and as visual communication and should, therefore, accord with his definition of visual studies. The film director Michelangelo Antonioni’s credo reads:

But we know that behind every image revealed there is another image more fateful to reality and in back of that image there is another and yet another behind the last one and so on up the true image of that absolute mysterious reality that no one will ever see.⁴

This is what modern researchers on the visual world of the historic past have also realized: every picture has many layers and contains many scientific ‘truths’. The end of the last millennium was accompanied by the pluralism of deconstruction, which initiated the ‘meltdown’ of historical and art historical methods, described by Jean-Claude Schmitt in ‘Images and the historian’. Are we facing a new constructive era based on a deconstructivist fragmentary inheritance?

In 1928, René Magritte painted a picture with visual configurations which resembled a pipe. Over this simple and rather un-aesthetic depiction he wrote: ‘Ceci n’est pas une pipe’. The title of the picture reads: ‘La trahison des images’. It took decades for researchers in history and art history to realize that their work with images was embedded in ‘treachery’. In my opinion Magritte’s simple and ‘un-

² Bent Fausing, *Synet som sans* (Copenhagen: Samlerens Bogklub, 1995), pp. 17, 54.

³ Michael Baxandall argues that analysing an image is equal to scanning a text (M. Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention. On the Historical Explanation of Pictures* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985; repr. 1992), p. 3). In my view this has nothing to do with the non-linearity of an image. The textualizing of an image is caused by the fact that when analysing we ‘translate’ the visual contents to a linear linguistic system.

⁴ Michelangelo Antonioni (dir.), *Al di là delle nuvole* (*Beyond the clouds*), 1995; lines spoken by John Malkovich (The Director).

artistic' combination of a mimetic configuration and a linguistic statement is one of the many examples showing that artistic creativity most often forms the avant-garde in raising questions. In my view, the contributions to this volume demonstrate an inspiring willingness during the last couple of decades to deal with the 'treachery' of images by accepting the uniqueness of visual information. The 'treachery' we find is within the words, which are connected to an image as a title or as a description, not within the image itself. And why not think that medieval artists, too, often formed an avant-garde?

One could argue that iconographic studies for centuries have realized the 'treachery' of images if we define iconography as a conventional codified distance between expression and content. From the ancient hieroglyphs and culminating in medieval Christian imagery, such conventions have dominated image making. The more or less arbitrary linkage between content and expression is a 'treachery' towards the apparent analogue visual presentation. This is not the intriguing point in Magritte's canvas. He is, so I think, alluding to our belief in the analogue aspect in visual representation. With the rise of portrait and especially landscape painting, iconography lost influence in the visual arts. At least its role is no longer as clear-cut as it used to be.⁵ Photography changed it all in such a way that, according to Roland Barthes, a photo in a strange way represents an un-coded message.⁶ As a matter of fact, when looking at a photo of a pipe we all in our verbal descriptions admit 'it is a pipe'. It is we who commit treachery towards the image—or to use Gerhard Jaritz's explanation: 'Using verbal descriptions of pictorial sources (or also original objects), we only rarely have the opportunity to deal with anything like the original wording of the source of full-text. We are creating our own text'.⁷

The development of photography and the establishment of history and art history as scientific occupations go hand in hand. When in 1839 the French government bought the rights to the daguerreotype process, the purpose was to support scientific research. Photographers were sent to Egypt to make 'real' copies of the hieroglyphs. We still use photographs as a mimetic or at least an acceptable equivalent to the original image; as a matter of fact, the plates in the present volume are based on this assumption. But things have changed. Today we know that even Robert Capa composed 'fakes': the falling man from the Spanish Civil War is not a dying republican soldier. Nobody believes in photography any longer. Benetton made the final post-modern showdown with

⁵ Brendan Cassidy, 'Introduction, Texts, and Audiences', in *Iconography at the Cross-roads*, ed. by Brendan Cassidy (Princeton: Index of Christian Art, Princeton University, 1993), pp. 3–15.

⁶ Roland Barthes, 'Rhétorique de l'image', *Communications*, 4 (1964), 40–51.

⁷ Gerhard Jaritz, *Images. A Primer of Computer-Supported Analysis with Kleio IAS* (St Katharinen: Max-Planck-Institut für Geschichte, 1993), p. 16.

the mimetic representational power of the most realistic visual medium, photography. Furthermore, the simulation of a painting in three-dimensional (3-D) space strikes a blow against the ascendancy of photorealism in computer rendering. Simon Niedenthal demonstrates this by colliding a painting by Antonello da Messina, ‘St Jerome in his Study’, with the most recent rendering technology and suggesting the use of radiosity processing to check a 2-D representation against a 3-D structure.

The development of landscape and portrait painting gradually moved art away from iconography. The invention of photography marked a culmination of this movement. The final exposure of the ‘treachery’ of images has questioned the mimetic aspect. In a way these movements create a point of departure for modern research in pictures. With the loss of iconography and the mimetic aspect of realism in all kinds of pictures (dare I call it a pre-iconographic level of an image?) we are free to turn to the images of the past with new eyes. Is this what Erwin Panofsky meant when at the end of his life he gave up iconology? And is it not fair to think that the same situation has forced Irving Lavin to say that he sometimes thinks iconography is an invention of the devil?⁸ Many of the articles in this volume demonstrate a marginalization of traditional iconographic studies and introduce not so conventional visual codes. Norbert Schnitzler’s concern is significant for many of the articles when he demonstrates the mutual stimulations that combine new juridical concepts like ‘deterrance’ with corresponding concepts of representation. Is he elaborating another iconography or does he work at a new iconological level? None of the articles deals with the mimetic aspect as a documentary.⁹

The post-World War situation with the decline of the colonial powers has erased (art) historical explanations based on a centre-periphery theory. In the modern world there are no real centres of cultural or art historical activities. Finally the Internet has shown us an absolute decentralization of culture and information.¹⁰ Hundred of thousands of images put on the Internet on equal terms make it almost impossible to point to specific artistic centres of the past. Such experiences are reflected in Michael Camille’s essay ‘At the sign of the “Spinning Sow”: The “other” Chartres and images of everyday life of the

⁸ Irving Lavin, ‘Iconography as a Humanistic Discipline (“Iconography at the Crossroads”)’, in *Iconography at the Crossroads*, ed. by Brendan Cassidy (Princeton: Index of Christian Art, Princeton University, 1993), pp. 33, 38.

⁹ Cf. Keith Moxey, ‘Reading the “Reality Effect”’, in *Pictura quasi fictura. Die Rolle des Bildes in der Erforschung von Alltag und Sachkultur der Mittelalters und der frühen Neuzeit*, ed. by Gerhard Jaritz (Vienna: Verlag der österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1996), pp. 15–21.

¹⁰ Axel Bolvig, ‘Ars longa—vita brevis’, in *Medium Aevum Quotidianum*, ed. by Gerhard Jaritz (Krems: Gesellschaft zur Erforschung der materiellen Kultur des Mittelalters, 1998), pp. 7–20.

medieval street'. The famous cathedral of Chartres is not necessarily the only centre of the city. Its art is not the only one worthy of research. The preoccupation with so-called 'marginal' images has been so intense during the last decades that Jean Wirth treats the subject in an overall discussion of the research into the marginal figures of manuscripts from Emile Mâle's negation of meaning to Sharon Davenport's reading a spiritual meaning into every example.

After Marcel Duchamp's 'Ready Mades' there can be no real distinction between high art and low art or non-art. In 'Primitive paintings: the visual world of *populus rusticus*', Helena Edgren writes: 'The primitive paintings still suffer from the label of "second-rate art" that they received a hundred years ago, and consequently they have not been able to compete with finer paintings for the attention of art historians'. Now the competition is vigorous. Michael Camille's 'Spinning Sow' and Axel Bolvig's 'Wooden Shoes' have nothing to do with art with a capital A.

Another questioning of the traditional preoccupation with the intentional meanings of an image, be they those of the artist or the donor, has been—it is my conviction—inspired by the modern world's use of pictures. No contemporary visual media can survive without reflecting on 'what the spectator sees'.¹¹ Could and should the spectator see and experience one and only one intentional meaning? Anna Nilsén reflects on conditions of visual communication in her article 'Man and picture: on the function of wall paintings in medieval churches': '... the interiors of the churches were too dark for the whole body of paintings to be identified by the congregation'.

Since the establishment of the technique of printing, historians have had access to huge amounts of written source material. This is one of the explanations why most historians fastened themselves in linguistic irons. Since Leopold Ranke, historical methodology has bound itself to the Gutenberg Galaxy.¹² In her article, Lena Liepe, an art historian, notes that 'after all, it is not the image itself that interests the historian'.¹³ Today the situation has turned around 180 degrees. You can write a history of world art in one volume but you can only print a small selection of the works of art. In this new millennium—in principle—you can store millions of pictures on huge hard disks but nobody will have time or energy to read about each single object. Image databases offer

¹¹ The expression refers to Richard Wollheim, 'What the Spectator Sees', in *Visual Theory: Painting and Interpretation*, ed. by N. Bryson, M. A. Holly, and K. Moxey (Cambridge: Polity Press in association with Basil Blackwell, 1991), pp. 101–50.

¹² Axel Bolvig, 'Zur Kritik digitalisierender Geschichtspräsentationen', in *Electronic Filing, Registration, and Communication of Visual Historical Data, Abstracts for Round Table no 34 of the 18th International Congress of Historical Sciences*, ed. by Axel Bolvig (Göttingen: Max-Planck-Institut für Geschichte, 1995), pp. 1–7.

¹³ Cf. Keith Moxey, *The Practice of Theory. Poststructuralism, Cultural Politics, and Art History* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994).

possibilities for comparative analysis of historical image information.¹⁴ Several of the present articles deal with the use of image databases. Jörgen van den Berg demonstrates the new potentiality of ICONCLASS as a common indexing system within a digitized world. Jérôme Baschet argues for an ‘iconographie serielle’ which is ‘indispensable pour faire apparaître l’épaisseur historique et la complexité des phénomènes, dès lors qu’on la conçoit . . . comme la production de gammes de variations, au sein d’environnements complexes et mouvants’. Gerhard Jaritz shows how the database Real brings new light to visual phenomena such as cleanliness and men’s hairstyles. In the image database we are confronted with connections of the qualitative and the quantitative, opening up possibilities of searching for patterns, their role, rules, and connotations. Axel Bolvig uses the database of Danish wall paintings to demonstrate that in the pictorial world wooden shoes were not used by peasants but by evil people and devils, and that they connote rebellion.

The growing acceptance of a unique and individual visual meaning independent of the linearity of linguistics is stressed by Lena Liepe when writing that ‘the main potential of images as historical sources lies precisely in their visual formation’. Ulla Haastrup demonstrates the historical power of images. She challenges the historians’ positivistic belief in the superiority of written material when using images as evidence of the existence of Jews in medieval Denmark in spite of written silence. Søren Kaspersen in his ‘Framing history with salvation’ indicates a medieval, politically tinted, connotative use of visual language in detailed programs. With three different examples Frank Colson, Jean Colson, Ross Parry, and Andrew Sawyer demonstrate a superiority of the image. ‘When we are considering power (to use Bryson’s phrase) “not as a monolith, but as a swarm of points traversing social stratifications and individual persons”,¹⁵ it appears to be (in these three examples at least) the image that thrives as a representational framework’. This acknowledged superiority of image to word is behind Francis Haskell’s article on J. Huizinga showing that *The Autumn of the Middle Ages* is ‘the first major work of history to have been inspired, both directly and self-confessedly, by visual sources’.

An established acceptance of images as invaluable material in our understanding of the past stresses another treachery of the image. We do not look at the same pictures as did our forefathers. The content of a text is the same whether it is written by hand or printed in Palatino or in Times. This means that we can copy a text without changing the content. But we cannot copy an

¹⁴ Gerhard Jaritz, ‘Comparative Analysis of Historical Image Information’, in *Electronic Filing, Registration, and Communication of Visual Historical Data* (as note 12), pp. 29–33.

¹⁵ N. Bryson, ‘Semiology and Visual Interpretation’, in *Visual Theory: Painting and Interpretation* (as note 11), pp. 61–73 (p. 71).

image—we create a new image with a resemblance to the original.¹⁶ Each individual picture is the result of an inevitable connection between form and content. A change in the former involves a change in the latter. Therefore we are forced to reconsider the physical conditions of pictures. Rolf-Jürgen Grote and Annette Hornschuch write about the use of IT and the need for interdisciplinary research in ‘Innovative hybride graphische Systeme zur Denkmalüberwachung’:

Selbstverständlich können die im Verlauf der Forschungsprojekte entwickelten oder geplanten rechnergestützten Verfahren der Visualisierung und Dokumentation zunächst nur vorläufige Interpretationshilfen geben. Sie sind als Service-Leistungen aufzufassen, die einem interdisziplinären Untersuchungsteam den Einstieg in vertiefende Zustands- und Schadenserfassungen erleichtern und erste Hinweise für Konservierungs- und Restaurierungsmaßnahmen ermöglichen.

The title of Phillip Lindley’s article is significant and explains why research in images is such a broad-spectrum project: ‘The Lincoln CD-ROM Project: history, theory, conservation, and images’. The chief objective of the Lincoln Project was to document the evolution of conservation and the progress of conservation work. The intention behind this volume is to demonstrate an interrelated fan of approaches to understanding the visual world of the past.

To stress the diversified but exiting instability of visual communication I cannot resist quoting *Against Art and Artists* by Jean Gimpel. As its struggle against the Reformation developed, Rome decided to use art as a means of action against Protestant heresy. Art and artists were to be indoctrinated, and their work supervised. In 1573, Paolo Veronese was summoned to appear before the Holy Office because of his *Last Supper*. He had continued to paint religious subjects, ignoring the instructions of the Council of Trent. Into his picture he had introduced all kinds of human and animal figures, all of which the Holy Office considered incompatible with the gravity of the subject.

Inquisitor: Does it seem to you proper in a painting of the Last Supper of our Lord to represent fools, drunken Germans, dwarfs and other trifles?

Veronese: No.

Inquisitor: Why did you do it?

Veronese: I did it with the idea that these people were outside the room where the supper was taking place.

Inquisitor: Do you know that in Germany and other places infected with heresy they are in the habit of using various paintings full of low subjects and similar inventions to tear to pieces, vilify and make fun of the things of the Holy Catholic Church, in order to teach false doctrine to foolish and ignorant people?

Veronese: The Commission was to decorate the picture as I thought fit. It is large

¹⁶ Søren Kjørup, ‘Billedkommunikation’, in *Visuel Kommunikation*, vol. 1, ed. by Bent Fausing and Peter Larsen (Copenhagen: Medusa, 1980), pp. 58–82.

and can hold many figures. . . . If there is space left in a picture I decorate it with invented figures. . . . We painters claim the license that poets and madmen claim.

The inquisitors were not satisfied with Veronese's explanation. They ruled that within three months he must correct and amend his picture.

Paolo Veronese did not correct his picture. He changed the title. The *Last Supper* became *The Feast in the House of Levi*.¹⁷

Who is treacherous towards images? In my opinion the many possible answers lie in a new *Iconology*.

¹⁷ Jean Gimpel, *Against Art and Artists*, rev. edn (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1991), pp. 55–56. This is a translation of the original French, *Contre l'art et les artistes, ou la naissance d'une religion* (Paris: Seuil, 1968).