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Interview

Vincent Debiais

► **To cite this version:**

Vincent Debiais. Interview. Michele Bacci; Fabrizio Crivello; Vesna Scepanovic. Images in Premodern Societies. A Dialogue about the State of the Field on the Occasion of the 20th Anniversary of “Iconographica”, 1, SISMELE - Edizioni del Galluzzo, pp.116-120, 2023, Iconographica Library, 978-88-9290-279-4. halshs-04308124

HAL Id: halshs-04308124

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-04308124>

Submitted on 26 Nov 2023

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VINCENT DEBIAIS

1. *In the last thirty years, images have been a focus of scholarship from many different viewpoints, and they have been pivotal in the many scholarly movements, or “turns”, attempting to methodologically reframe the study of art history in general. Can you briefly explain which was your original focus of interest and in which directions your scholarly approach developed over the course of time?*

My focus of interest has been and remains the relationship between texts and images in Medieval visual culture from the Christian West, mainly from an epigraphic perspective, with a focus on monumental writing in sculpture, painting, and mosaics, as well as the shapes, functions, and audiences of medieval inscriptions made in the pictorial medium. I aimed to go beyond the traditional association of source and illustration to demonstrate that inscriptions and images are part of the same visual and intellectual discourse that tends to overcome the limits of the form. The topic of text/image relationships may sound old-fashioned or overinvestigated, but the different “turns” of the last three decades allow a new understanding of the extent to which the simultaneous analysis of visual and textual elements can tell us about medieval written and visual cultures. More recently, I have been dealing with the concept of abstraction in medieval visual arts and the implication of informality during the Middle Ages, in connection with Christian theological notions of *ordo* and *forma*.

2. *Please name up to three books that you consider to have played an important role in orienting your research.*

For my research on text/image relationships, I have read and constantly re-read two important books: Arwed Arnulf, *Versus ad Picturas. Studien zur Titulusdichtung als Quellengattung der Kunstgeschichte von der Antike bis zum Hochmittelalter*, Munich, 1997; Herbert L. Kessler, *Neither God nor Man. Words, Images, and the Medieval Anxiety about Art*, Freiburg, 2007. More recently, I rely a lot on Jean-Claude Schmitt, *Penser par figure. Du compas divin aux diagrammes magiques*, Paris, 2019

3. *What is your assessment of traditional art history, with its emphasis on controversial notions and often rigid distinctions between “style” and “iconography”? What do you see as its hermeneutic limits and advantages? Do you think it should be thoroughly replaced with new approaches, or simply revised and integrated into the present-day art-historical discourse?*

Personally, I do not believe in any need for replacement. Notions evolve, concepts are adjusted, but, basically, I assume that methods remain almost the same. New trends and new objects need sometimes to be addressed by means of more precisely focused approaches, but this must be done in the aim to respect the material and to produce deep knowledge, not to serve a trend. The notion of iconography can be discussed for specific images but the intellectual paths it opens with careful descriptions and thorough identifications cannot be avoided or replaced. Art history will probably grow stronger if it incorporates new approaches in their diversity without trying to create “school”- or “club”-like phenomena. I cannot think of any notions that may be mutually exclusive or disqualify other scholars’ approaches.

4. Since the 1990s, our field has experienced many different “turns”, each laying emphasis on one of the multiple dynamics in which images are involved. To what extent did your research benefit from such scholarly debates?

I am convinced that my research benefited a lot from various personal encounters and from slow, individual, and friendly intellectual debates, especially during fellowship and research stays in the US, and I am truly grateful to my colleagues, teachers, and students, who took time to carefully discuss intriguing topics or conceptual challenges. In the other hand, I cannot say that the great scholarly debates or trendy discussions have been productive in the same way, especially during scientific meetings, symposia, or workshops, when questions of methods were often posed, whereas the real historical or artistic issues were left aside. I sometimes had the feeling that it was more important to manifest one’s belonging than to make research, and this has often led me to avoid these debates. I am convinced these debates are useful and helpful for the field, but we should think of a more convenient format for their development.

5. In your opinion, which specific notions have become particularly relevant to our present-day understanding of images, and how have they affected your own approach?

For the last few years, I have been especially interested in three main notions. The first one is materiality; after the effervescence of the “material turn” and all the fruitful meetings and publications, I have found that both the means and meaning of medieval images can be revealed by a careful analysis of the empirical and symbolic qualities of their material aspects. The second topic is a general understanding of the anthropology of images, in a cross-cultural and cross-historical perspective, thanks to Philippe Descola’s work, among others. The third one is the importance of Christian theology as a major key to the interpretation of the visual, not only as it concerns the contents of medieval images, but also their shapes and functions.

6. What is your specific understanding of “meaning” in visual objects? How do images manage to convey messages, and what are the implications?

In my understanding, “meaning” is at the intersection of content and media. Iconography tends to focus on the image’s subject, and on the ways in which the subject is staged

within a sculpture or painting, but I assume that the meaning also stems from all those elements within an image that do not directly belong to the subject: i.e., from what I call the iconography of the in-between, and especially from the material and technical implications of image-making.

7. To what extent is “meaning” determined by factors not immediately associated with the specific visual appearance of images, such as mise-en-scène strategies, conditions of visibility, and more generally the experiential dimension of viewers?

Meaning cannot be separated from the rhetoric of the visual, and from the narrative or iconic strategies used to stage an image in its context of display. Recent research on sacred space, light, movement, senses, and the body have shown the importance of the display conditions, and the contemporary art concept of “installation” may help us to see where meaning is produced when an image is created for specific events involving the senses of sight and touch.

8. In your view, are we now better equipped to reconstruct and more deeply understand the complex relationship between the visual appearance of an image and the expectations of its viewers?

I assume we are now ready for some experiments in the archaeology of reception. In this respect, recent works by Roland Bettencourt or Bissera Pentcheva for Byzantium prove to be very stimulating, even if I doubt that we will be able to go much further. There is always a difficulty in separating the sensorial effect of the object and the possible expectations from the viewer. New approaches from the anthropology of the visual could probably give some insights here, based on the experience of seeing, feeling, waiting for, and dreaming images, but we will always face the limits of a reconstruction where spiritual, religious, and magical aspects are hard to investigate.

9. To what extent can images contribute to informing their viewers’ understandings of other images and other aspects of reality and experience?

Images are part of the continuum that shaped the medieval world, as shown by Jean-Claude Schmitt or Jean-Marie Sansterre; but they have a special status at the same time – they constitute a special level of reality. Art history still must assess this level of reality that came to be shared by material/visual images, and other types of images. This is probably where medieval art history must meet its fellow disciplines and methods in the wider field of medieval studies. The experience of dreams, ghosts, but also feelings and emotions probably have common points with the medieval experience of art.

10. What is your assessment of the materiality of images?

The materiality of images is essential for the understanding of both the making and reception of medieval art. The question is not only what makes images *be*, but also what makes images *mean*. The importance gained by archaeological approaches in the most re-

cent trends of medieval art history leads sometimes to an exclusively material understanding of images, as if they were made of things or stuffs, and had no intellectual or spiritual content. On the contrary, the symbolic approach to materials often leads to the opposite result of only emphasizing the immaterial functions to the detriment of any material aspect. In this respect, it might be useful to go back to medieval thought and look at the conceptualizations of materiality worked out in the Middle Ages. The works by Elina Gertsman, Aden Kumler, Beate Fricke, Bissera Pentcheva seem truly relevant in this respect. Working with the students in museums and archives is fundamental to reach this global understanding of medieval material.

11. *In your view, how can we approach the “social life” of images? In what sense can we assume that images interrelate with their viewers and users?*

Alfred Gell's *agency* certainly opened new perspectives as to our understanding of the ways in which medieval images interacted with each other. Sometimes we lack information about the viewing/experiencing contexts of such images, and it remains difficult to assess their environment and their social life. New trends in the ecocriticism might be interesting to develop in view of an “ecology of the visual” where images, people, and events are thought of as parts of a global, interrelated milieu. In any case, we will have to remain careful when trying to reconstruct such interactions. Medieval images belonged to a specific ontology, and we cannot give them attributions and “powers” they did not have.

12. *Does the experience of images exclusively imply the exercise of sight, or do other senses also play a role? If possible, please cite a relevant case from your research field.*

Sight is the most important sense for the experience of images, as shown by Éric Palazzo recently, but touch is also crucial, as we can read throughout Jackie Jung's research. In my own work, sight works along with touch to understand all the phenomena of textures, for example.

13. *Recent studies have emphasized that “iconicity” (or “visual efficacy”) is not an exclusive property of artistic images but can also be regarded as an attribute of non-figurative objects, such as elements of landscape, natural materials, and living beings. To what extent can such objects be included in an art-historical narrative?*

In my new research, I focus on the notion of “abstraction” in medieval visual arts. So, I truly believe in a large understanding of iconicity, even for images and objects that look imageless or formless. In the same way as there is an iconicity of script, I guess there is also an iconicity of sound, of nature, of material, of social gatherings. Everything might be considered for its iconicity if it has been understood as such by medieval thinking, and the semantic spectrum of the word *imago* is so strong and wide that it might encapsulate all these forms of image-making. Of course, it seems difficult to put them under the title of “art”, and this is where art history might need to be careful not to lose its purpose, but for a global approach to medieval visuality these are promising research paths.

14. *Many studies have focused on the dynamics by which images originally meant for a specific viewing context come to be transferred to, appropriated by, and transformed and reshaped in another. Which hermeneutic tools can be useful in our analysis of such phenomena?*

Recently I came across research tools stemming from theoretical biology and ecology and used them to explain phenomena of transformation, alteration, adaptation, erasure, destruction, disappearance... Even if it can only work in terms of analogy and discrete parallelism, it may be interesting to apply them to medieval topics.

15. *English is more and more the lingua franca of global art-historical scholarship. To what extent may we avoid applying to non-European contexts notions drawn from an essentially Western European understanding of images and their materiality and meaning?*

I understand the concern, but the language I work with is not only a tool, it also defines and shapes my own thinking and I truly do not know how I could reshape everything in order to avoid linguistic tricks or evidences of who I am. Awareness is a key, carefulness is necessary, but it seems more important to teach focusing on the meaning of words instead of trying to create a new lingua franca that should erase any personal involvement. But this is my own limitation and fear probably. Writing seems too hard for me to remodel it at my age!

16. *Finally, what are we still lacking? In which direction should we pursue our studies in the following decades?*

I wish I knew! Personally, as a scholar of western Christian art, I would advocate for a reconciliation between the erudite approach of medieval images and objects and a more sensitive, spiritual, poetic reading of objects. I have the feeling that art history became cold, clinical sometimes, and that language is not used anymore to convey the sensations and aesthetics emotions triggered by the encounters with medieval art. Current trends are so self-aware that they do not allow any statement that is not political, and beauty often disappear behind the curtain of methods, schools of thought, and claims. I sometimes wish art history may be more about people and their experiences of beauty. But this is a very naïve proposal that does not fit in the state of the field where we should be thinking more about the students, young scholars, and their challenges to live or survive in the academia. Wanting to focus on theology, philosophy, and the spiritual implications of medieval art might seem superfluous in this context, but this is probably where we can make a statement about the possible specificity of medieval art within the panorama of universal art.

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