The Pictorial Turn in History

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The objective of the two-day conference was to raise and enlarge the awareness in dealing with visual evidence useful to the historian through a dialogue of various disciplines with different methodological approaches.

The conference's executive committee, William Gallois, Declan O'Reilly, Sara Pennell, Krisztina Robert, John Tosh and Cornelie Usborne, were able to invite with the financial support from The Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art and the German History Society nine international speakers. Coming from history or history-related humanities (art history, cultural or visual studies, etc.), their combined fields of expertise were covering epochs from the late Roman era to Apartheid South Africa, with a strong geographical focus on Europe.

Throughout the conference, both its title „the pictorial turn" and definitions of how to consider visual evidence were vividly discussed. The value of non-textual sources, that is every two- or three-dimensional object itself, or its reproduction as photograph or film, that has been intentionally produced or displayed and thus allows us to address specific questions to events in the past, has long been recognized. The conference's organisers were responding to a two-folded increase both in the production/reproduction of images and their integration into scientific argumentation over the last two decades. The chosen expression „pictorial turn" has been challenged from some participants as following a general „trend for turns" in the wake of such successful models as the linguistic or the iconic turn. Although there was unanimous consent to the growing importance of the visual in historical science in recent times, there remained parted views on whether this represents a consciously elaborated paradigm shift in the discipline's methodology, or whether the growing accessibility of images due to new technology as the internet results in a more intense personal engagement with the visual which almost naturally translates into the historian's approach to his or her work.

Furthermore, it has become clear that every scholar dealing with visual sources should be very aware to define precisely the kind of source in the context of his or her work. For example, many participants evoked the etymology of the word „pictorial" to insist on its character as being something painted or hand-made, in contrast to the more general „visual" which applies to both paintings and objects made through more elaborated technology such as photographs, and even moving images like cinematographic sources.

Another important definition is the visual evidence's degree of immediacy: Is the argumentation directed at the object itself or also at its reproduction? Often, the photograph a scholar includes in his or her study gives visual evidence of the material structure of the object described in the text. The photograph is interchangeable with other photographs focusing on the same aspect of the object. Now, when describing a symbolic or public function on the same object held under particular historical circumstances, a specific contemporary photo can be a unique visual evidence, especially when combined with textual evidence as in a newspaper page or a book. In this latter case, the specific reproduction will be as important as the object, whereas in the first case the reproduction is only a substitute for the physical absence of the object described.

All of the speakers put their particular emphasis on a different aspect of the visual historical evidence. Overall, two methodological models emerged from the delivered papers: One tried to define the role of the visual evidence in historiography in theoretical, general terms, whereas the other gave a practical case study example of how the visual can be used to raise specific historical questions. As a result, the practical examples were fruitful to a better understanding of the theoretical statements, and vice versa.

The empirical papers include MICHAEL LEWIS' reflection on the intended accuracy of representation as opposed to a transfigured,

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art inspired shaping of objects. He presented one of the largest and best known pieces of medieval pictorial evidence, the Bayeux Tapestry, visually depicting and textually annotating the events before and during the Norman Invasion of England in 1066. In the 70 metres wide piece of evidence, there is no uniform approach to an attempted likeliness of objects such as textually designated churches, monasteries, castles and ships, or to a visible difference between the Anglo-Saxons as distinct form the Normans. On the other hand, Lewis could prove the influence of contemporary book illuminations in the iconography of the Tapestry.

Also belonging to this category are the papers of KATE RETFORD and MATTHEW JEFFERIES, who argue for the use of the work of art as a key to understanding the intellectual and social climate of the societies they were produced in. This was the case with a type of family or group portrait in England in the 1720s and 1730s called „conversation piece", and the „bombastic" architecture in the last two decades of Imperial Germany under Kaiser Wilhelm II. In both cases, the combined analysis of the visual evidences with textual sources casts new light on their respective times. Concerning England in the first half of the eighteenth century, we were shown to distrust the painted possessions and homes of those portrayed when compared with the accurate list of inventory the same families kept. Instead of bearing witness to the sitters' goods, they were often interchangeable studio props. Their role can be defined as reflecting a social or moral order those portrayed wished to be associated with, good taste, balance and humble industriousness being frequent ideals. As for the beginnings of German Modernism under the Emperor, they were not all expressions of future-oriented visionaries as the Bauhaus-spirit of the Weimar Republic might lead one to think. When confronted to textual evidence such as letters or contributions to specialised journals, the early works of architects such as Walter Gropius or Peter Behrens can be read as attempts at re-installing Greek monumentality of Doric order.

Another interesting case study was the role of the visual artefact in memory culture in South Africa. ANNIE COOMBES gave a panorama of emotionally symbolic places and typical objects, notably the so-called „memory boxes", that became part of the collective identity created by women during the Apartheid regime and its aftermath. When confronted with the necessity to remembrance, their value is polyvalent, depending on the time, the gender and ethnic background of the person remembering, as could be seen around 1996 through the difficulties the Truth and Reconciliation Commission had in dealing with them.

Featuring one specific subject yet at the same time asking questions of a more theoretical nature was PHILIPP OSTEN's paper on the propagandistic uses of photographs of disabled children in Germany's 1920s. Here, many different discourses are articulated in those photographs discovered in the cellar of the youth home Oskar-Helene-Heim in Berlin, complementing those published in special bulletins and other prints by the organisation Deutsche Vereinigung für Krüppelfürsorge (German alliance for cripple care): The hierarchy of power between those taking the photograph without the consent of those being photographed and depersonalised; the selection and manipulation of photographic evidence for specific purposes (raising money, accusing the Versailles powers of producing disabilities through food shortage, creating norms through the joint displaying of healthy and disabled children); the „scientification of the cripples" which for Osten proved the argument of Aby Warburg's dictum of the de-demonisation of images through arrangements in scientific order; the influence a carefully orchestrated display of disabled persons has on society's perception of the abnormal, leading both to a belief in the healing powers of science and to a fear of degeneration which found its paroxysm in National-Socialist eugenic policies; the long aftermath of both the Krüppelfürsorge and the Nazi legacy of medico-historical science in Germany, resulting in an awkward, obscuring approach until well into the 1970s. The type of sources analyzed by Osten enabled him to address them with a triple set of historically relevant questions: 1. the real-life circumstances of those photographed, 2. the criteria for and the in-

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tention behind the selection of the published photographs out of the thousands taken and 3. the repercussions the published photographs had on contemporary society and for future generations. Thus, this paper was a brilliant example both of a case study and of a broader, theoretical approach to the uses of visual evidence.

Similarly, CHARLOTTE BEHR presented a case study, which led to a more general discussion. In a close stylistic analysis of the first crafted artefacts depicting images from migration-period Scandinavia, she raised the question of the basic human need for visual self-expression. The Scandinavian tribes first developed visual crafting through their mercenaries' contact with Roman imagery and crafting technique. Although we lack substantial textual evidence of how Scandinavian societies reacted to the appearance of the visual among their midst, the acceptance and rapid development of own approaches to representational crafting proves its appeal as a medium for conveying messages. Most of the surviving items such as belt-buckles or fragments of ceremonial weapons are held to have been crafted for and used by rulers. Therefore, their iconography can be understood as a vehicle to express notions of power.

Also in this line of addressing general questions of the historians' work through the presentation of one specific case was DAWN ADES' paper on two Western works of arts. Nicolas Poussin's *Worship of the Golden Calf* (1633-34, London National Gallery) and Marcel Duchamp's *Bride stripped bare by her bachelors, even (The Large Glass)* (1915-23, Philadelphia Museum of Art) have not much in common in terms of genre or theme. Still, they both share one specific characteristic: They refer to a precise text. Poussin, in estimating his audiences' preconditioning, could take a sound knowledge of the Bible for granted. For his canvass, he had to choose one event in the story, paint it in such a way that everyone would recognize it while at the same time allow for the expression of his individual interpretation of this event. He depicted an unchaste dancer touching Aaron's sleeve, thus enclosing the High Priest into the sacrilegious circle of adulators, which prompts heavenly wrath. Poussin gave personal expression to the very moment in which even society's high representatives advocate the return to old, pagan myths of adulation. On the other hand, Duchamp's artwork consists not only of a painted window pane depicting a bride and nine bachelors, unrecognisable if not for the association with the title indication, but also of a written part in form of an accompanying text. As Duchamp seemed to have explained, he was responding to what he felt was an absence or diluting multitude of compelling, universal texts. He created his own written epos, ironical in tone through waiving syntactical orthodoxy and followability, earnest through the inclusion of what he considered to be the true human myths, erotic attraction and mystery. In the two cases, we have the necessity to acknowledge both parts of the source, the image and the text, for the comprehension of the historical meaning of the creational event, that is the ideas the respective authors intended to convey through the design of their artworks. Furthermore, Ades reminded her audience of the similarity in approaching textual or visual sources alike in an argumentation: Eventually, there is not so much difference between developing a thesis along different pieces of textual evidence only or out of one closed canvas, if it always needs supplementary textual evidence. Duchamp, as Ades' juxtaposition with Poussin revealed, can be credited for pointing out this fact so grossly through the ostentatious creation of a text that does not really give any help in understanding the accompanying picture in a literal sense: all it does is give some ground for vague associations that, at best, could make sense.

LYNDA NEAD introduced the non-static visual evidence to the conference through a short screening of parts of Mitchell and Kanyon's actuality films from the Edwardian era. Through an evaluation of their contemporaries' judgment of the different qualities of film, ranging from the hopes of an almost 3-D-like, dynamic form of documentation linked with the term „eye-history" to its rejection as a mere grey world of shadows, Nead was insisting on their usefulness to what she calls the „historical imagination". In this respect her paper was one of those addressing the function of the visual in most general terms. To her, a major difference between pictorial evidences as

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in works of art and visual evidence as in a documenting photo or film lies in their different degree of reality. Whereas the artwork only gives indirect indications on the intellectual currents of the time it was created, the visual is much more abundant in precise information otherwise often neglected in written testimonies such as people's fashion, behaviour or the shape of commodity architecture. Through those details the historian can engage in what one could paraphrase as a kind of visually assisted hermeneutics, directed at recreating the material situation of the times he or she deals with.

The most theoretical paper was presented by PETER BURKE. To the great satisfaction of some historians, he set forth methodological guidelines for dealing with visual evidence. Before delivering what he playfully called The Ten Commandments, he pointed out two basic characteristics of the non-dynamic visual evidence: It always shows a selection of something larger only, and this selection is always shown in a state of freeze. The ten imperatives a scholar dealing with a picture (a painting or a photo) should always address to his or her sources are: 1. Is the picture drawn directly from the original object or only from another pictorial representation of the original object? 2. Are there other pictures of the same object that could be used as a contrast with, to determine what kind of a selection process took place? 3. The complete picture, even its background details, has to be scrutinized to evaluate its accuracy. 4. One should always consider the possibilities of manipulation. 5. Who were the mediators, who made the picture in what kind of circumstances? 6. What was the material context of the picture, what was it originally created for? 7. How was the picture received when it was created, how in later times? 8. It is necessary to present the picture along with its historical context rather than isolated from it. 9. What more general remarks can be made about the interaction of the picture and the world outside? 10. There are no rules in general. Each historian dealing with pictures has to determine and follow his or her own set of rules. Arguably, Burke didn't intend to establish a rigid set of rules for using pictures, but rather sought to open a fruitful discussion on what kind of tacit consensus there should be within the historical-scientific community in dealing with images. A conscientious scrutiny of the picture before integrating it into the thesis' argumentation will be to the benefit of both the author and the reader, minimising the possibilities of destabilising the thesis if a material misjudgement of the picture becomes obvious.

Summing up the different papers and ensuing discussions, the merits of this conference were to give an account of the many ways in which to use visual evidence for a historiographic thesis. Two important results can be singled out: 1. The interest various disciplines revealed in the many questions raised, working methods and theories presented, highlights the current importance the visual evidence holds in contemporary historic sciences. 2. The thorough analysis of both the intrinsic structure of the image itself and of the circumstances surrounding its creation and reception will prove to be of great benefit to the force of the thesis.

Conference Overview

Dawn Ades (Essex): „The text of images"
Charlotte Behr (Roehampton): „Power and Function of Images in Migration-Period Scandinavia"
Peter Burke (Cambridge): „Visual History: The Ten Commandments"
Annie Coombes (Birbeck): „Gender and Memory in Post-Apartheid South Africa"
Matthew Jefferies (Manchester): „Wilhelmine monumentalism: on the political and cultural role of architecture in the German Empire"
Michael Lewis (British Museum): „The Bayeux Tapestry: an Accurate Reflection of the Real World of the Eleventh Century or a Work Indebted to Contemporary Art?"
Lynda Nead (Birbeck): „Just What is it that Makes the Pictorial so Different, so Appealing?"
Philipp Osten (Heidelberg/Stuttgart): „Patient Photography and Propaganda. Medical Images as Sources for the Social History of Medicine"
Kate Retford (Birbeck): „The Evidence of the Conversation Piece"

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