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Call for Papers

“Visual Culture” and “Religious Studies”

The many areas and phenomena that are of interest to religious studies are undoubtedly those in which humanity's visual inventiveness and creativity have been most at their productive and, on occasion, at their most surprising or their most bizarre. Do a great many cultures not survive in human archives and in human memory because of the evidence left by their temples, their ceremonies, their ritual artefacts, their liturgical vestments and their most typical “images”?

Only the visual systems associated with political power (royal, imperial, military but democratic, too) have been able to rival them in this field when not merging with them altogether.

So, let's start by taking up the idea of *Visual Culture* and trying to isolate what is most essential about it.

Very generally, it is possible to assert that, without exception, all cultures linked to human groups of whatever type or size have had and continue to have a very strong visual identity. Moreover, this is very often the most perceptible and, therefore, the most immediate expression of their existence and their character. This identity is itself based on rich and standardized repertoires of signs that are immediately recognized and understood by their members. Status, titles, hierarchies, roles, powers, fortune, age, gender *etc.*, not one of these fundamental features, whether individual or collective, exists in isolation from its visual expression. The visual has always had substantial weight and influence in the life of cultures... but has often been underestimated in their study.

The interdependence that exists between the main visual registers (body decoration, images, architectural designs, attire and symbolic objects but also ceremonies, festivals, parades, pageants *etc.*) is obvious everywhere and beyond dispute. This interdependence increases the impact of each of these registers and there is, evidently, no fear of redundancy since repetition and indeed accumulation increase the effectiveness of each element taken separately. Aesthetic and decorative aspects, impressive as they may be, must never

conceal the fact that these same cultures have been constantly working to create their own visual universes. In this respect, these visual universes are close to genuine cosmographies or, at the very least, are the clearest and most immediate demonstration that such cosmographies exist (although the word “cosmivision” would obviously work better here.) And these are what our eyes perceive and recognize first and foremost, something no authority has ever doubted, and certainly not dictatorships, hence the latter’s irrepressible tendency to put themselves constantly and everywhere on display.

The visual artefacts designed and produced in each culture seem then to be arranged in coherent systems which extend at the same time into symbols and practice. The visual is often not just what is on show and what strikes the eye but also something that represents or depicts something else (a particular god, the king, disease, the hereafter, death, fortune, happiness, etc.) and evokes, prescribes or commands in an almost performative manner (membership, fear, astonishment, admiration, obedience, fascination, respect, etc.).

It is impossible to talk about this triple function at the same time as talking about the notion of a system without simultaneously evoking ideas about the methods, economy and politics of the visual. From what has already been said, it follows in effect that each culture necessarily has a conception of the visible and, very often, in symmetry, a conception of the invisible. This global conception is composed of orthodoxies and orthopraxies since these draw their inspiration from what has to be called politics: what does it show? What does it put on display? What does it conceal or censure? What does it promote? What does it condemn? What does it transfigure or disfigure? To what end and following what rules? What institutions (church, party, administration, political power...) are primarily if not exclusively in charge of it? And what devices (media, technical, social, political, religious) do these institutions invent and perfect to this end?

The visual universes of each culture, or even each *subculture*, must then be regarded as sophisticated constructions that are the outcomes of lengthy and complex processes. They are indeed systems rather than mere accumulations of artefacts in as much as they are based on a working together of techniques and devices (design, production, diffusion), which are themselves subordinate to the search for effectiveness. *A fortiori* when they concern such powerful (and exhibitionist) institutions as the monarchy under Louis XIV, the film industry, the North Korean Communist Party or the Catholic Church. These visual universes are not mere appearances, in other words, the picturesque expression or the superficial manifestation of something located elsewhere that is of greater essence. The strength and power of the visual lies first of all in its visuality rather than in its potential abstract meanings, which are in any case arrived at only

after lengthy analyses. We see and have seen and are thus affected long before we have understood. Advertisers, filmmakers, painters, architects are all well aware of this. That the visual is designed to be seen immediately and without distraction, in a word to “impress”, is perhaps what best describes its unique and irreplaceable character. As opposed to reading which requires a sufficiently long period of time to allow thinking to come into play.

If we now look from the *religious studies* aspect, what do we see? Although these visual universes have been everywhere available to them, *religious studies* have scarcely studied them in any systematic way at all, that is to say, by acknowledging their status as specific productions and devices. In line with the dominant tendency of our academic culture, religious studies have essentially remained text based (philology, translation, commentaries, hermeneutics, exegesis, interpretation, etc.). Here, however, we are happy to put the case for visibility not being systematically subordinated to textuality. In other words, for the effectiveness and purpose inherent in the visual not being sacrificed to the search for “deep” meanings thought to be contained only in the texts.

Moreover, the visual archives of humanity present an opportunity for *religious studies* to raise a series of fascinating questions:

Do visual artefacts and devices of a “religious” kind differ and to what extent from those employed by royal, imperial, dictatorial or even democratic regimes? Do the pomp and circumstances of public ceremonies, for example, whether religious or secular, have recourse to different visual principles and procedures? Are they seeking to have the same effect? These questions could also be asked of propaganda images or the super-human scale of buildings like temples and palaces.

Is it in fact possible, from a deliberately chosen standpoint of purely visual productions and devices, to talk about similarities (of structure, form, function, aesthetic . . .) among all religious cultures? And, if so, what do these teach us?

At a less general level, it is still possible and no doubt fascinating to wonder:

Whether the visible/invisible relationship represents what is almost a cultural invariant of the human spirit, a way of organizing and apprehending the symbolic universes imagined and created by humanity itself;

How the invisible is shown;

What rules, procedures and techniques have been used in different places? How, in particular, the gods and other supernatural beings have been depicted and, in this area, whether common features are to be discovered at the level of these techniques and procedures for depiction? An entire chapter could be given over to the representation of incarnations, metamorphoses and other hierophanies.

On the level of a monograph covering one specific area, one might ask first of all what “visual policies” have been pursued by a particular institution (the Counter-Reformation, the evangelical churches, Catholic missions, Tibetan Buddhism, Buryat shamanism . . .) in a given sphere (the use of architecture, images, spectacle or masks etc.) and in a given context (healing, the Inquisition, conversion, evangelism . . .). And, above all, what are the ostensive methods by which these same policies have devised and implemented practical procedures and technical means? *A fortiori* when unique and original solutions have been invented that have no equivalents in other fields.

Given our awareness of the sometimes bloody controversies caused by the use of imagery throughout history (iconophilia, iconophobia and iconoclasm), what do we know for certain about the powers and effectiveness of the “religious” pictures/images? What’s more, since we know that the visual is very rarely used on its own, we must not neglect relationships of complementarity or homology, particularly with the auditory (words, music, chants). How can we assess the impact these have on the faithful, on actors and spectators, which is at once both cognitive and emotional? Is it possible in certain cases to talk about the “religious” education of the gaze? In particular, when care has clearly been taken in devising the choice of artefacts, the prescribed mental disciplines and the systems of visualisation so that each enhances the effects and impacts of the other.

Of all these questions, however, the most fundamental is obviously the one that can be summed up simply by asking: do religious phenomena have a “visual culture” of their own? Because, in order to answer in the affirmative, it must be possible to say what means, what techniques, what devices and what specific objectives that culture is able to use to ensure its own effectiveness.

This is the undoubtedly controversial question we would like to make the focus of a subsequent issue of *MTSR*.

Interested authors may send a title and a 20 lines summary to:

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