

RALPH DEKONINCK

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?*

I am the product of a very classical training in art history, from a time when the stylistic approach was the main orientation of art history studies in my university, with an opening towards the analysis of works of art by laboratory methods. While relying on such foundations, my path has opened up towards more properly iconological questions. My research is part of what is known today as “visual exegesis” applied to early-modern religious imagery. This expression of “visual exegesis” is not only to be understood in the sense of a simple exercise of iconographic/iconological interpretation: it refers more precisely to the study of image-specific visual strategies aimed to produce sensible meanings or meaningful affects, with a view to reform, conversion, or inner conformation. The interpretive act, both intellectual and affective, was at that time conceived according to this pragmatic aim. It was guided or induced by a certain visual rhetoric (which relied on the combination of various figurative registers, from narrative to symbolic). In the cases of the illustrations of Jesuit meditation literature on which I have worked, it can be said that the image can compete with ingenuity to enter into resonance with textual exegesis. Far from confining itself to a role of illustration or dependence on the gloss of written commentaries, the image glosses itself, or even thinks itself, by producing its own “theory” in the etymological sense of the term *theoria*, i.e. by producing the conditions for its own contemplation and understanding. The image thus becomes not only the support or the locus of meditation, but even more the motor of spiritual transformation. Therefore, in my field of inquiry we can speak of a shift from the study of images to the study of the process of vision, that is to say towards the relationship of the beholder to the object of meditation through the latter’s image. This belies the idea that “we cannot see what seeing is”: representation can be offered as a meditation on the very act of seeing, which opens up very stimulating research perspectives on the experience of the image, or rather on the image conceived and lived as an experience.

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

Here are the three books, published between 1989 and 1993, that marked the beginning of my career as a researcher in art history, many other authors – such as Louis Marin and Marie-José Mondzain – having after that guided my steps: David Freedberg, *The Power of Images. Studies in the History and Theory of Response*, Chicago, 1989; Georges Didi-Huberman, *Devant l'image. Questions posées aux fins d'une histoire de l'art*, Paris, 1990 (*Confronting Images. Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art*, trans. John Goodman, University Park, 2005); Victor Stoichita, *L'instauration du tableau*, Paris, 1993 (*The Self-Aware Image. An Insight into Early Modern Meta-Painting*, a revised and updated edition, Turnhout, 2015).

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?*

Concerning the understanding of the distinction, and even the opposition between iconography and style or meaning and form in relation to Christian images, I would say that we have inherited the Christian *doxa* drawn from the famous letter of Gregory the Great to the iconoclast bishop Serenus of Marseille. It is well known that this letter grants the image a linguistic status, able to stand in for the sacred text in order to serve those who do not have access to it. This conception was to leave a profound impression on our “natural” way of interpreting images in terms of meaning and reading. As a reaction to this logocentric approach that sees the image as a text to be read, the pendulum has tended to swing the other way and research has shifted attention from meaning to the material presence of images. Images appear as objects endowed with a certain power, a feature that short-circuits the classical metaphysics of representation, whose tendency is to reduce representation to a disembodied sign or as an imitation of reality that has a symbolic or mimetic meaning. In this respect it is possible to speak of a return to presence instead of representation. This is probably a reaction to the increasing dematerialisation of images in contemporary society, the very term “image” now tending to make us forget its material density.

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 new scholarly debates?*

Like a return of the repressed, the powers of images have come to the surface, and we have (re)discovered all their anthropological depths, hidden since the Renaissance by the theoretical and even ideological frameworks of artistic literature and then of art history. It is therefore no coincidence that the anthropological turn that has affected art historical research in recent years has come mainly from medievalists who have sought to reveal the workings of the belief in the efficacy of images. Some images are now considered as agents, that is to say, as objects endowed with an ability to act or to trigger reactions and not simply as things to be interpreted as passive transporters of ideas. The image does not simply produce meaning, but also actions or reactions, based sometimes on the idea or belief that

they can act by themselves. This move from the material turn to the performative turn characterises a series of research projects carried out in a wide variety of fields, all of which attempt to go beyond what images tell us or show us towards what they want, or more precisely towards the “needs, desires and demands they embody” (Mitchell); in short, what we want from images. To put it simply, while it is obvious that an image can make us cry, how can we believe that it might cry by itself? This scholarship has especially highlighted the ways in which belief in the efficacy and agency of images depends on a series of factors, ranging from their specific material and formal characteristics to the ways in which they were displayed and the rituals activating them or being activated by them.

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?*

In recent years, we have witnessed a revival of scholarship on ornament (closely related to a new interest in the study of *parerga* and framing effects in general), a dimension that seems to have escaped the field of iconography, of meaning and of representation. Being no more considered as a simple pattern, ornament is today approached as a complex phenomenon whose significance exceeds the strictly stylistic dimension. Its aesthetic dimension, far from being limited to the issue of taste and fashion, must be reintegrated within the realm of human intentions and actions. By serving with its aesthetic qualities the significations (symbolic, ritual, etc.) of the object, the ornament acts on the spectator and makes him react in return. The ways in which ornamentation affects meaning need thus to be considered. In particular, we need to examine the ways in which an image is often transformed by the force of its ornamentation, but also by the ornamental apparatus accompanying it and bringing it before the viewer. Let me remind that the primary meaning of *ornamentum* relates to the harmony between form and function. Deriving from the Greek etymology referring at one and the same time to the idea of beauty (cosmetic) and to the idea of order (cosmos), it designates the appropriateness to a function, even to what guarantees its efficacy, or even efficiency, and therefore quite the opposite of the superfluous to which we habitually attach the word.

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

If we consider that the majority of medieval and early-modern images-objects were viscerally rooted in situations that gave them sense and to which they gave sense, I would say that I understand this last word “sense” (and not “meaning”) in three complementary ways: in that it touches not only on the question of meaning, but also in the way it refers to the organisation of space, to the paths induced, to the direction of the gaze as well as of the body; and finally in that it refers to sensitivity, to the affects, to the emotions that make sense, according to the first two meanings of the term that I have just mentioned. Meaning, space, and emotion/motion, or if one prefers the semantic, kinaesthetic and aesthetic dimensions (in the primary sense of *aesthesis*), such are, in my opinion, the coordinates of what I would call the situated arts or images, at least in the field that is mine.

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?*

Let me express a truism: in the era of globalisation and the digitisation of images, which are now apprehended in fairly virtual networks, and in the face of the musealisation of many works of the past that were not conceived for the museum, it is important today to consider anew the inscription of works in spatial-temporal situations, or in what we should call their “chronotopes” in the early days of their creation and reception. Alfred Gell speaks of “Art nexus” to designate the network of intentionalities through which producers and receivers, not to mention all the mediators or mediations in between, act on the senses of the work, and make sometimes the work itself act as an agent in its own right. For my part, I prefer the expression of “art connections” that I understand according to the orientations that I have just mentioned (cf. answer to the question 6) and which do not exclude the mediators and mediations. What interests me are the networks of images and objects that constitute what I would be tempted to call a “spatial nexus” in which these images-objects make sense. This corresponds more or less to what Jérôme Baschet called “relational iconography” or to what Ernst Gombrich called the “ecology of images” referring to the visual environment with which human beings have always interacted.

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?*

In my field of research, the study of the interactions between spiritual practices and artistic practices (cf. answer to question 1), or, to be more precise, the study of the interferences between the plastic and symbolic characteristics of the works on the one hand, and the meditative modalities of their creation as well as their reception on the other hand, allows us to better understand the complex relationship between the visual appearance of an image and the expectations of its creator and its viewers that they also contribute to construct. It is a question of looking at the mental equipment of the spectator of the time, i.e., the ways in which his visual and spiritual culture is deeply impregnated with the protocols of reading and experiencing the image conveyed by meditative literature.

More broadly speaking, if we consider images-objects as a crucible of human relationships, the principle of life (*Eigenleben*) in images, according to Bredekamp, can no longer be seen conceived as a direct extension of the human body or society, but as a force (*Eigenkraft*) emanating naturally from images themselves, a force that can act on the body as on society. It is possible to speak of figural forces, to use the terminology of Louis Marin, while Bredekamp prefers to speak of *Potentia* or *Latenz* to designate these latencies activated at a precise moment or in specific circumstances. To see the image as a force is in fact to take an interest in power as potential, in potentiality, that is to say, in the entirety of what the image is able to bring about. What then are the characteristics of this

latent force, and what activates or intensifies it, what contributes to its performance and to its efficacy? That is the question that seems most important to me.

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

If we were to apply this question to the field of spirituality, it is interesting to note how material images were not only able to assimilate many of the protocols of meditational or devotional practices, but also how they were able to impregnate these practices themselves, right up to the mystical experiences whose relations testify well to this impregnation of the visual models in vogue at the time. Spirituality has as main objective the transformation and conformation of the faithful to the models given as examples to be imitated. It is on this ground that meditation has been thought as a painting in action. Painting was in fact used as a model for thinking about the act of spiritual imitation, the meditator being assimilated to a living image, a likeness in the making, who undergoes or participates in the work of conformation, a kind of "spiritual galvanoplasty" to use Henri Bremond's beautiful expression. Thus, the image in act is at the heart of the meditative process, as a means and an end. It is in this sense that meditation could be thought of as painting in action.

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

Many studies have repositioned the question of the material side of art works at the centre of art historians' interests. In contrast to an approach to art history that has long avoided the material dimension of images in favour of an often strictly stylistic or iconographical analysis, it is now understood that the properties and values of materials are part of the very meaning of works of art and the ways in which they are received. It invites us to consider how materials generate certain forms and appearances, and how they bring about and maintain certain beliefs in the immanent power of objects, independent of their formal or representational value. This reflection is for example particularly relevant for liturgical objects made of a wide variety of materials (metals, wood, ivory, textiles...) whose symbolic meaning pertains to their efficacy.

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?*

Turning away from classical iconographic and stylistic approaches, research has attempted to understand the uses and practices which an image can give rise to. Many images form indeed a knotwork of social actions and interactions with it being at one and the same time the object and the means. From this, a body of thought on the functions of the image and on its power to bring about actions or reactions has been developed. It had long been recognised that the image could arouse an emotion, but this emotion in turn was able to provoke a motion, such as prayer, conversion, donation, and so on, just to mention the type of reactions closely related to religious images.

Let's take again the example of the liturgical realm. It is obvious that in order to better apprehend the meaning and efficacy of ritual objects, a strictly stylistic and iconographic approach cannot suffice any longer, because these objects only 'function' within a complex system of relations: relations with the people who ordered and manipulated them; relations with the ritualized time-space; and finally, the relation between the different objects themselves displayed and used in a certain order.

More generally speaking, we could say that this type of images is only performative insofar it is performed, i.e., insofar it engages the spectator in a performance. It is even possible to say that it is effective only when it is performed, in the sense of the performing arts.

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.*

The presence of the image, during the Middle Ages and the Early-Modern period, has never been as isolated as a work of art hanging in a museum might be (and yet such a work is not really isolated, the museum itself being a frame that locates the work and determines its artistic status); the image or object is always located in a specific place and within a network of other artefacts, gestures, words, sounds, smells... After considering the nature of the work, it is therefore necessary to go beyond its immediate frame to understand it within this network of sensitive relationships that are thus fashioned around it and because of it.

The symbiotic environment (cf. answer question 7), which I envisage in the church spaces of early modernity, is composed not only of a great variety of image-objects but also of a multitude of deeply ritualised gestures and words. This is particularly true for the ways in which the rituality of ordinary liturgical times on the one hand and the extraordinary religious festivities on the other constituted powerful factors in activating works of art and images. Far from being conceived as autonomous pieces that we could contemplate today in isolation, these works were, for the most part, integrated, understood, and experienced in complex ensembles that were both perennial and ephemeral. This mixture of ephemeral and perennial art prompts us to rethink our conception of the hierarchy of the arts and the boundaries between the different artistic and visual media.

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?*

The history of art, especially for the periods after the Middle Ages, continues to maintain a division between image and object. This division is still characteristic of museums, which distinguish between works of art that correspond to an image (essentially painting and sculpture) and the so-called decorative arts, which fulfil a function that is not exclusively iconic and artistic. Many of these objects do not carry any image. This does not prevent these objects from making images, i.e., from being a space for the projection of an

imaginary. An object doesn't need to be figurative to be efficient, and to form a knotwork of social actions and interactions. This is also one of the main lessons of the anthropology of images and art.

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?*

Within the frame of what is labelled today "Global art history", the investigations on all type of cultural and especially visual circulations and transfers constitute certainly one of the main trends of the present research. If we want to understand for example the worldwide dissemination of early-modern European images, in particular engravings (and for my part more specifically the Antwerp engravings), and their influence on diverse visual cultures, we need to better understand the reasons for this international success. In other words, we need to examine the conditions of possibility of cultural transfer and translation as well as explaining its effects. This supposes to reconsider the classic question of influence exerted by the European prototypes on the new conquered territories, by setting aside the model of a one-way relationship between prototype and copy, which assumes a certain passivity on the part of the receiver and the exercise of a certain power of domination on the part of the issuer. This conception, based largely on the idea of images as propaganda tools in the hands of conquering powers imposing their models, did in fact persist for a long time. In recent years, attention has turned more towards the factors involved in the various forms of visual interbreeding that typify the dissemination and assimilation of this European imagery throughout the world. The image, thus directly or indirectly inspired by the first European visual sources, can turn out to be the result of a subtle interplay of borrowings that can affect both themes and modes of composition, or even particular motifs, which can be infinitely recombined according to a grammar and syntax that have yet to be understood in terms of how they operate and which cultural issues are involved.

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?*

For some time now, research in the anthropology of the image has sought to move away from specifically Western framework of thought in order to think about the image by shifting towards the study of non-Western cultures. Anthropologists such as Alfred Gell, Carlo Severi and Philippe Descola, specialists in these cultures, have in turn attempted to take a renewed look at European arts thanks to this departure from their own cultural framework. The recent broadened reflections of Philippe Descola in *Les formes du visible* (2021) thus seek to account for four modalities of figuration or figurative schemes through time and across cultures on a global scale (animism, naturalism, totemism and analogism), the comparative perspective allowing him to bring together an Alaskan Yup'ik mask, an Aboriginal bark painting, a miniature landscape from the Song dynasty and a

Dutch interior painting from the 17th century. While the generalising ambitions of such a comparative anthropology of figuration may appear somewhat excessive and, for some, somewhat reductive, it is certain that it contributes to a fresh look at the iconic and artistic heritage of the West through this test of otherness.

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

In emphasising the conditions of creation and even more the modalities of reception of images, some main trends in art historical research and Visual Studies have tended to neglect their intrinsic being as a factor that can activate their power. In this regard Bredekamp speaks of 'intrinsischer Bildakt' (intrinsic image-act) to account for the intrinsic power of images. The presence in question here is no longer that of the referent in the image or of the forces manipulating it, but that of the image itself, and it matters little whether this is anthropomorphic or not, figurative or not. We need therefore to reintroduce the issue of the aesthetic dimension of images, a dimension that must not be reduced simply to the philosophical sense of beauty but for which it is necessary to restore the etymological sense relating to sensibility. The anthropology of the image and the Visual Studies have attempted to deconstruct the aesthetic approach to the work of art so that other forms of reaction suppressed or sublimated by the aesthetic reaction might be considered; with the consequence that this dimension has been neglected in research. Now, the power of images can be brought back to the question of their sensible force. This is probably one of the best manners to reconcile iconography and style or meaning and form.

Ralph Dekoninck
UCLouvain
ralph.dekoninck@uclouvain.be