



Universität Zürich

Religionswissenschaftliches Seminar

Kirchgasse 9

CH-8001 Zürich

Tel. +41 44 634 47 38

Fax +41 44 634 49 91

mglavac@access.uzh.ch

www.religionswissenschaft.uzh.ch/medien

Lic. Phil. Monika Glavac

Assistentin

International Exchange on Media and Religion Approaches to Visual Media

August 2009, 24th – 26th

This year, the international meeting on media and religion was held in St. Stephen's House in Oxford. The participants were requested to write their papers on methodological approaches to visual sources before the meeting and to post them by the end of June so that all the others could read them before the meeting and be prepared for discussion.

1 Participants

The Bible in Art, Music and Literature, University of Oxford

Christopher Rowland, Queen's College

Natasha O'Hear, Worcester College

Fondazione Bruno Kessler, Istituto di Scienze Religiose, Trento

Stefanie Knauss

Debora Tonelli

Davide Zordan

Medien und Religion, Religionswissenschaftliches Seminar, Universität Zürich

Monika Glavac

Anna-Katharina Höpfligner

Marie-Therese Mäder

Fabian Perlini

Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati

(Tommi Mendel)

University of London

Ann Jeffers, Heythrop College

Cambridge Theological Federation and Anglia Ruskin University

Zoë Bennett

The Open University

(Melanie Wright, Milton Keynes)

Systematische Theologie und Hermeneutik, Universität Zürich

(Pierre Bühler)

The names in () indicate that the participants were not present but their papers had been posted and were discussed.

2 Programme

The aim of the meeting was to discuss different methodological approaches to visual media, in order to produce a publication on the topic. Following contributions were collected:



- Monika Glavac: The Representation of the 'Other' in the Caricatures – An Example
- Christopher Rowland: Blake's Nativity Scenes
- Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati: Images in Images. Self-reflection as an Approach to Visual Sources
- Anna-Katharina Höpflinger: Hierarchies of Gaze. A Semiotic Approach to Marduk's Battle against Tīāmat on a Relief from the Temple of Bēl in Palmyra
- Zoë Bennett: Creation made Image and Image made Word: John Ruskin on JMW Turner's Snow Storm
- Ann Jeffers: Seeing is Believing: Representations of Women in the Luther Bible of 1534
- Davide Zordan: Painting the Word/representing the Piety in a Rembrandt's Masterpiece
- Debora Tonelli: The "Go on the Stage" of the Divine Violence in Ex 15, 1-18
- Pierre Bühler (Not present): Don Quichotte as Image and Text in Friedrich Dürrenmatts Work
- Natasha O'Hear: Visualising the Vision: Hans Memling's Apocalypse Panel
- Melanie J. Wright (not present): Material Judaism: interpreting the *Pushke*
- Tommi Mendel (not present): Critical Reading in Documentary Film
- Marie-Therese Mäder: Methods in the Field of Film and Religion: A Multidisciplinary Perspective.
- Fabian Perlini: Censorship and Self-expression. The Banning of the German Propaganda Movie I ACCUSE in Switzerland.
- Stefanie Knauss: How to talk about what one can't talk about? Theological Reflections on Sex, Death and Transcendence, with the Help of Cinema

3 Working Style

The contributions were grouped in three sections: "Images", "Images and Texts", and "Film". After the presentation of the key issues of each paper, each section was discussed transversally with attention to common points in the methodological approach. Finally, each participant had to make a written statement on the relevance of his/her statement for the whole project.

The result is a rich and broad range of essays dealing with peculiarities of visual analyses for the study of religious traditions in historical and contemporary perspectives.

4 Topics

One of the main tasks of the meeting was the critical characterisation of the different approaches to images, considering their focuses and limits. Being an interdisciplinary exchange, the concern is to find coherence within the project, while leaving space to different accents. Each participant works on different kinds and genres of images and visual media, with different material and narrative aspects: the visual media range from an ancient bas-relief found at the Bēl temple in Palmyra to a contemporary American Jewish pushke but also from work of arts by William Blake, Rembrandt and William Turner to popular media like films, votive-paintings and caricatures. Despite this variety of visual media, some common aspects connecting the different methodological approaches could be clearly defined:

a) Subjectivity in seeing

A common line within the different approaches can be found in the strong link to the gaze as a subjective experience. The interest for the image, the concern for it, and the experience of looking at it can be described as a dialogue between the image and the viewer. It is the viewer who asks about his/her emotional reactions watching a film, an object, or an image. At this level the strong link between emotional, affective and rational approach to the image is of crucial importance.

Therefore, the reconstruction of the meaning of a certain image remains closely bound to the experience of seeing it. In some cases it could be shown that the process of affective and rational perception of the image is directed by the composition of the image itself.

The main problem of this subjective approach to images lies in its intersubjective communicability: How can emotions or feelings in the process of visual consumption be translated into words? How can this important aspect of a methodological approach be described transparently?

b) Contextualisation

A very common element lies also in the necessity of embedding a chosen image into its relevant context. On this level important questions arose: Which are the relevant contexts of a given image? From a synchronic perspective, there are the contexts of the producers and the contexts of the recipients that can be quite different. From a diachronic perspective there are many contexts relevant for images transmitted from generation to generation. This question was discussed particularly in relation to images that are strongly related to biblical narrative and that have played a role in different historical contexts, as for instance illustrations of Luther's Bible. We noticed that the con-



textualisation of the images tends to be reduced to the moment of its production, even though some examples clearly focussed on other crystallisation point in visual reception, as for instance the comment of John Ruskin on Turner's Snow Storm has shown.

The approach to images by contextualisation raises also other crucial questions, particularly those regarding the contextualisation of the historical gaze: What can be understood as "seeing" in a specific time? As the contribution on an ancient Near Eastern source has demonstrated, there are even images that had been invisible to the human viewers at a certain time.

Furthermore, questions about the materiality and the technical aspects of the production of visual media should be taken into consideration. Here we detected some aspects that will have to be integrated in the papers before publication.

5 Preparation of a Volume

The following steps will lead to a volume to be published in 2010.

- Dossier with abstracts, short biography, number and quality of the image, length of the contribution (due for September 2009)
- Final redaction of the papers incl. the images and the permission for their publication (due for December 2009)
- Introduction by the editors (due for December 2009)

In the mean time we are looking for a publishing house and possible conditions for the publication.

6 Prospects

All the involved research groups appreciated the challenge of an international exchange on visual media in religious studies and expressed their wish to continue the collaboration. A meeting in Zurich is planned for next year (May 8th – 9th) dealing with "Religious Images and Social Imagination". The meeting aims to find out possibilities to interpret images in their relationship to social context, particularly considering their effects on social processes. Each participant will explore this new perspective with a selected example from his/her current research. Although a new aspect has been defined, the concern about methods will remain important. The topic will be further developed during the next meeting in Oxford (August 2011, 24th – 26th), St. Stephen's House or Queen's College.

7 Financial support

We would like to thank the University of Zurich for its financial support.

Zurich, 31/8/2009

Monika Glavac