

EDITORIAL 2014

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About a century ago it was written that it would be “a highly dangerous experiment which could be successful from time to time but if observed as a matter of principle would become a loose cannon”. Carl Robert was warning his readers not to interpret pictorial works of art on the basis of array, setting, companion pieces, and findspot. It would be preferable to interpret every image on its own terms.¹

Nevertheless, at the end of the last century, propelled by diverse turns – namely the pictorial, the iconic, and the visual turn –, a new field of scholarly research emerged in cultural studies and humanities, labelled as visual culture studies in the Anglo-American sphere and *Bildwissenschaft* in German-speaking countries.² Its subject-matter is not only analysis and interpretation of images but also, from a culture studies perspective, the practices of perception, of seeing and looking, as well as matters of construction and transmission of meaning in the visual field. It is not only about the interpretation of images on their own terms but also the analysis of visual worlds in their sociocultural und historically specific forms and contexts.

Research into past cultures is mainly based on the interpretation of artefacts as material expressions of these cultures with a corresponding epistemic potential. These artefacts were already embedded into specific visual contexts when they were created. This applies to pictures on ceram-

- 1 C. Robert, *Archaeologische Hermeneutik. Anleitung zur Deutung klassischer Bildwerke* (Berlin 1919) 232. 259: “[...] ein höchst gefährliches Experiment, das zwar gelegentlich einmal glücken kann, aber zum Prinzip erhoben direkt gemeingefährlich wirkt”.
- 2 *Bildwissenschaft* and visual culture studies are not congruent with each other but both mainly understood as interdisciplinary. *Bildwissenschaft* is concerned with basic philosophical and aesthetic questions regarding the idea of the image whilst visual culture studies more look into the practices of perception. – Cf. Bachmann-Medick, *Cultural Turns. Neuorientierungen in den Kulturwissenschaften* (Reinbek bei Hamburg 2010) 329–380.

ic vessels, wall paintings, reliefs or sculpture and also to architecture or urban designs. Therefore, it is not far-fetched to apply perspectives of visual culture studies in cultural history.

Such a development would be logical for disciplines like so-called classical archaeology which began to change its orientation³ from an idealising classicism to an archaeology shaped by social sciences and cultural anthropology.⁴ Visual culture studies are not only aiming at the products of alleged high cultures and distinguished works of art but – like cultural studies and the new tendencies in German *Kulturgeschichte* – at the visual aspects of cultures at large. The conventional methods for the interpretation of images – iconography, iconology, formal aesthetics, stylistic analysis – are complemented by further theoretical approaches: There are product-oriented methods like semiotics, psychoanalysis and discourse analysis, production-oriented methods dealing with material and technical questions of image production and visual modes of perception, and finally reception-oriented methods and theories researching the signifying activity of the perceiving subjects.⁵

The above mentioned turns were accompanied by the observation that the technical developments in the 20th century – new means of reproduction, mass media, photography, and the PC – spawned a flood of images which made it seem worthwhile to have a fresh look at contemporary cultures in the light of visual aspects. However, today there is no doubt that it is reasonable to apply such new orientations also in respect of past cultures, especially illiterate ones or such with little alphabetisation where images are important carriers of messages and meaning.

Further the point is not only analysis of past visual worlds but also their subsequent visualisations, imaginations, and orchestrations like, for

3 A turn which was initiated in the 1970ies by Burkhard Fehr, Herbert Hoffmann, and Lambert Schneider and which at the University of Hamburg is mirrored in the labelling of the discipline as *Archäologie und Kulturgeschichte des antiken Mittelmeerraums* (archaeology and cultural history of the ancient Mediterranean).

4 In classical archaeology such new orientations are emerging as, for example, in 2013 the *Kiel-Hamburg-Aarhus Network for the Study of Ancient Visual Culture (KHAN)* was founded.

5 Cf. S. Prinz – A. Reckwitz, *Visual Studies*, in: S. Moebius (ed.), *Kultur. Von den Cultural Studies bis zu den Visual Studies* (Bielefeld 2012) 180.

example, in museal, filmic, and artistic contexts which as constructions and appropriations of past worlds call for cultural history's attention.

It is the aim of this new journal "Visual Past" which is freely available on the website <http://www.visualpast.de> to be a forum for research into cultural history from the afore-mentioned viewpoints. The journal's title refers to the field of visual culture studies. However, no paradigmatic orientation is intended but only a reference to the wide discussion contexts of visual culture studies and *Bildwissenschaften*. The further debate on the diverse currents on such studies and more traditional approaches is left to the authors of this journal. The only paradigm may be openness to interdisciplinarity. Contributions from archaeology and art history are as welcome as such from media and communication studies, cognitive science and cultural anthropology.