Artifacts, Images and Forms in Global Circulation (Paris, 13–14 Jun 19)

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Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel, Université de Genève, CH

Artifacts, Images and Forms in Global Circulation
A Digital Approach of Visual Semantics

Co-organizers :
Ecole Normale supérieure, Université de Grenoble-Alpes/Laboratoire de Recherche Historique Rhône-Alpes, Purdue College of Liberal Arts.

Chairs :
Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel, Paula Barreiro-Lopez, Catherine Dossin.

As part of the 10th anniversary of the Artl@s project, we are organizing an international conference on the digital approach to the circulation of images and forms.

In his groundbreaking project, the Atlas Mnemosyne, Aby Warburg suggested that some shapes travel, passing times and cultures. On their way, accompanied by processes of mixture, borrowings, transfers and resemanticizations that contribute to their impact, they become acting symbols. Building on this idea, Herbert Read proposed in The origin of forms in art (1965) that artistic forms can be formalized and reduced to certain shapes that carry “lines of beauty” and thus symbolic meaning. Such ideas, we believe, could serve as a starting point for cross-disciplinary research that would bring together art historians, historians, linguists, and computer and cognitive scientists with the aim to discover the basic units of a generalizable “visual semantics” of artistic creation.

More and more art historical sources are available online worldwide. This should not only excite us to reconstruct the global circulation of images and artifacts, but also use these tools to (re-) consider the mobility of images, patterns, and styles. Indeed, one of the greatest limitations of the digital approach so far is that it has not been confronted with the circulation of images (shapes, colours, layouts) in a massive way.

This international conference aims to assess the potential of digital technology in renewing our study and understanding of artistic circulations and in the collective and progressive deployment of alternative narratives which are more de-centered and more inclusive.

Presentations on all historical periods addressing the following themes are welcome.

1. Networks, (subaltern) Agents and the Politics of Visual Circulation
How does a pattern circulate and inform the creation of new visual and political meanings? Some visual productions (arts, graphics, poster, cinema, TV, photography, video) have contributed to the transmission and international diffusion of specific political, artistic and collective memories. With the development of computer vision and deep learning on images, today we have the means to study this circulation and better understand how specific patterns and the political semiotics they convey circulate and multiply. However, digital approaches have most often focused on linking actors involved in the international circulation of images, styles, ideas or works of art. We are interested in approaches that will not only present the tools used for reconstructing and analyzing these networks, but above all that will show the specific and innovative contribution of the digital compared to analog or traditional approaches.

2. Canals, bottlenecks, intersections: digital geography of artistic circulations
What do digital tools contribute to our understanding of the geography of artistic circulations? What are the bottlenecks? The intersections? The factors of circulation and non-circulation? Their evolutions through time? Moreover, can a digital geography of art convincingly lead us out of the historiographical myth of centres and peripheries and of translatio imperii? Recent studies have demonstrated that we cannot think of the world geography of the arts as a homogeneous field dominated by a centre. In the field of Global and Connected History, specialists have given contextualized complex answers to the question of globalization and global cultural geography. Can computational, quantitative approaches support and expand their conclusions?

3. Iconology in the digital age
Digital approaches work above all with textual data. For instance, the tools in the Artl@s database of catalogues can already help track the circulation of an artwork or of a motif through the analysis of artists' names and the titles of artworks. But the starting point is still textual. What information must be crossed to be sure that we talk about images, and not only about their producers or their titles or their display? The availability of huge visual databases, and the possibilities allowed by digital analysis technologies, make it possible to ask again the questions of the old iconology and to ask them on a massive scale. The challenge of globalization renews the intuitions of art historians such as Heinrich Wölfflin or Aby Warburg who, more than a century ago, wanted to understand the logic of stylistic dissemination. Would it be an autonomy of forms once the historical and social logics had been relativized? Can digital methods help answer this question? Could a pathos formula (Pathosformel) be tracked by a recursive neural network?

Proposals should be sent before February 15, 2019 to Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel (beatrice.joyeux-prunel@ens.fr): a summary of 300 words max, accompanied by a CV in English. The conference will be held in English on 13 and 14 June 2019 at the Ecole normale supérieure, 45 rue d'Ulm, Paris.

This conference is organized in the framework of the research projects Artl@s, Ecole normale supérieure – PSL /Institut d'Histoire modern et contemporaine, in collaboration with MoDe(s)2 – Modernidad(es) Descentralizada(s): arte, política y contracultura en el eje transatlántico durante la Guerra Fría HAR2017-82755-P and the Laboratoire de Recherche Historique Rhône-Alpes (LARHRA).

Reference:

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