

What can pictures still do in the 21st century? (Bordeaux, 3-4 Jul 25)

Bordeaux Montaigne University, Jul 3-04, 2025

Deadline: Jan 6, 2025

Maryse Ouellet

What can pictures still do in the 21st century? Figuring reality in visual arts.

This conference aims to examine the question of figurative art at the beginning of the 21st century. Nowadays, figurative artistic models are challenged by increasingly sophisticated technologies that reshape our definition of “the real,” and more particularly, of reality. AI-generated images tend to normalize manipulated and distorted representations of the world we live in and can sometimes become indistinguishable from real images (“deepfakes”).

In the context of art production, the concepts of realism and reality are usually considered in relation to the question of aesthetic mimesis. The most widespread assumption is that figurative art is not some form of copying of reality, but its representation through a specific medium. The following question can thus be raised: how can visual arts continue to produce images that offer an interpretation of a constantly distorted reality, that deceives viewers’ perceptual capacities and cognitive functions? Returning to Peircean semiotics and the interpretation of signs might help us grasp and analyze the complex forms of these “new images” (sometimes combining image and text) by revealing the way they are used to project dominant ideologies and/or cultural hegemony. Social and traditional media consume, reproduce, fabricate and falsify an ever-increasing number of images, whether personal, journalistic, from archives or related to artistic practices), helping to blur our perception of a reality that seems increasingly elusive.

In *Art's Realism in the Post-Truth Era* (Edinburgh University Press, 2024), Maryse Ouellet and Amanda Boetzkes underline the crucial role that figurative art and its aesthetic dimensions should play by “attending to the ways that the arts mediate, visualize and even shape reality”. In the post-truth era, which role and function can visual arts play in what Peter Szendy calls an “iconomy” (a concept based on Marie-José Mondzain’s “iconic economy” that he coined in *The Supermarket of the Visible: Toward a General Economy of Images*, 2019), which could be defined as an economy based on the circulation and general commodification of images and gazes? Why and how can one picture the real and reality knowing that the definitions of these notions are becoming increasingly unstable?

We could mention here new forms of visual culture based on autobiographical content (Instagram, blogs or vlogs) which, while faking interpersonal immediacy, resort to autofictional devices identified in more traditional artistic genres (portrait or self-portrait). The social dimension of the medium is thus bypassed to picture the staged self.

In *The Story of Art without Men* (2022), Katy Hessel explains: “In times of crisis, artists have often turned to the figure. Realism in nineteenth-century France emerged in the wake of the French Revolution; in the decades following the Mexican Revolution the Muralists presented socially conscious portrayals of people; artists in the Weimar era documented street life and nightlife; at the height of the Depression, American artists turned to the figure... In today’s world of new technologies, dystopian politics, global pandemics, ecological destruction and right-wing capitalism, I’m interested that we are finding ourselves in a renaissance of figurative painting” (433). Indeed, the resurgence of figurative art in painting and sculpture is well established, as shown by recent exhibitions, for example “Mimesis (Representational Art 2023)” at Barcelona’s European Museum of Modern Art, or “Public Private” (2023) in Shanghai, where artists “redefining identity through painting in the 21st century” were exhibited, according to Stephanie Bailey. This recent trend indicates the need for contemporary artists to reflect the complexity of human experience and to reshape its contemporary characteristics by deconstructing pictorial genres (Flora Yukhnovich and Rocco painting), by reinterpreting traditional cultural topoi (Ophelia in Lisa Brice’s artwork) or by creating hybrid forms (Bharti Kher’s sculptures of imaginary ‘goddesses’), thus demonstrating that figurative art isn’t restricted to popular cultural forms.

In return, popular culture seems to resort to a more explicitly reflexive discourse on the status of images. In *Civil War* (2024), Alex Garland portrays the ethical and aesthetic dilemma of young photojournalists, torn between the ideal of the “perfect picture” which exemplifies aesthetic norms of representation and their desire to be objective witnesses in times of war. In an article published in *The Post-Truth Era: Literature and Media* (Authorspress, 2021), Denis Newiak switches perspective and explains how COVID pandemic films can help us counter post-factualism.

Building on the assumption that the concept of reality has been blown to smithereens, *The Department of Truth*, a comic book by James Tynion IV (published since 2020 by Image Comics), asserts that reality does exist, but taking Pragmatism to its logical conclusion, claims that majority rules in matters of truth. As a result, science is no longer the arbiter of truth, which is generated by the masses (the number of people believing that something is real). The Department of Truth is a secret agency in charge of eliminating conspiracy theories that may threaten the stability of the version of reality that they seek to uphold, even if this entails fabricating or eliminating supposedly real events. The storyline ensnares readers in a somber game of mirrors and make-believe.

The concept of “retromediation” or remediation “in reverse” of digital photography (created by Servanne Monjour in *Mythologies postphotographiques: L’invention littéraire de l’image numérique* (Presses Universitaires de Montréal, 2018), questions the way contemporary photography reinterprets reality by refuting the transparency of the medium. This practice is a post-production technique through which a digital photograph is manipulated to recreate the vintage appearance of gelatin silver prints. It can also refer to the use of old film cameras, even low-quality models (“toy” or pinhole cameras). Lo-fi photography could be considered as the most extreme example of this approach (for instance the Leicester Lo-Fi group of photographers) which runs counter to the Staged Photography movement exemplified by American photographer Gregory Crewdson. Despite Hollywood-scale production techniques, the artist manages to portray intimate scenes suffused with poetic strangeness.

How can these varied aesthetic objects explain “not only the social formation of the visual field,

but also the visual construction of the social field”? (“Iconologie, culture visuelle et esthétique des médias,” W.J.T. Mitchell, 2009).

In conclusion, Barnabé Sauvage explains that according to Andrea Pinotti and Antonio Somaini in *Culture visuelle – Images, regards, médias, dispositifs* (Presses du réel, 2022) the 21st century is heading toward “an-iconicity.” In the last two chapters of the book, Pinotti and Somaini argue that virtual reality (VR) and artificial intelligence (AI), two contemporary ways of experimenting and picturing, testify to a departure from the traditional conception of the image. (“À propos de : Andrea Pinotti, Antonio Somaini, *Culture visuelle. Images, regards, médias, dispositifs*,” 2022).

Along these lines, researchers or experts in anglophone studies and/or visual culture are encouraged to delve into the various artistic strategies that may confirm the advent of a contemporary aesthetic disruption or, on the contrary, display a form of resistance to this trend. The conference will seek to answer the following questions, following W.J.T. Mitchell’s numerous contributions to this field: What can pictures still do in the 21st century? How can visual arts figure reality in the 21st century?

Papers may deal with any form of visual art and visual culture.

Papers should be 20 minutes in duration and can be in English or French. They may cover any area of the English-speaking world.

Proposals should include a 300-word abstract, together with a title, a bibliography and a short biography.

Please send your proposal by January 6, 2025 to the following addresses: helena.lamouliatte-schmitt@u-bordeaux.fr and nicolas.labarre@u-bordeaux-montaigne.fr

A publication of peer-reviewed texts will be proposed by the organizers.

Registration fees are 50 euros for lecturers, professors or independent scholars. Doctoral students are exempt from conference fees.

Reference:

CFP: What can pictures still do in the 21st century? (Bordeaux, 3-4 Jul 25). In: ArtHist.net, Nov 16, 2024 (accessed Jun 8, 2026), <<https://arthist.net/archive/43158>>.