Hans Belting is an acclaimed German art historian with extensive work centered on reconsidering the history of art as an anthropology of the image, while thinking the historiographical foundation of art in addition to its methodological approach. Thus following the critique of representation, his attempt consists of redefining the image, without abandoning the concept of representation, in order to explore the displacements that take place within it, while opening the question to multiple perspectives. In this regard, Belting’s reflection understands representation necessarily in connection with human existence. Therefore, his particular approach to this matter contributes great novelty –insofar as he takes a stance from the majority of the contemporary discourses concerned with the analysis of images- since from an anthropological perspective, the human being could not be the possessor of its own images. On the contrary, the human existence would actually be ‘the place’ of images. Nonetheless, this would not assign a passive role to human existence in relation to the image; in Didi-Huberman’s words: “The act of seeing opens us to a void that looks at us, which concerns us, which constitutes us”.

Hans Belting is a member of the Medieval Academy of the United States of America, the American Academy for Arts & Sciences and of the Sciences Academy of
Berlin (Wissenschaftskolleg). He has been a professor at the University of Hamburg, the University of Heidelberg, the University of Munich, Harvard University and Columbia University.

This present interview took place in Barcelona, Spain. Hans Belting was invited to deliver the inaugural speech for the opening of the academic course titled: “Migration of Images, Aby Warburg reconsidered” at Pompeu Fabra University (UPF).

Dispositive of visibility

Andrea Soto Calderón & Katryn Evinson Williams: While contemporary discourses assert the ‘failure of images’, you maintain that images only fail when no analogy is to be found with that which precedes them (let along that which relates them to the world). From this perspective, in the wake of the of representation, would you agree that the renowned failure of images would be rather that they are being judged according to a regime to which they no longer belong?

Hans Belting: I do not assert the failure of images. This is the critique that Baudrillard develops in relation to the contemporary images which is due to the fact that he believes that there is no longer an analogy. But I disagree with this. The concept of representation changes over time. A common accusation that has been made about images is that they are external to human existence, they capture you, and they seduce you. For me the problem of this critique is that it understands representation from a very specific point of view. It is not so much that images fail to represent, as it is that they fail to represent in accordance with the notion of representation from which they are being judged.

The question of representation is very extensive and complex. It is currently still an open discussion.

S&E: In this context, your proposal of relating images to collective identities, meaning an image has more to it than just being a product of perception, could be a result of a personal or collective symbolization. Would it be right to say that this may be a way to re-think the idea that images are not only a technical device, but that they require to be considered according to the visibility mechanism that regulates their statute?

H.B: Yes. I would say it is the latter. Which of my publications are you referring to exactly?


H.B: In this text, what I formulate is an idea of coordination between body, image and medium (it is important to clarify that I consider the body to be a medium). However,
this relationship is in constant change. When the technical media comes into play this relation becomes dynamic. In this sense, I would never respond to the question “what is an image??” I reject this question. I can talk about the image in its context relating to the body or to the medium. It is a triangle. In the classes I instructed at the Collège de France ten years ago I introduced a fourth factor which I called the “gaze”. The gaze would be the relationship between the body, the medium and the image. The image is always in this circulation and therefore not definable on its own. That is what I wanted to say before.

S&E: You maintain that the anthropological perspective centers its attention in the praxis of the image. This perspective entails a different understanding of the techniques of the image and the history behind them. That which subjects our perception to a form is determined by an era, a time. Precisely that circumstance is the point where you introduce the participation of the ‘medial’ focus of images. In this sense, which do you think is the praxis of the contemporary image? And what would be its main structural feature that could outline its specificity?

H.B: The obvious answer is digital media. But I do not think this is a very convincing one, since from my perspective digital media is only at one of many stages of the technical change of images. For me the important question is whether the history of images continues into the digital era or whether there is a rupture. I personally decided against rupture. But some writers are in favor of the rupture. That is one of the reasons why I could not include digital media in Anthropology of Images.

S&E: In the discussion you maintain with Peter Weibel, you prefer to address the issue of the physics of the images in opposition to a metaphysics of the images. Would this distinction follow the lines of the critique you formulate on philosophical aesthetics, in the sense that it carries out an abstraction of images and disregards the discussion about the “media”, as if these two components could be dissociated. Would you be so kind to further elaborate on this issue?

H.B: For me the difference between physics and metaphysics does not exist. Because metaphysical ideas can be bound in physical images, the physicality of images, per se, has no existence. Images need to be physical in order to be visible for human existence. Of course I am considering ‘physical’ in a very wide sense. In the digital era images are not very physical but they are physical insofar as they are technical. Therefore the physicality is a characteristic of images, which does not imply –from what I understand- anything about its metaphysics. In any case, they are always physical inasmuch as they exist.
Iconography & Fear

S&E: Would you be so kind to share your opinion with us in regards to the perception that your work has had in Brazil? Especially what Norval Baitello Junior has dealt with in his book *The Age of Iconography* and the question on the relation among iconography and fear –to devour images while being devoured by images at once–?

H.B: You are referring to the notion of anthropophagy?

S&E: Yes

H.B: Yes, I know him very well. This is very Brazilian way of… I have no problem with that. It is interesting to use different languages. For example I would never use the term “to devour” or “to be devoured”. But I perfectly understand what Norval Baitello Junior means. That is interesting to me. He uses a different language associated to a different culture but, still, I understand what he is talking about. Although he is positioning himself in a Brazilian tradition whereas I am not forced to do so because I do not intend my concerns to be applicable to other contexts.

Intersections

S&E: The intellectual climate tends to think the relation between human existence and technology in a relation of opposition. In your work, you demonstrate that technology is part of the inner constitution of human kind, insofar as we are the ones who construct the technical devices and our technical knowledge. This process takes place regardless of a previous form –which would involve a determined intention to achieve an explicit result–. Furthermore, it is a process in which both parts are reciprocally influenced; it is a product of a relation that operates through the available potentialities. From this perspective, there is a philosopher you make reference to, Vilém Flusser. The relation seems obvious since your theoretical reflections are focused on the technical image and its respective function in the post-industrial society, the devices, and the cultural means of communication. More specifically, how do the communicatory vehicles introduce changes in the cultural and social domain? Especially considering their anticipatory capacity in regards to the complexity the new media and the revolution represent in terms of the significance of the first images ever created. However, it seems to us that your theoretical approach in regards to the fear associated with the totalitarian risk that devices may imply is grounded on the fact that they are conceived in a very unequal struggle against men.

H.B: For me there is no clear-cut opposition between technology and human existence. However, if men invent images as power tools, the result can easily be that men end up being dominated by them -even when that was not an intended outcome-. See, for me Flusser postulates very vast ideas, which I think are not historical. He is thinking in terms of rupture and opposition between technology and human existence and I do not
I share this. I think there is no war. There is history. But these formulations are not new in the history of images. They have actually been a constant problem.

I do not share the reception that has related me to the tradition of this opposition. I take a stance for the idea of a relation between human existence and technology.

I met Flusser very few times in my life but we always reached harsh discussions. We did not easily talk about these issues because… how should I say this? … I guess he was too political, and I am more historical.

In Anthropology of Images I establish a relation between body and medium considering the body as a living medium. In this sense I think that without first having the notion of the body as medium, no other media can be invented. Artifacts are extended tools of the body. Regardless of the terms in which they are considered, their purpose was always to be extended tools of the body. Of course there is an iconic difference, but in Anthropology of Images I was interested in the relation of what the English call images as opposed to what they call pictures; between mental images and material images. W.J.T. Mitchell wrote a passage about Anthropology of Images where he points out that this difference is a distinctive trait in my book. And I reject that interpretation because I deny such a clear-cut between mental and material. In German we can always use “blind” for both image and picture, while the English are very pragmatic and therefore distinguish between pictures and images, which I think is very good.

In my book Florence and Baghdad: Renaissance Art and Arab Science (2011), I discuss the Arabic postulation that affirms images are only in the brain; that images cannot be material. This is a very interesting position that is not true, of course, but then for their culture it is true. There are no pictures in Arab society, yet images do exist.

S&E: Within the framework of the discussion in regards to the medium, you seem to resist addressing the question of materiality when searching for new conceptual content in support of the creation of images?

H.B: No. I do not resist addressing the question of materiality. In my work I develop a very important notion that has been present from the Stone Age until present day: medium. Everything is technology, materiality.

S&E: Lastly, are you familiar with Rancière’s conceptualization of the image?

H.B: Yes, I had discussions with him that were useless for me. Rancière is very rigid. He compartmentalizes everything. I believe philosophers tend to make this mistake. They fall constantly into abstractions. I think everything is more fluid.

S&E: We disagree. We think Rancière is not rigid. In fact he dialogues—for example—with the field of cultural studies, visual studies, as well as many artists, and among other disciplines in general. Rancière—while not in a systemic fashion—attributes a special emphasis to materiality in his reflections on images. While doing so, he questions the traditional understanding of the concept of materiality. The specific feature of this materiality to which Rancière refers, is
that human existence is not facing the imposition of the action of thought against the passivity of material –this mindset would correspond to the representative regime–. On the contrary, the ‘details’ would be that non-index trace –which is not the mark or sign of thought inscribed in the bodies–, but rather the way in which thought both unfolds and articulates itself on the basis of this materiality. To express this deployment of thought from the materiality of an image of Rancière you pick the expression: ‘thoughtful images’. In this sense, considering that we are not dealing with the notion of materiality in terms of the traditional opposition material-form, do you think that this position could be close to your conceptualization of “medium”, especially in regards to your reflections against the discourses asserting the increasing disembodiment of the image (to which you argue we are facing a new type of corporeal experience)?

H.B: No. Images cannot think. For me the progressive loss of the corporality of images is a minor matter. In order for images to be visible, they need to be physical. There is no way out. For me the varying degree of physicality is not important. For me what is most important is the relation between “making them visible”, and “what is made visible”. Iconoclasts destroy media, but the images in people’s heads continue. I prefer complex ideas not simplistic formulations.

S&E: Thank you very much for your time.

H.B: Thank you for your questions, I think I need to reflect on them because they arouse very complex matters.

///BIBLIOGRAPHY///

