

Seeing and looking through words: towards a history of the visual culture of early and late ancient Christianity

Deadline for paper proposal abstracts, 500-1000 words in length: 30 April 2019

Conference dates: from 10 to 12 October 2019

Conference site: Department of Historical Studies, University of Turin-Italy

Scientific committee: Claudio Gianotto; Leonardo Lugaresi; Adele Monaci ; Valerio Neri; Andrea Nicolotti; Lorenzo Perrone; Teresa Piscitelli

Info adele.monaci@unito.it; andrea.nicolotti@unito.it

Seeing and looking through words: towards a history of the visual culture of early and late ancient Christianity.

The Department of Historical Studies at the University of Turin, in collaboration with the Journal "Adamantius. Journal of the Italian Research Group on Origen and the Alexandrian Tradition", is issuing a call for papers for a conference on "Seeing and looking through words: towards a history of the visual culture of early and late ancient Christianity" to be held in Turin, 10-12 October 2019.

The conference is not focused on the various theological attitudes and positions regarding images as works of art, nor does it address competition between words and images. Rather, it aims to explore the intertwining and exchanges that have taken place between visual facts and the words – written and/or listened to – while also investigating how this interweaving is both an expression of habits of seeing and looking and, simultaneously, a process of constructing such habits.

This proposal sets off from the effort to rethink the relationship between words and images by building on the concept of "visual culture" understood as a "visual construction of the social" and "social construction of the visual" (W.J.T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*, Chicago 1986). Although this approach is mainly focused on the contemporary age, it could also provide a source of inspiration for antiquity in that it highlights the complexity of the relationships among multiple elements: images understood as both a product of conscious figurative practice and a expression of unconscious and immaterial processes (mental images); the devices that make these images visible and govern their creation (painting and statuary, but also writing and listening); and, finally, the gaze that come to rest on these images (M. M. Cometa, *La scrittura delle immagini*, Milano 2012).

From this point of view, the documents that can be traced back to Jesus' followers in early and late ancient Christianity present particularly interesting intersections of issues: The coming to the fore of a powerful visuality, starting from the 4th century onwards not only represented a divergence from a former lack of and/or aversion to images; it was also in contrast to the rarity of descriptions/ekphraseis found in narrative texts prior to that period.

In light of this point, what channels fuelled the eminently natural visual dimension of the way we relate to reality?

One line of inquiry might involve visions and allegorical interpretation itself. Given that this interpretation is so frequently based on the mental associations of images, might it represent an important medium?

The conference will focus on the documents attributed to Jesus' followers, but it is also essential that we examine Greco-Roman and Jewish cultures of the same period in order to better understand the possible points of interweaving and exchange.

If late antiquity does indeed constitute a turning point in Christian visual culture, what might be the most privileged points of view for exploring it?

The many issues participants might address include:

- Did the first centuries scholars explore the psychology of images, that is, the way words can serve to construct mental libraries of images?
- Jesus' followers wrote at length about the dangerousness of the images crowding the places where they lived: they advocated a veritable discipline of the gaze to be achieved through censorship, resulting in the construction of habits and objects of looking. How does one construct a different gaze, and where would it be directed? Are there different disciplines of looking associated with different audiences?
- When writing becomes description - including but not limited to ekphrasis - its aim is not only to "show", but also to indicate what we should look at and how so. What themes would best enable us to understand this aspect?

The following are a few of the many possible avenues of research:

- The "portraits in words" found in hagiographical texts and descriptions of religious buildings are promising places to begin, as they were subjected to more intense re-semanticization with the development of the cult of saints and religious architecture in late antiquity.
- The descriptions of lost artworks that Christian authors began to write in the 4th century, following in the footsteps of the two Philostratus.
- Another promising line of inquiry might be Christianity's relationship with the moving image of theatre, a relationship that involved not only censoring but also constructing alternative theatre and alternative ways of watching it.
- Accounts of pilgrimage - a religious practice based first and foremost on the desire to "see" - could also provide interesting points of departure.

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Conference dates: from 10 to 12 October 2019. The conference is free to attend and open to all, but places are limited. Please contact the organisers directly to reserve your place.

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Please send to adele.monaci@unito.it; andrea.nicolotti@unito.it

Deadline for final texts for publication: 15 December 2019

Proposed papers will be accepted in English, French, German, Italian, and Spanish.