

MELOT, M. (2015). *UMA BREVE HISTÓRIA DA IMAGEM.* VILA NOVA DE FAMALICÃO: ED. CECS & HÚMUS

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Born on August 9, 1943 in Blois, Michel Melot, librarian and art historian, served as Director of the Department of Prints and Photographs of the National Library of France (1981-1983), where he organized several exhibitions, including the great exhibition dedicated to Impressionist prints, Director of the Public Information Library of the Centre George Pompidou (from 1983 to 1990) and President of the Superior Council of Libraries, at the French Ministry of Culture, where he managed the general inventory of architecture and heritage until his retirement (from 1997 to 2003).

He is the author of a vast work in the fields of archaeology and art history, novels, and reflections about books, libraries and heritage. His works include the following: 1970s: (1975) *L'Œil qui rit: Le pouvoir comique des images*, Paris: Bibliothèque des arts, (1978) *Fontevrault*, Paris: CLT; 1980s: (1981) *L'estampe*, Genève: Skira, (1984), *L'illustration, Histoire d'un art*. Genève: Skira; 1990s: (1994) *L'estampe impressionniste*, Paris: Flammarion; 2000s: (2004), *La sagesse du bibliothécaire*, Paris: l'Œil Neuf, (2006), *Livre*, Paris: l'Œil Neuf, (2012), *Essai sur l'inventaire général du patrimoine culturel*, Paris: Gallimard.

This vast bibliography highlights the fact that *Uma Breve História da Imagem* [A Brief History of the Image] is one of the works by Michel Melot dedicated to the image – a passion that was accompanied by his keen interest in writing – not as a linguistic phenomenon, but as a graphic matter that unfolds in space.

In this slim volume, originally published in 2007 by the publisher, L'Œil Neuf, now translated by Aníbal Alves and published by the Communication and Society Research Centre, in partnership with the publisher Húmus, Melot proposes a brief history of the image. I have structured this overview into several notes, in which I have recorded some of the impressions and reflections raised by his work.

HOW MUCH IMAGES MEAN TO US

Throughout the book's nine chapters, spanning 130 pages, the author traverses the history of the image, from prehistoric drawings to the age of digital images. He transports us across time and space, in a zigzagging journey. We jump from being in front of the Caves Chauvet, Combe d'Arc, Ardèche, to the Gutenberg Galaxy, to the world of GPs, from the West, to China, Egypt, India, Afghanistan, from the contexts of Islam, to Christianity and Calvinism.

But he never shows us the images that he mentions throughout his book. Perhaps this was an option justified by the publishing costs involved? Or perhaps Melot didn't want to subordinate the images to the logic of his own writing? We don't know. But there

is no question that the readers miss the images and the author is probably aware of this. At the end of his book, when he presented an annotated bibliography, he wrote: “in terms of images, it’s not enough to read books (...) this book owes much to visiting museums” (104). That’s why, in order to follow the book, alongside the journey that he proposes to us, we need many images, images from our memories and personal experience and images from collective memories. When will a multimedia edition of this *Brief History of the Image* be published?

THE PASSION THAT IMAGES AWAKE IN US

Melot recounts this brief history of the image in a passionate, discursive manner that seduces us and simultaneously keeps us in a permanent position of tension and questioning. He seduces us, because he writes in a clear, straightforward and often deeply poetic fashion. One must also recognize in the creation of these effects, of course, the talent and art of the translator, Aníbal Alves. But his siren song doesn’t intoxicate us, it doesn’t surrender us to temptation. The text keeps us in a position of constant attention: because it provides a great deal of information – it is a brief but dense and well-documented history – because it forges a dialogue with us – bringing our beliefs into play, and the things that we take for granted in terms of images – and because it challenges us to think about the relations we have with images, as social actors, as human beings and as bodies.

THE LIFETIME OF IMAGES

The exercise that Melot develops by looking at the history of images, from front-to-back and from back-to-front, allows us to understand the coexistence of the distinct dimensions of the time of the image: the past exists in the present, not only as a “before” and “after”, but also as a “during”, that inhabits it in various ways. Melot gives us several examples:

- Image-based magical practices still exist today;
- We still oppose image to writing, forgetting that an image is always a form of writing, and that writing is primarily an image;
- Images and writing share our screens, on televisions, on cell phones, just as occurred on Palaeolithic walls;
- The pictograms of the figurative writings, which were used in America up until the nineteenth century, to recount the warlike exploits of Indian tribes, continue to populate our streets and our commercials, in the form of logos, signs and signboards (p. 25).

Melot teaches us that there is no transcendence or eradication in the history of the image, its technical conditions, the uses that we make of it, and the theories we produce about it. Instead there is remediation (Bolter & Grusin, 1999), dialectics and coexistence. The image, as a human artifice, jumps from its original period to our own or to others.

The author shows us that “the image, like writing, has several histories” (p. 37), and stresses that “the origin of the image does not have to be sought over the course of the centuries. It is always in us. A form becomes an image as long as it is observed, and associations of memories appear” (p. 23). Perhaps for this very reason Melot argues that the “history of the image can be summed up as an eternal struggle or permanent tension between analogy and code, or index and symbol, abstraction and figuration, realism and idealism” (p. 25).

HOW MUCH THE IMAGE HAS SUFFERED AND HOW MUCH IT HAS CONQUERED

After pointing out a turning point or “pictorial turn” – an expression coined by Mitchell (1992), Professor of English and Art History at the University of Chicago - which many consider to be fundamental in the history of the image in Judeo-Christian culture, where the image passed from an object connected to worship and rituals to a worldly, desacralized use, Melot stresses the following:

- How, after invention of the small picture frame, the image changed hands, thereby moving from the spiritual power to the temporal power;
- How the mass reproduction of the image has raised the problem of originality, its link to the original, with the model: has it perhaps lost the aura (mentioned by Benjamin (1936-1939/1992)?)
- How the image suffered from invention of the printed book: it was “dragged along with the baggage of writing” (p.51), adulterated in the form of illustrations and placed “outside the text”, or “off-field”, in a marginal position that persisted for at least three centuries” (p. 53);
- How the image became a “mirror instrument”, as a result of photography;
- How the image encompassed the gesture and the word (p. 83), it combined with sound and was pulverized into pixels, thus being mathematically defined as a surface in which each point is determined by its coordinates (p. 95).
- How the image has short-circuited language - given that writing itself, which was originally invented to escape from the image, has now become an image in its own right (p. 98).
- And how it has transformed us into an image of flesh: “the tattoo transforms us into an image of flesh (p. 99), becoming a body.

HISTORY OF AN ANNOUNCED IMAGE

Are all these progresses new, or completely new? Are there any real ruptures?

Is it true, as some commentators argue, e.g. Moisés Martins in his text “O que podem as imagens?” [What can images do?] – published in the book *Imagem e Pensamento* [Image and Thought] in 2011 by Grácio Editor – that the proliferation of images on screens means that the nature of the image has changed: it no longer refers to the world, nor to the other, but, on the contrary, it is now things and ourselves that imitate images (p. 132)? Or is it the case, as Melot argues, that the nature of the image hasn’t changed at all, digitization hasn’t stripped the image of its analogue nature – it is only the reproduction technique that has been digitized – and the relationship between things, ourselves and images, never had a single meaning (p. 94)?

This propensity of the image to integrate itself into reality, or that of reality to emanate itself within the image, is nothing new, Melot notes (p. 99). He adds, “the myths of the image have never been as strong as at the moment when we thought we had mastered its techniques”. “After so much progress, how did we get there, or rather, how do we “remain there”?” (p. 94), asks the author. And he concludes: “If there is a crisis of representation, it is as old as the image itself (p. 99).

ARE WE THE ONES WHO SEE THE IMAGES OR ARE THEY SEEING US?

“The real danger lies in us not wanting to know that they are just images – in truth images don’t fall from the sky” (p. 35), emphasizes Melot. It is important, therefore, to “remove the sorcerer power that we bestow upon them” (p. 36). And how do we remove this power?

By describing what we think we see in them? No, Melot replies, we remove this power from the image “by raising the current of meanings which have been attributed to the image, and deducting from the image the meanings that which we give to it (p. 19).

Does this mean deciphering images, as if they were word games? No, writes Melot, we must first understand what they conceal through that which they show (p. 35), since “the entire image is simultaneously a means of access to an absent reality, which symbolically evokes it, and yet is an obstacle to that reality” (p. 14).

Does this imply “that the meaning brought to an image remains perpetually open?” (p. 25). And does this mean that images aren’t encoded? In that case, what causes us to be able to recognize an image as an image?

IMAGES AND OURSELVES, A BOUNDLESS PASSION

Michel Melot invites us to see images not as things but as relations. In the 1960s, Guy Debord affirmed: “the spectacle is not a set of images, but a social relation between people, mediated by images” (1967, thesis 4).

To see images as relations, therefore means that we frame them, that we look for their *raison d’être* in the diverse communities of producers and consumers of images and in the relations between them. It also means understanding that the lifetime of each image lies in the hands of the viewers. They are the true sorcerers, rather than the images themselves. As Aníbal Alves points out in the translator’s note, to understand images as relations is to understand that they always pertain to something, of which they are an image (p. 6), and therefore shouldn’t be confused with reality, nor be seen as a mere illusion.

If we are disturbed by the images we see on TV or in newspapers why instead of being revolted by the social and human reality that they represent, we want to ban them? Only those who believe in ghosts are afraid of their images, Melot reminds us.

It is true “that the image isn’t learned like a language and escapes the teachers’ instruction”, that “the image is felt before being understood” (p. 67), but books such as

this help render our vision visible, which itself is invisible. They help to render our vision strange, requiring explanation, in order to multiply gazes, because the gaze is not only, as is usually said, a “window on the world”, it is also “a mirror of the soul” (Jay, 1994, p. 10).

The brief history of the image proposed by this book is, in fact, very thick and dense, a true critical and reflective exercise, that challenges us to be demanding in our relations with images. We recommend it to anyone who loves images.

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