The flesh of images/ La chair des images

Art, techniques of emotion and the limits of expression after Trent

Research proposal – FMSH Bourse Fernand Braudel – *IFER* (incoming) – Host institution:
Labex HASTEC (Histoire et anthropologie des savoirs, des techniques et des croyances)
Centre de Recherches Historiques (EHESS – CNRS)

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Innocenzo da Petralia, Crucifix of St Damiano, 1637, Assisi, Santa Chiara (Wikimedia Commons).

Introduction

My project focuses on problems of the making, the impact and the censorship of artistic renderings of the image of Christ in Early Modern Italy. My starting point will be an inquisitorial case against a Sicilian sculptor, Innocenzo da Petralia, the author of a series of hyperrealistic wooden crucifixes in Central Italy (1637-1638). I will use this case study, together with comparative materials, to trace the history of certain constant attitudes toward religious images in Western Christianity (in particular the image of the suffering Christ), to reconsider notions of censorship in the visual arts and to ask the question about the emotional effectiveness or efficacy of hyperrealistic visual techniques. The aim of this project is to re-examine the long debated issue of art and censorship in the early modern period and to reformulate in new terms the classic problem of the relations between art, emotions and normativity during the Counter-Reformation.

My work is situated at the crossroads of the history of art, the social history of theology and historical anthropology. In my forthcoming monograph on representations of limbo between 1300 and 1700 circa,[1] I have looked at the history of the representation of the Christian afterlife from the edges of limbo – an idea of uncertain theological status. This has allowed me to shed new light on problems of belief in and representation of the afterlife in Western Europe. In the case of limbo, painters were asked to give a visual form to the emotions in this ambiguous place of the afterlife: neither excluded from, nor included in, Christian society and salvation. Deriving from and revisiting Mary Douglas's notion of residual category and Victor Turner's work on liminality, the idea behind my forthcoming book is that by studying the marginal, the residual and the anomalous elements of a system, we can understand something about the center as well.

In my new research project, I intend to move from the margins to the center. What was possible for me to isolate and study, as in an experiment, by exploring the specific case of limbo – the complex relationship between doctrines, beliefs and images, the role of the images in giving a definite form to theological notions, and the reactions to the artistic expression of emotions – is true, and even more so, at the center of Christian iconography. There is no more striking conflict of opposing emotions than that between the triumphant Christ who has rescued the souls from limbo and the suffering crucified Christ. Artists were entrusted with the task of giving this image a definite, and sometimes definitive, form. The final choice about how to represent his triumph and his suffering was left, ultimately, to them. What strategies and methods did they employ? What reactions did they provoke? Which were the limits of acceptable visual representations of the suffering of Christ?

I will begin by looking at historical cases in which giving powerful artistic expression to the emotions in Christian art conflicted with iconographic conventions and theological doctrines, as well as with contextual circumstances and norms. By both a close analysis of new evidence and a re-reading of already known comparative materials and historical cases of image censorship in Western Europe from the Middle Ages to the 19th century, I aim to look afresh into issues of art censorship to reconsider the emotional efficacy of artistic techniques and the problem of the limits of acceptable representations, especially in religious art.

My approach to the study of images has been influenced, both ideally and practically, by the tradition of scholarship which developed around the Warburg Library in Hamburg and continued in Italy (in particular at the Scuola Normale Superiore), in Germany and in the United States. I am interested in how images work, in their specific language but also in their ambiguity, and in their distinctive contribution to the history of culture. My work on iconography and iconology, which I have developed in a series of seminars and publications at the Warburg Institute,[2] would enormously benefit from a collaboration with the historians, the anthropologists and the historians of art of the EHESS. An interaction with the 'Centre de Recherches Historiques' (CRH), and in particular with the CARE ('Centre d'Anthropologie Religieuse Européenne'), the GAHOM ('Groupe d'Anthropologie

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[1] *Storia del limbo. Immagini dell'aldilà nella società occidentale (1300-1700)*, due to be published by Feltrinelli Editore Milano in 2014 (series 'Campi del Sapere. Culture', directed by Carlo Ginzburg).

[2] See, for example, my 'The Nudes in Limbo: Michelangelo's Doni *Tondo* Reconsidered', *The Journal of*
[2] See, for example, my 'The Nudes in Limbo: Michelangelo's Doni *Tondo* Reconsidered', *The Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 73, 2010 [2011], pp. 137-180, which was awarded 'I Tatti prize.' From 2010-2013, I worked as an Academic Assistant in the Photographic Collection of the same Institute, contributing to the building of the Warburg Instiute Iconographic Database.

Historique de l'Occident Médiéval') and the GAS ('Groupe d'Anthropologie Scolastique'), and with the CEHTA ('Centre d'Histoire et de Théorie des Arts'), would allow me to conduct this project in the most fruitful way, helping me to develop the social and anthropological dimensions of my work, as well as to refine my questions and methodology in the context of recent debates about the 'efficacy' of images and the need for a new iconology.

Innocenzo da Petralia's wooden crucifixes: case study and contextual questions

In 1637 the surfeit of wounds on the body of a wooden crucifix in Assisi (above) caught the eye of an inquisitor of the faith, who had a dossier opened at the central office in Rome. A friar, Innocenzo da Petralia (1592-1648), had produced not just this one, but several similar objects for a large range of patrons of different social standing. The case involved aristocrats, including the Duchess of Urbino Livia della Rovere and her sister Suor Maria at the convent of the Corpus Christi in Pesaro. Suor Maria "had asked a Franciscan brother of the reformed observance to make a crucifix for her devotion" in front of which "she did almost all her spiritual exercises," wrote Livia to Cardinal Barberini in an attempt to intercede for her sister. "As it happens," Livia continues "that Father Inquisitor ordained to take away from her this crucifix. He claims that the many wounds which appear on that image alter the ordinary form permitted by the Holy Church."[3] This case opens a series of questions, which will constitute the starting points of my research.

1. RELIGIOUS IMAGES AND NORMATIVITY AFTER THE COUNCIL OF TRENT. The intervention of the Inquisition was anomalous. According to the Tridentine decree on the veneration of the relics, saints and images (1563), bishops were in charge of control of religious images. Furthermore, the categories of images which were to be considered as unacceptable were described vaguely: images representing 'false dogma'; 'provocatively beautiful' images; 'unusual' images (*insolitae imagines*). Innocenzo da Petralia's crucifixes were considered to be 'unusual', that is not conforming to the use of the Church, because of the surplus of wounds (more than the traditional five) depicted on the body of Christ. Bypassing the local bishop, the Assisi inquisitor decided to forward the case to Rome, as he thought the crucifix was also able to provoke 'scandal'. At stake were not only issues of normativity in relation to images, including conflicts between local and central authorities, and between different religious communities, but also questions of impact. A close analysis of this case and a comparison with other image-related materials I have already surveyed in Roman ecclesiastical archives will allow me to reconsider Counter-Reformation approaches to art.

2. 'HORRIFYING' CRUCIFIXES IN WESTERN ART. In 1305 London a certain "cross of terrible aspect" (*crux horribilis*), which was venerated by many on Good Friday, was subjected to censorship as it was considered to be "an erroneous sculpted image of the crucifixion." Although here the 'error' was not the surfeit of wounds, but the shape of

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[3] I mentioned briefly this unpublished dossier in my 'Arti figurative e Inquisizione. Il controllo', in *Dizionario storico dell'Inquisizione*, diretto da A. Prosperi, Pisa, Edizioni della Normale, 2010, I, pp. 102-105.

the cross, the similarities with the Petralia case are striking. They raise questions about certain constant attitudes toward the image of the crucified Christ, in particular the existence of aesthetic limits to the representation of Christ. As long as the artistic rendering do not surpass these limits, the result is perceived as a 'true' image of the cross, as opposed to an 'erroneous' one. However, the claim about the novelty of Innocenzo's sculptures was rebutted by its defenders, who explained that this type of crucifix was common in Spain. The expertise of EHESS medievalists such as Jean-Claude Schimitt, who have had an extremely important role in linking iconography and anthropology, folklore and artistic elaboration, to social history, and the image databases available in particular at the GAHOM, will allow me to find other cases and extend the research on this point, both chronologically and geographically, in the *long-durée*.

3. THE MENTAL AND THE PHYSICAL IMAGES OF CHRIST'S WOUNDS. The defenders of Innocenzo's crucifixes also claimed that they were made "according to Bridget of Sweden's revelations" and were helpful for practicing the spiritual exercises. On the one hand, this line of defense offers an important historical perspective to the study of the attachment to suffering images of Christ; on the other, it opens a further question concerning the relations between the mental images of Christ's wounds and their material rendering in art. What was unusual, and therefore disturbing, for the Italian censors was the excessive amount of painted blood on the wooden flesh of Christ, what, in modern terms, can be called the 'hyperrealism' of the rendering. I will test on my case the methodological possibility of using the notion of 'hyperralism' to examine the relationship between the imagination of Christ's suffering as translated into words (e.g. in the genre of the vision) and the material and visible reproduction of Christ's wounds, which, arguably in this case, enhanced the devotee's emotional engagement. Here, too, a collaboration with the CARE, and in particular with Pierre-Antoine Fabre, would be essential for their work on the history of early modern spirituality and on the dynamics between presence vs. absence of a material image in Early Modern spiritual practices (Fabre, 1996).

4. SERIAL PRODUCTIONS IN EARLY MODERN CATHOLIC EUROPE. My fourth point concerns the serial nature of Innocenzo's production. He was certainly not the first, let alone the most famous, serial maker of crucifixes. Previous examples are provided by Tuscan wood sculptors and by Giambologna. Notwithstanding the much inferior artistic level of the relatively obscure Innocenzo, his case can be compared with the former, not only for their multiple productions, but also for the creation of a market in the high ranks of society (higher in Giambologna's case). As models for his works, however, Innocenzo was probably looking at Spanish types. I will, therefore, examine the reciprocal influences between Italian and Spanish religious art, focusing on issues of replication of models for the image of Christ, from Sebastiano del Piombo's successful *Christ Carrying the Cross* to Innocenzo's crucifixes (some of which he signed). I will study their making, addressing the social dimension of these objects and the artist's conscious choices to fabricate images for the needs of a society that was able to produce a growing series of new devotions in a continuous conflict with the Council of Trent's decisions and its *caveats* against novelties. Potentially, the cartography of expressive images of Christ that I would like to reconstruct could expand well beyond Italy and Spain: I certainly plan on taking into account strands coming from Northern Europe (and studied by scholars such as James Marrow). But this map could extend beyond Europe as well. For instance, a Peruvian Lenten curtain

with a bloody crucifix, which was on display at a recent exhibition in the Metropolitan Museum in New York, offers an interesting initial basis for comparison. The study of the trajectories and the geography of expressive renderings of the image of Christ could result in the construction of a map – an *atlas* in Warburgian terms – of the circulation of such motifs and artistic techniques in early modern Europe.

'Efficacy' and censorship: methodology and comparative materials

The passage from a specific case study to the idea of drawing a map of the trajectories of expressive renderings of the image of Christ raises at least three general questions. Firstly, the relation between the specificity of the Petralia case and the general problem of the emotional reactions to extremely expressive, or hyperrealistic, images, not only of the suffering Christ, but also of the body in general, in Western art. Secondly, what is an effective image of Christ and how to make it. Thirdly, the question of the reactions to this 'efficacy' as a possible way to rethink the problem of art censorship.

The Petralia dossier has the advantage of providing us with exceptionally rich materials and historical language about both the making of and the reactions to this type of crucifix. Innocenzo's technique combined a skilled wooden relief with the application of massive clots of red painting representing blood ("il crocifisso fabricato da un padre siciliano è di rilievo di legname di albuccio ricoperto di colori al naturale"). Is this specific technique, a combination of sculpture and an original use of clusters of painting, to make the image of the crucifix more 'effective'? One way to begin to answer this question is to compare the reactions to the Petralia crucifixes with those provoked by the multiple crucifixes produced by Bernini and his workshop. But the comparison could extend to contemporary images of wounded or mutilated bodies as well. Is the supposed objectivity, and therefore realism, of images of bodies killed in war affecting the emotional response of the viewer? A second way to start rethinking the problem of the efficacy of images of the suffering Christ is to keep in mind Susan Sontag's observation that "photographs of an atrocity may give rise to opposing responses." If we compare Bernini's rendering of the image of Christ with Innocenzo da Petralia's, which of the two can be considered more 'effective'? In other words, to what extent are the mental images and the emotional reactions depending on the visible and material rendering?

In various historical contexts, such as in 17th-century Italy (as well as in our 21st-century world of the medias), the result of an artist's work is perceived sometimes as something that goes beyond the limits of acceptability. Often, these are the instances in which censorship intervenes. However, to define these limits is not always an easy task. Too often, the classic literature on the subject of art and censorship in the Counter-Reformation (from Mâle, 1951 to Prodi, 1962; and again in Freedberg, 1989) has taken the notion of 'censorship' for granted. On the contrary, this notion is often more difficult to grasp than it might seem. After the Council of Trent, numerous religious writers gave recommendations on how to depict sacred subjects. Sometimes, we can observe an ambivalent attitude on the subject of the expression of the emotion and the 'efficacy' an image. For example, on the one hand, the archbishop of Milan and art collector Federico Borromeo (1564-1631) disapproves of those emotions which he considered inappropriate, such as the supposed shameful expressivity of the naked bodies in Michelangelo Buonarroti's *Last Judgment*; on the other hand, he complains because "modern painters and

sculptors (after Michelangelo) seem to pay virtually no attention" to the special function of art in depicting emotions. The same ambivalence emerges from the documents of the trial against Innocenzo: the inquisitor considers unacceptable his representation of Christ, but the bishop of Assisi admits that "one cannot deny that this figure moves the mind of everyone who looks at it to a big devotion and an extraordinary contemplation of the passion of Christ", thus acknowledging the emotional effect of this image as a trigger of devotion.

Commonsensically, 'efficacy' (a 16th-century word which is probably of theological origin: the 'efficacy' of sacraments, of grace and therefore, in the Christian discourse, also of images) is 'the ability to produce a desired or intended result'. One the one hand, Innocenzo da Petralia obtained his desired result with his very successful works; on the other, he went beyond the limits of 'efficacy', unwillingly clashing with censorship. The comparison with Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel is, once again, pertinent. I will argue that early modern artists, or, perhaps, artists in general, were not concerned with notions of 'orthodoxy' or 'heterodoxy' (which, of course, are in themselves problematic). Their concern was, more obviously, with the many different options and technical possibilities available to them to express attitudes, emotions, spaces and faces. In the Petralia case, it would be possible to argue that the problem of the canonic number of the wounds of Christ is secondary to the question of their rendering. I will focus in particular on those cases in which this power of expressivity clashed with the various contextual conditions, such as political or religious constraints. This part of my project will develop the critical readings of the theories of the power of images as proposed by Freedberg, 1989 (see, for example, Prévost, 2003), by emphasizing the necessity to focus on *techniques of efficacity* – in the case of Innocenzo da Petralia the methods he deployed to obtain the hyperrealistic effect of the wounds of Christ.

In order to refine the theoretical frame that is needed to revisit the notion of censorship along these lines, it will be appropriate to open my research to comparative materials from different contexts and historical periods. Two promising fields for comparison are pornography and portraiture. Examples in both these areas range from early modern cases of censorship of the nude and of the realistic (or hyperrealistic) portrait in religious images to later examples, for example of political caricature (just to mention one, Charles Philipon's famous 1831 *poire*-sequence on king Louis Philippe's face, which Gombrich described as "a kind of slow-motion analysis of the process of caricaturing"). In the case of both the representation of the nude and of portrait, and perhaps even more so in the case of the caricature, a study of the various techniques used to produce a 'real' and effective representation of someone and of someone's emotions, and a reflection about the question of the limits of an effective representation, will be useful to reopen the dossier of art censorship in Western art.

Interaction with host institution and international network

For its interdisciplinary nature at the crossroads of different social sciences, such as social history and anthropology, the EHESS and the Labex HASTEC ('Histoire et anthropologie des savoirs, des techniques et des croyances') – the latter in particular for its focus on the history and the techniques of belief – would be ideal environments to conduct this research. With my background and profile of early modern historian of art and historian specializing in religion, and with a rich experience of research both

in Italy and in the UK, in particular at the Warburg Institute, I will be able to collaborate fruitfully with the medievalists and the modernists of the 'Centre de Recherches Historiques' (CRH), including those with whom I have already started a conversation (Pierre-Antoine Fabre, Jean-Claude Schmitt and Sylvain Piron), and with the art historians and sociologists of art at the CEHTA (part of CRAL, 'Centre de Recherces sur les Arts et le Langage'). I am particularly interested in the work of Giovanni Careri, especially for his axes of research on Michelangelo and Bernini, Renaissance and Baroque art theory, the relations between art and emotions, structural iconology, typology and marginal figures in Christian iconography (a theme of central relevance to my work on limbo as well). Behind and beyond this project, as is currently formulated, there is the issue of the relation between each individual historical context and the universality of the emotions, a question which is raised but not yet entirely resolved by several recent and less recent works at the intersection of art and science (for example, by David Freedberg). In my current proposal, the problem of the biological basis of the efficacy of images remains marginal, but, on this field too, I hope in a fruitful exchange with art theorists and anthropologists who have worked on biological theories about the efficacy of images (for example, at the CEHTA, Éric Michaud and the researchers in cognitive sciences at the Institut Nicod).

Outside the EHESS and the Fondation Maison de Sciences de l'Homme, other Parisians institutions, such as the Bibliothèque nationale de France and the Institut National d'Histoire de l'Art (INHA), would represent crucial resources for the development of my project.

Finally, a fellowship at the EHESS and the Fondation Maison de Sciences de l'Homme would provide me with an unique opportunity to interact with French research culture and to contribute to integrate scientific networks in France with UK, Italian and North American networks. In particular, I would be keen on contributing to develop links between my host institutions and the Warburg Institute, University College London, the Scuola Normale Superiore and the Italian Academy for Advanced Studies in America at Columbia University (where I was awarded a fellowship starting from September 2015), in order to help building lasting collaborations in the larger fields of cultural history, the history of religion, social history, visual and material studies, and the theory and history of art.

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