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The Lure of Objectivity, or Verities of the Image

Anne Lafont

RÉFÉRENCE

Claudine Cohen. *La Méthode de Zadig : la trace, le fossile, la preuve*, Paris : Seuil, 2011, (Science ouverte)

Lorraine Daston et Peter Galison. *Objectivité*, Dijon : Les Presses du réel, 2012 (édition originale anglaise 2007), (Fabula)

Bruno Latour. *Enquête sur les modes d'existence : une anthropologie des Modernes*, Paris : La Découverte, 2012

Das Technische Bild : Kompendium zu einer Stilgeschichte wissenschaftlicher Bilder, Berlin : Akademie Verlag, 2008. Sous la dir. de Horst Bredekamp, Vera Dünkel, Birgit Schneider

NOTE DE L'ÉDITEUR

Traduit du français par Brian Horihan

- 1 Considering the diversity of subjects, historical periods, and specialised knowledge surveyed in each of these books, reviewing them together makes for a bewildering reading experience. It would be impossible to accurately assess, or even, at times, to follow the individual arguments made in all of them, so widely do the authors draw upon the history of ideas, the history of institutions, the history of the visual arts and epistemology, in different places and periods from the Renaissance to the present.
- 2 Nevertheless one discerns a common ambition running through all of them. That ambition in part reflects society's expectations of scholars, be they in Berlin, New

England, Paris or Chicago: to deconstruct the idea of truth by the transparent construction – in other words, by the conscious fabrication – of new forms of objectivity.

- 3 While this ambition certainly stands out as one of the common denominators of these works – works that, taken together, reveal how science variously constructs its truths – the authors, even more than their books, share another common trait, namely the practice of interdisciplinarity. Horst Bredekamp, Claudine Cohen, Lorraine Daston, Peter Galison and Bruno Latour, historians, anthropologists, sociologists and philosophers, all privilege collective research.¹
- 4 In their commitment to recasting the history of Western Modernity, these intellectuals have made extensive use of interdisciplinarity, collective research, and the critical analysis of legitimizing systems of expertise. These three principles, in addition to the critical history of traditional research methods, have guided the authors' reconstruction of objectivity and guaranteed its transparency. Claudine Cohen, an archeologist specializing in prehistory, Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, historians of science and scientific practice, Bruno Latour, an anthropologist and sociologist of "modes of existence,"² Horst Bredekamp, an art historian, all serve as directors of important research groups in their respective disciplines, working within established institutions: the Conseil Européen de la Recherche, Humboldt Universität, the Max Planck Institut in Berlin, Harvard University and Sciences Po (Paris). They are scholars whose work engages the future of the so-called hard sciences and the human and social sciences in a mutually enriching exchange of knowledge and methods. Such exchanges have already brought about a reconfiguration of the place of science in society in which the duties of the former toward the latter are fully assumed, as Bruno Latour has shown us, for example, in his critique of the politics of Certainty. This discourse had dominated scientific thinking until quite recently, to the detriment of a discourse of Trust, i.e. the transparency of institutional systems, which has now largely displaced the former.
- 5 Despite differences in the nature of their projects and arguments, it is remarkable to observe how, at various moments in their respective careers, the authors have all chosen the image or the visual arts as the privileged means of apprehending and decoding statements of objective knowledge, that is, supposedly incontestable scientific conclusions.³ While this comes as no surprise in the case of H. Bredekamp, the same cannot be said for the others, and their respective monitoring of image systems intended to produce demonstrations and proofs – ranging from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century scientific atlases to the Pixar Laboratories's films reconstituting the worlds of dinosaurs – are interesting in more ways than one.
- 6 Indeed, it is fascinating that historians and philosophers of science, engaged in a critical deconstruction of their own disciplines, which are themselves wholly dependent on calculations, equations, quantities, texts, might finally, having reached a certain methodological breaking point, have designated the images accompanying these demonstrations of numbers and letters – graphs in another form, if we follow Anne-Marie Christin⁴ – that these scholars might finally have designated images as the experimental objects on which to conduct a rigorous study of the means of veridiction (proof and value, in B. Latour's vocabulary) in our culture, for at least the last four centuries.
- 7 We can thank the authors of these works for refusing to narrowly restrict their definition of the image, for otherwise the reader would not have grasped the centrality of semantic interplay and exchange in the exciting field of objectivity in and through visual worlds. Footprints, tracks, fossils and fossil fragments are therefore viewed as images, in the

same way as diagrams, collections of plates, photographs, screens or X-rays. The authors do not, however, overlook the need for organizational categories, and L. Daston, with a view toward historicization, suggests a decisive landmark: the invention of photography. The almost magical power gained by crossing this technical threshold (the mechanisation of image making) is, however, immediately mitigated by the facts, for if the instantaneity of photography made possible an increase in the speed with which images could be produced – compared, for example, to manual techniques such as drawing – the scientific value (fidelity to nature and potential for applied use) of these supposedly more objective images did not change in the nineteenth century. The scientific applications of the new technology retained the sacrosanct truth of Nature and its imitation as supreme evaluative criteria. This held true both for images produced by the human hand and for those created by machines.

- 8 In other words, the manual and/or mechanical recording of Nature for the purposes of scientific study was, throughout history, directly linked to the development of technology, though technical advances did not fundamentally alter scientific values, as L. Daston explains. The absence of any fundamental change is corroborated by cases of errors and avowed fraud, as C. Cohen points out in the third part of her book, entirely devoted to counterfeit in the sciences of prehistory.
- 9 If the authors have taken visual artifacts as their point of departure in writing the history of paleontology, or in historicizing key scientific concepts such as “objectivity,” it is because such objects necessitate, as these works make abundantly clear, a process of semantic dissection. A scientist’s efforts to understand a prehistoric stencil painting of a child’s mutilated hand, a fossilized bone or an X-ray of a skeleton demand resources of “reading,” deduction, analysis, and semantic “unpacking” that serve to legitimate the reproduction(s) of a form of reality. In part conjured up by an image whose indexical form varies from case to case – a molding, an imprint, a fragment, a silhouette, a geometrical form... – the reproduction will always be founded on a more or less prolix visual support that, in any case, remains subject to interpretation.
- 10 In this respect, the research group headed by H. Bredekamp, whose project is summarized in the book’s title, *Das Technische Bild*, has been innovative and will perhaps convince readers there exists a stylistic history of technical images. The group has awakened us to the existence of works whose formal characteristics echo contemporary technological innovations, such as, for example, the *Portrait of Arthur Korn* from 1908, whose linear treatment evokes telegraphic transmission, or visualization techniques, such as satellite images of the Earth (an image compared to an echograph of a foetus). Without reducing their extremely ambitious approach, it is interesting to observe that H. Bredekamp’s group makes use of methodological tools borrowed from other disciplines (including one of the most highly contested: the history of styles) in order to conquer a completely new field of research. Thus, the group “Das Technische Bild” studies not only the techniques and materials involved in the making of images, but also the devices used to visualize them. Historians of science, on the other hand, for whom visual studies are a fairly recent thing, when faced with a similar corpus, tend to seize on such images in order to revisit one of the dominant values in the theoretical construction of their academic field. The same corpus has shaken both art history and the history of science to their foundations. To put it more simply, both disciplines have been more or less reconfigured by these four fundamental works that issue precisely from the interdisciplinary study of images.

- 11 One of the most remarkable aspects of the volumes put together by B. Latour and H. Bredekamp is the scale of their ambition. The former is a horizontal, anthropological study of the West in the widest sense of the term (reversing the foundational *episteme* of anthropology itself) that presents its findings in a double format. *Enquête sur les modes d'existence* is an *ersatz* book, one of whose forms, available online (<http://aimeinquiry.org>), can be fed and interpreted endlessly, since the work is open to the contributions of readers-potential researchers. H. Bredekamp and his co-authors, for their part, have imagined a book in two asymmetrical parts (already refreshing in itself): the first, "Methodik" (pp. 14-65), is devoted to methodological propositions and theoretical conclusions resulting from the Berlin research group's eight years of existence, while the second part, "Fallstudien" (pp. 68-223), brings together case studies referred to in the book's first part that serve to support its theoretical arguments. Thus, the way the reader navigates the book's contents is original, non-progressive, non-linear, and inspired by the Internet's multiple-entry hypertexts. The architecture and graphic design of these books, decidedly unusual, reflects as much their ambition to open up new unexplored territories as they do the authors' desire to breathe new life into research in the human sciences by rethinking its means of reproduction and distribution.

NOTES

1. With the relative exception of Claudine Cohen, whose book *La Méthode de Zadig* is entirely her own, though she leads the research group "Biology and Society" at the EHESS.
2. According to Bruno Latour, the notion of modes of existence, which he borrows from the philosopher Etienne Souriau (b. 1943), refers simultaneously to a plurality of existences, both material, virtual, ephemeral, transitional, mutable, and eternal: love, the atom, the Law, God, the Internet, a tree... and to a society's attachment and valorization of these existences.
3. Though less present in B. Latour's most recent book, a work that sums up his forays and investigations into the world of laboratories, law and politics, the visual arts played an important role in his previous books and exhibitions. See especially: *Iconoclash* (Karlsruhe: Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie, 2002).
4. Christin, Anne-Marie. *L'Image écrite ou la déraison graphique*. Paris: Flammarion, 1995