AN ART HISTORIAN REFLECTS ON MODES OF VISUAL EXEGESIS

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I thank Dr Anne Elvey, editor of this journal, for inviting me to respond to Dr Rosemary Canavan’s article. Canavan’s reflections, on the use of visual exegesis as a hermeneutical method in biblical scholarship, raise questions on critical issues in interdisciplinary scholarship. My response is informed by my training as an art historian. The study of art, or more broadly visual culture, encompasses an ever expanding range of disciplines and methodologies. My own discipline of art history sits alongside studies in fine arts (studio practice), aesthetics, architecture, design and more recently digital practice and design.

My own career has been unusual. Unlike many colleagues in academia I have not taught as a member of an art history department in a university. Instead for the last fourteen years I have taught art history within the department of Church History and Christian Thought at Yarra Theological Union, a member college of the University of Divinity, Melbourne. Colleagues and students at YTU welcomed me and have encouraged and supported my art historical contributions to the curriculum. Theology and its cognate disciplines have sometimes been reluctant to engage with ideas and fields other than those traditionally allied to the study of theology. Protestant theological schools until very recently have shunned visually based studies. Broadly speaking this reluctance by both Protestant and Catholic theological institutions of learning may reflect the deeply held belief that theology was above all a scholarly tradition steeped in and of study of the word.

In thinking about the place of art history in the developing understanding and practice of visual exegesis, my reflections grow out of my experiences teaching and studying visual images with students and colleagues at YTU and the wider University of Divinity. I am grateful to them all for alerting me to the methodological expectations, concepts and terminology which I hope informs my own teaching and research. In what follows I will address three issues raised by Canavan’s paper. These areas briefly deal with the recent emergence of “visual exegesis” in art history, the word-image debate, both in scripture studies and art history, and finally the role and place of visual reproductions in scholarly publications.

Visual Exegesis: What Does Exegesis Mean to Art Historians?

Canavan’s survey of the emergence of visual exegesis in biblical scholarship does us all a favour. Her assessments of the critical practitioners and the methods they developed demonstrate the breadth of visual material utilized and the principle influences from other disciplines, namely post-structuralism and literary theory. To turn to my own discipline of art history, I write as a researcher working in the late medieval/early modern period (1300–1600). My research concerns the visual imagery of the cult of the saints in Italy c.1300–1500. This background informs my remarks. Let me begin with the practice of exegesis which means the interpretation of scripture according to an ascending hierarchy of meaning. This concept has long played a vital role not only in scripture studies but also in art historical scholarship. As Christopher Hughes has shown, French and German scholars in the nineteenth century turned to principles of medieval exegesis to explicate the decorative programmes of cathedrals. 1 Exegetical texts from the patristic through the late middle ages aided researchers, especially those influenced by Erwin Panofsky’s iconographical method, to locate meaning in exegetical texts. 2 In the last twenty years scholars like Paolo Berdini and Walter Melion continue to extend the ways in which the historical practice of exegesis contributes to our contemporary knowledge of the relationship between historical texts and visual images. Berdini based his study on several paintings by the Venetian painter Jacopo Bassano (1510–1592). In these paintings, Berdini argues, the viewer engages with the artist's visualization of a text, which draws on the artist's own visual and textual experience. 3 Walter Melion has published widely in Dutch and Flemish art and art theory of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Two recent collections

of essays to which he contributed indicate the scope and methodological interests of Melion and the researchers included in these collections. Melion's introductory essay, together with many of the chapters contained in these volumes, deploys traditional iconographic methods to examine the various ways in which the study of interplay between verbal and visual imagery during the period 1400–1700 sheds light on developments of the practice of scriptural interpretation in this period. Scholars from a range of disciplines, including art history, history and literary studies, survey a wealth of visual material which in the main deals with the art of Northern Europe. Undoubtedly of value to biblical studies and art historians, these volumes (with some exceptions) pursue methods which rely primarily on categories which derive from textual exegesis, that is, typology or literary theory (e.g. rhetoric). In other words, the distinctive visual qualities of the art works often seem overwhelmed by the sheer weight of analytical categories (inspired by both early modern and contemporary scholarly authorities). Is it possible to imagine a visual exegesis that is not overly determined by the historical dominance of verbal categories? Canavan's essay supplies yet more evidence to suggest how rewarding a symposium on this issue might be.

The Word-Image Question

This notion of the text as complete in itself leads to my next observation. Such an exegetical move immediately raises critical questions about language. The reader or viewer's search for meaning in a text, in this case, a biblical text, may lead her to a visual image. To what degree can we assume a common foundation for these systems of communication, that is, the textual and the visual? Is word a word approach the interpretation and theories formulated by witnesses contemporary with the visual works being examined. Instead of devising novel terminology for the twentieth-first century, I prefer to base my analysis on what we can glean from written and visual sources composed at or near the era we are studying. Methods adopted from semiotics have shaped and influenced what has become known as the word-image question in art history and other disciplines. The insights derived from Saussure, Pierce and more recently Kristeva remind us that what we assert as natural in the act of reading and seeing requires critical scrutiny. This applies in particular to the hierarchy of values we ascribe to different media. For scholars teaching and researching Christian art from late antiquity through the early modern era the "word-image debate" becomes much more than a question of disciplinary self-awareness. From the writings of Clement of Alexandria (c.150–215) and Gregory the Great (c. 540–604) to the participants in the struggle over the authority and function of visual images in Byzantium in the 8th and 9th centuries, through to the outbreaks of iconoclasm in the west in the 14th and 16th centuries, we hear the voices of women and men from all sides of the debate. These testimonies (not always written) witness to how polemics on both sides of the word-image debate in extreme cases could lead to death. Too often we contemporary scholars focus on the intellectual and political context of such controversies. Our goal to penetrate the inner world of an individual's beliefs must always remain elusive. Yet if we neglect the realm of lived experience our research runs the risk of failing to attend to our sources with both critical and imaginative engagement.

Reproductions and Good Faith

We cannot attend to our sources in good faith if we do not use visual material of the highest quality. Everyone knows that they ought to consult the very best translations if the original cannot be read as such. In art history the equivalent ideal is to consult original works of art. Reproduction even of high photographic accuracy will not bring to life the visual immediacy to which the artist and his contemporaries responded. If we use reproductions we are responding to different stimuli which moved the original viewers. In a word, reproductions distance us from the original work just as written accounts of it do. If however it proves impossible to study works of art in situ, then all concerned must lobby publishers to print reproductions of the highest quality, so that readers can draw their own conclusions about the visual arguments that are being presented. A sound dialogue between scholars of text and scholars of images requires nothing less. I am grateful to Dr Rosemary Canavan for prompting me to reflect more deeply about the issues that she so ably raises.