

François Cusset

1- Into which languages were your works first translated? How do you explain it?

I believe the first translations were into German and the Scandinavian languages. I think this may be because the theoretical writers that first drew my sustained attention in Iconology were English and American, and sometimes German (Nelson Goodman, Ernst Gombrich, Edmund Burke, G.E. Lessing, Wittgenstein, and C. S. Peirce). I did enjoy a few early French translations—an essay on abstract painting in Cahiers du l'art moderne, but it took a very long time for an entire book to be translated, and that has been a pleasure to witness.

2- Did you expect anything specific with regards to your French reception?

No. I had no idea what to expect. If anything, I expected silence, or (in anxious moments) an outright dismissal as bringing nothing especially new to the consideration of images, media, and visual culture. This may be partly because I have felt myself for so long to be an apprentice to French theory in translation. I regard myself, for instance, as in some deeply fundamental way, as a Sartrean, which I know must seem terribly old-fashioned. But that has always been one of my ways of operating. I like to go back to the basics in a discipline and re-read the classics. My dear friend and colleague, Francoise Meltzer, read the translation by Maxime Boidy and Stephane Roth and reported to me that it made me sound a bit old-fashioned, like a classical French author. This delights me very much, because I never regarded myself as a vanguard stylist, or particularly interested in the melodramatic genres of theoretical or scholarly writing. My English prose models have been Northrop Frye, Edward Said, and William Hazlitt, leavened by an immersion in William Blake and Jacques Derrida.

3- What did you think of the editorial choices and translation work (as far as you can judge the latter) in your first volume translated into French?

As I've just said, I think the translation of Iconology by Roth and Boidy into highly expressive, clear, and idiomatic French is largely responsible for its success. My impression is that they worked very hard on finding the most precise equivalents for concepts such as the "hypericon" and for the even more difficult task of making my rather slangy, idiomatic English—a plain, familiar style of writing aimed at a common reader—into readable French prose.

4- What surprised you most in your French reception?

That it was so warm and enthusiastic. You must understand that, for an American cowboy like me, raised in the foothills of the Sierra Mountains, Paris is a purely imaginary place, the repository of every fantasy that an isolated bookish

boy could have. Although I was living in Carson City, Nevada till age 14, in books I was roaming the Middle East with Mark Twain and on the run in 19th century France with Jean Valjean, and exploring 20th century Spain with Ernest Hemingway. The first time I visited Paris, as a student in 1967, I sat in the cafes with my notebook ostentatiously open, waiting for some gorgeous French girl to ask me for a cigarette, and then to inquire about what I was writing. It never happened, alas. But in Paris, September 2010, all the fantasies were fulfilled when the Jeu de Paume filled to overflowing to listen to me talk about “The Future of the Image” and I signed more books in one day than I ever have before.

5- You came over to France and gave lectures and interviews upon publication of this volume. What were your impressions of it? To what extent did questions and reactions in France differ from what you're accustomed to in the US?

My main impression was astonishment at the seriousness with which my writing was being taken. I still cannot quite fathom the distinctive French commitment to reading and literary culture. We have nothing quite like it in the U.S. The idea that my 25 year old book would receive a major review in Le Monde, and that it would be selected for the paper's non-fiction summer reading list was flabbergasting. I imagined French men and women on the beaches, reading Iconologie while sipping something indescribably delicious. In the seminars and interviews I was struck ever more by the seriousness of engagement—questions that betrayed an intimate awareness with my thinking and writing, or that raised some implication that had never occurred to me before.

6- A dialogue took place at that time with Jacques Rancière, whose work on the visual predicament, as different as it might be from yours, parallels it in the way it values the specificity of vision and visibility against a traditional intellectual hierarchy looking down on it. What is the role of such a dialogue for your work? How would you appraise the difference between your two works? Are there other French theorists whose point of view was or is valuable in your perspective?

My work has always been conducted as a dialogue with other writers—philosophers, scholars, poets, and visual artists as well. The American Minimalist Robert Morris has been my interlocutor for over twenty years. I have written about his work, and he has written about mine, most recently in The Pictorial Turn, a special issue of Culture, Theory, and Critique devoted to my work. The British sculptor Antony Gormley has quite literally “drawn from” my work in a portfolio that is also featured in The Pictorial Turn, and I have drawn from him in all my thinking about the fate of public sculpture in our time. Biologist Norman Macleod, the Keeper of Paleontology at the British Museum of Natural History has been a long-time collaborator on questions about image and form in

the life sciences, and the “species/specimen” distinction as a useful way of thinking about the (untranslatable) distinction between an image and a picture. More diffusely, my work as head of the editorial collective that produces Critical Inquiry has amounted to a thirty year long monthly seminar on criticism and theory across the humanities and social sciences.

My encounters with Ranciere were preceded by an extended period of reading his work with my graduate students in the arts and media at University of Chicago. When the invitation to have a public dialogue with him at Columbia University arrived, I was eager to embrace the opportunity to explore the relations between our work. It seems to me that we have arrived at a number of common problems (the relations of words and images; the connection of aesthetics and politics; media and the “distribution of the sensible”) by very different routes. Ranciere came to these issues out of political and aesthetic philosophy, a deep reading of the entire tradition that links Aristotle to Schiller and Kant. My approach has been more eccentric and eclectic, by way of poetry and painting (especially Blake), the relations of literary theory and art history, and an intensive study of the philosophy of the image, leading toward a new version of the ancient discipline of “iconology,” the study of images across the media. There are clearly important differences in our approaches. I think Ranciere is less interested in the non-artistic image and the icons of mass culture, than I am. And we have discussed an important difference of sensibility in our attitudes toward the vitalist discourse that surrounds image-making. Ranciere expresses a strong resistance to these vitalist vocabularies (the idea of the image as a quasi life form), while my inclination is to yield to it, and explore its ramifications in phenomena such as iconoclasm, idolatry, fetishism, and totemism. Ranciere’s essay on my work in The Pictorial Turn (“Do Pictures Really Want to Live?”) is one of the most rigorous accounts of my theoretical project that I have seen, and although (or perhaps because) it expresses some reservations about the wilder, more speculative parts of my work, it has been incredibly valuable to me.

My encounter with Ranciere, then, is rather similar to the one I had with the German philosopher, Gottfried Boehm, a few years ago. Boehm had coined the phrase, “the iconic turn,” at almost the same time that I had written an essay entitled “The Pictorial Turn” that appeared in the magazine Artforum. We had been working on the same problem for a number of years without being aware of each other, and our encounters in recent years have been delightful occasions. I would compare them to the meeting of two jazz musicians who have been experimenting with the boundaries of their art, and finally have a chance to jam together.

7- What do you think are the chances of Visual Studies as an interdisciplinary field to rise in France? What are the obstacles to it? Was your work received in France as part (and foundation) of this field, or just as an individual body of

work?

I think the chances of Visual Studies emerging as a disciplinary field in France are quite good. There are already many scholars, especially in the younger generation, who seem eager to pursue research in this area. Certainly my reception by Gaby David and Andre Gunthert of the Lhivic Lab at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes made it clear to me that important work is already going on. And the reception of my lectures at Paris VII and the Jeu de Paume made it clear to me that my "individual body of work" is being read across a number of fields, both academic and non-academic.

8- Interdisciplinarity being a key to your work and Visual Studies at large, did you feel similar interdisciplinary impulses in France, or on the contrary a more disciplinary take on topics such as the ones you labor on?

I would sometimes hear reports of a "disciplinary resistance" from "traditional art history" to both Visual Studies and to my own body of work, but I did not experience it very directly. There were interesting moments of critique in the "France Culture" radio interview of September 11, 2009, but I felt a general consensus that the notion of an iconological "interdiscipline" or "indiscipline" was gaining considerable traction in France. Since it was the anniversary of 9/11, it was perhaps a good moment to reflect on the mass spectacle of image destruction in the age of digital media.

9- Institutionally, was your work received in France exclusively within academic circles, or did you find connexions (and a readership) within other circles, such as the art world, media studies, activism, or the larger public debate? How is that different from your American reading and reception?

I was very gratified to see that my work has some appeal to French artists, and to a more general reading public that is interested in the way images function in art, politics, science, and culture. The American reception of my work has been perhaps more gradual, a matter of ideas slowly leaking out into more general circulation. In France, by contrast, the reception seemed sudden, dramatic, and enthusiastic.

10- Was any French author influential in the elaboration of your work? Did you renew the interpretation of them, and in what direction? In which case, would you speak of a "feedback effect" in the way your work met some interest among French readers?

My work is indebted to many French authors, most notably Derrida, Foucault,

and Lacan, but also to elder figures such as Barthes and Sartre. I first began reading Sartre when I was a college student, consuming all his novels, plays, and much of his philosophy, including Being and Nothingness. Then for many years I think I forgot about Sartre, and forgot that, at some level, I have always been a “Sartrean” in my sense of the fundamental responsibility of the intellectual. Recently I have been coming back to his foundational book on racism, Anti-Semite and Jew, which has served as the inspiration for a new book I am writing about race, media, and visual culture in the U.S., Europe, and the Middle East.

As a researcher in image theory and visual culture, I could hardly escape the influence of Baudrillard and Debord. In art history, the work of Louis Marin was a great inspiration. And more recently, along with Ranciere, I have begun an unsystematic study of the writings of Jean-Luc Nancy. So I think there must be a way in which French readers experience a “feedback effect” in my work, as if certain ideas of what Julia Kristeva has called “French theory” have gone abroad, and now come back slightly altered, re-functioned, and re-framed in new contexts. I wrote a brief essay a few years ago that might be typical: it was entitled “Panofsky and Althusser: The Recognition Scene of Criticism,” and it concerned the uncanny similarity between Althusser’s moment of “hailing” or interpellation, and Panofsky’s “primal scene” of art history, when an art work is encountered as if one were tipping one’s hat to an acquaintance on the street.

Of course one could hardly imagine two thinkers more radically different in every other way, which is precisely what made me interested in this one vivid moment of convergence, and which led me to explore the idea of what Derrida might have called a “double session” of analysis: 1) an ideological critique of images and iconology; 2) an iconological critique of ideology. The first session is the one that I think most theorists are familiar with—perhaps overly familiar. The second, the analysis of the constitutive images of ideology, ideology as itself a concept fleshed out by visual, optical apparatuses and processes—that to me was the point of maximum interest. Not, however, the apparatuses so much as the social relations they produce—variations on the moment of the “face to face” which I regard as foundational to both images and media in an aesthetics of encounter.