



BOOK SYMPOSIUM

Objects and images

A medievalist's response to Carlos Fausto's *Art effects*

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Reading Carlos Fausto's *Art effects* and contemplating the ways in which I find it challenging and useful take me back in memory to my first encounters with the liberating effects of anthropology. Hoping that a brief description of this might provide context for my reactions to Fausto's comparative use of Western material, I give a short and somewhat autobiographical survey of a half century of medieval studies.

When I was a graduate student in the 1960s, most of those who enrolled for graduate study in the Harvard history department intended to specialize in American or European history. The "outside field" to which we graduate students in history were required to devote a quarter of our qualifying exams was chronologically "other." For medievalists, this meant classical Greece or Rome or early modern Europe. Few if any of our professors imagined that "outside" or "other" might mean non-Western. As aspiring medievalists, we were taught by our teachers to see our period as background to the present. The senior medievalists in the United States in the 1960s saw the Middle Ages as the root or origin of valued aspects of modernity: representative government, the "liberties of the Englishman," and the rule of law; the merchant class, capitalism, and double-entry bookkeeping; the university, the liberal arts, and a humanities curriculum based in the classics. No doubt more influenced by the counterculture of the sixties and the Vietnam War protests than we realized, we students sought something

else: not origins or roots but rather the challenge of difference. Were there recognizable structures underlying institutions and events as strange as the village "moot," the theft of saints' relics, or trial by ordeal? We studied feuding and dispute settlement, religious revivals, revolts and heresies—in short, what it meant to belong to or withdraw from groups and how humans accessed a world beyond the sensible. Thus it was the medievalists in training of the 1960s who were the first among history students to read Victor Turner, E. E. Evans-Pritchard, Mary Douglas, Marcel Mauss, Max Gluckman, and Clifford Geertz.

Then things changed. By the 1990s, medievalists and non-medievalists alike came to see the Middle Ages as less a social structural challenge to teleological assumptions than as a culture of the bizarre (Freedman and Spiegel 1998). Studies proliferated on ghosts and mermaids, vampires and shape-changing, the *jus prima noctis* and gender-bending. Recently, both medievalists and non-medievalists have sometimes succumbed to almost obsessive study of the period as the birthplace of the pejorative and the politically harmful. Given current stereotypes of the medieval period, many of today's scholars as well as most ordinary viewers of television, movies, computer games, and the internet seem to think of the Middle Ages as a hodgepodge of Tolkien, Anne Rice's vampires, King Arthur's round table, the Proud Boys, and the *Game of Thrones*.





Historians have responded to the rather diffuse “otherness” emphasized in the 1990s and early 2000s in various ways. To my mind, the most important among recent approaches is what has been called the “material turn”—a move that includes not only serious study of medieval archaeology but also scrutiny of both religious and nonreligious “things” (Daston 2004; Fleming 2010; Morgan 2010; Bynum 2011, 2020b). Art historians, as Carlos Fausto documents at length, have sometimes been leaders of this “new materialism,” using anthropologist Alfred Gell and sociologist Bruno Latour to create a new emphasis on what is often called “the agency of objects.” To someone like me, whose early inspiration came from reading Turner and Evans-Pritchard with exuberant recognition of an intellectual framework she had long been seeking, this material turn has been liberating exactly in its return to anthropology as an intellectual partner to what historians do. Many of the technical analyses Fausto details for the reader in his introduction and then returns to in his conclusion provide either new concepts or support for much recent work by medievalists. For example, Fausto’s understanding of ritual objects as neither animistic nor iconic but rather what we might call “presences” is itself nuanced and corroborates much of what historians have been struggling to articulate about the period of European history between the late thirteenth and mid-sixteenth centuries.

For all the utility and inspiration *Art effects* provides, however, I find it puzzling that—myself and Jean-Claude Schmitt aside—the medievalists Fausto cites are art historians. Moreover, what has been taken from their work to use in comparison is image and depiction (mostly paintings and manuscript illuminations), not object, or body, or tactility, although art historians, like historians, have recently been very interested in these topics and Fausto begins chapter one by stating (p. 29): “This is a book about artifacts and their effects.”¹ To any historian of medieval or early modern Europe, what jumps immediately to mind for comparison with the wide range of objects from Amazonia are not the relatively rare drawings of the Godhead or of monsters and devils in medieval manuscripts, to which Fausto devotes some thoughtful analysis, but the much, much more common accounts from the late Middle Ages of objects as agents: for example, miracle after miracle of Eucharistic wafers and relics

(body parts but also objects) acting to convert, heal, accuse, or inspire; ritual things such as dove-shaped pyxes or statues coming to life; objects that not only appear in visions but also remain behind as a proof of the visionary experience; and the belief of alchemists that any material could be converted into gold and their attempts by manipulating materials to do so (Bynum 2011: 231–46; Bynum 2020b: 39, 146).² Fausto is right that there is, in a sense, a default to the human in medieval ritual objects that depict, induce, or facilitate transformation, whereas much of what he considers from Amazonia defaults to the animal, but the most powerful and the most disputed ritual objects in medieval Europe—parallel to the Amazonian masks and aerophones he analyzes with such skill—are relics and the Eucharist, which do not in any simple sense represent the “Other” as “human.” Objects, not images or depictions, are at the center of late medieval ritual and practice in ways that most closely parallel the rituals and practices of Amazonia that Fausto studies.

I have written a fair amount over the past few years about similitude and comparison and the need to interrogate them as concepts (Bynum 2014, 2020a). Philosophers and students of comparative religion have done this for some time, and recently art historians have begun to do so, especially in discussions of portraiture (Gaier, Kohl, and Saviello 2012).³ They ask such questions as: what does it mean for a portrait to be “like”—to “represent”—the sitter? Thus we might consider: does a painting of Dora Maar “represent” Picasso’s mistress if she has only one eye? Is Marilyn Monroe “like” the figure duplicated hundreds of times in Warhol’s film strips? Although I can in no way claim to have solved the complicated problems raised by this discussion, Fausto’s efforts at comparative history encourage me to probe a bit further the issue of what we do when we compare two things.

What Carlos Fausto is doing in the introduction and conclusion to *Art effects* is what the Israeli medievalist Benjamin Kedar calls “soft comparison” (Kedar 2009: vi). It is what most of us scholars do when we attempt

1. Recent studies of artifacts by historians and art historians include Jung 2010; Morgan 2010; Bartal, Bodner, and Kühnel 2017; Ivanič, Laven, and Morrall 2019.

2. As Fausto indicates, he has not taken ritual into account in his treatment of the Christian, but this makes it difficult to compare Christian objects out of performance context with Amerindian ones embedded in ritual. For an example of an object, in this case a statue, animating, see Newman 2008: 164.

3. The introduction to this volume makes the point that more theorizing of “likeness” by art historians is necessary.



comparison at all. We draw on the best secondary material we can find about the comparanda and use it to shed light (by contrast and similarity) on the primary material to which we have devoted years of work. We are at the mercy of the research others have done, and in choosing it we are choosing not only an aspect of culture to compare to our material but also the approach of the scholar we are depending on. Hence it is enormously important what we choose.

And choose we must. Because as philosopher and literary critic Paul North has stated: “everything is like everything in some respect” (North 2021).⁴ Or as the ancient Greek philosopher Anaxagoras asserted in a proposition explored often since antiquity: “there is something of everything in everything” (Matthews 2002). Nonetheless, as the contemporary artist Donald Judd has commented: “A lot of things look alike, but they’re not necessarily very much alike” (Glaser 1995: 163).⁵ If an effort to explain apparent likeness leads quickly and almost inexorably to a discovery of structural or functional difference, such a dynamic may suggest that the superficial similarity one started with was not very interesting after all. Hence whatever we choose to compare, the comparanda will be like in certain ways, but choosing what kind of likeness we start with will be crucial.

With this, I return to the observation I made earlier that Fausto has chosen art historians’ discussion of image as his partner in soft comparison, not the very large amount of both descriptive and theoretical writing historians of European culture and religion, as well as art historians, have recently done on objects and materiality (Bynum et al. 2013). Fausto has made this choice despite the fact that objects rather than images are at the center of his analysis of Amazonia. That said, I note that his comparison of tribal objects with European images produces some helpful and convincing results. Thus when considering the image in medieval art, he quite rightly finds even the supposedly inexpressible—the Trinity—occasionally depicted as a man with three faces or three heads (an image repressed by Catholic legislation after the Counter Reformation). He is, moreover, correct to emphasize that even in the central sacrament, the Eucharist, one finds what I have elsewhere called “the return of the [anthropomorphic] repressed” (Bynum 2020b:

141).⁶ Visionaries do sometimes see the human Christ emerge in the consecrated wafer—either as the horror of chopped meat or the comfort of a rosy and loving baby. But if we move beyond the Christian art Fausto chooses for comparison—manuscript pages, panel paintings, and altarpieces—we find, first, a much larger and more sophisticated Christian theoretical understanding of “image” than he recounts and, second, a religious practice in which objects—that is, non-iconic “things”—are central. Although I do not have the space to explain these points fully here, I suggest two ways in which they would nuance his comparison of Amazonia and medieval Europe.

First, Fausto is right to consider European debates over iconoclasm (that is, the religious use of images) as important background to a Christian understanding of representation. The first wave of controversy over images, that from 726–787 and 815–843, did indeed conclude that Jesus could be represented in art in his human form exactly because of the Incarnation (Freedberg 1989; Belting 1994).⁷ Moreover, the vast majority of Christian images from the twelfth century on were of Jesus and the saints. By the fifteenth century in Europe, however, resistance to the iconic was far broader than simply to the depicting of Christ or God. Iconoclasts emphasized Exodus 20:4: “Thou shalt not make . . . a graven thing, nor the likeness [*similitudinem*] of any thing that is in heaven . . . or earth.” All sorts of images brought into Christian space or used in Christian devotion were suspect. For example, preachers in the fifteenth century rejected as idols even the circular Holy Name Tablets popularized by San Bernardino of Siena, arguing that the only circle that could “represent” God was the Eucharist (Bynum 2020b: 38).⁸ Moreover, the passage in Genesis that described man as created in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26) was primarily, in the long and sophisticated theological

4. I read Paul North’s work in manuscript and thank him for sharing it. See also Bois 2015.

5. Glaser quotes from a discussion with Judd. See also Powell 2012: 11, citing Judd.

6. There are also cases where the representation of Christ in images (that is, in panel paintings or sculptures) defaults to an object, such as the motif of the Hostienmühle where a baby turns into bread or vice versa. For an example, see Bynum 2020b: 26.

7. Belting 1994, Freedberg 1989, and those who have followed them show the influence of the anthropologist Alfred Gell (1998). In recent years, one of the major theorists of this trend, Hans Belting, has seen himself as an anthropologist. See Hamburger 2013: 202–15.

8. It is clear that objections to the tablets arose also from fear that they could be fabricated by the faithful and would thereby slip from clerical control.



tradition in the West, not a discussion of depiction or representation at all.⁹ The ideas of *imago* and *similitudo* were ontological and ethical. That the human being was created in God's image was understood as a statement of his/her possibility of salvation, of return to God; the *similitudo* the human person had lost was moral. In short, humans lost similitudo through sin, not visual or morphological dissimilarity (Javelet 1967).

Most sophisticated theological and philosophical discourse from at least the fifth to the sixteenth century struggled not with the question of whether depiction could represent God but with the question of whether language could.¹⁰ Epistemological and semiotic theories about terms and their referents were spun out of such struggles, and most theologians, from the pseudo-Dionysius to Thomas Aquinas to Nicholas of Cusa, felt that negative statements—statements of what God is not—better captured the divine not only in theological discussion but also in prayer. As Jeffrey Hamburger showed in his groundbreaking study of the *Rothschild Canticles*, even the depiction of the triune God as three human persons (or two humans plus a bird) tends to disappear in a ball of fire or fabric or a cloud of light as the worshipper rises toward heaven. Although there is very often a default to the human in Christian art, there is often, in theology, prayer, and devotional writing, a default to the ineffable (Hamburger 1991: 118–54, and plates 4 and 12). If one could interview native informants from the fourteenth century, some (at least of the theologically educated or the cloistered) might well say not “God is a big man” but rather God is a huge globe of light, an indescribable power hidden behind a curtain, or an essential “Beyond-ness.”

Second, if Fausto considered those things—relics and the Eucharist—that were even more contested than images in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, he would find greater support for both the differences and the similarities he suggests between Amazonia and medieval/early modern Europe. Yes, by the sixteenth century,

many Protestant areas of Europe were hostile to images. There was a newer and broader iconoclasm, to which sociologists and anthropologists as well as historians have recently called much attention (Latour and Weibel 2002).¹¹ But Lutheran Protestants did not reject images qua images. Indeed, Protestantism helped to develop the concept of “art” (as different from cult) exactly because images could be, as Luther said, *adiaphora*: “things of indifference.” They were not crucial either as sacrilege or as encounter, and could be used to teach if properly understood. Calvinists and later Puritans did, of course, reject all images in church except the cross, but even they often had religious images and objects in private homes. More profound and telling in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Europe were debates over whether bread and wine could be the body of God and whether the relics of holy persons (pieces of their bodies or things that had touched them) could convey power and healing and should therefore be revered. So intense was such controversy that the Catholic Church at the Council of Trent could not really agree on a Eucharistic formulation, settling for an anodyne and unclear statement, and pulled back from (without dismissing) relic cult (Browe 1938; Bynum 2007; Hahn 2012; Weinryb 2018).¹² Hence objects were more central, more threatening and challenging, in the European religious tradition even than images. The basic problem of the European reformations was claims to holy “thing-ness.”

Moreover, ferreting out the assumptions about objects that really operated in European culture is more difficult than it first appears. Although the art studios of renaissance Europe had conceptions of original and copy, of parts and whole, and of representation and depiction somewhat similar to current Western ones, there was a different understanding of presence in Christian practice.¹³ Scholars of religion denominate this “the

9. Fausto gives a useful discussion of the Hebrew, but almost no Christian in the West at this time would have known the Hebrew. Much more relevant to Western understandings would be the complex Latin meanings of *imago* and *similitudo*; for which see Javelet 1967 and Bedos-Rezak 2011.

10. Although the issue is too complicated to pursue here, some art historians, above all Herbert Kessler, have argued that images themselves deal implicitly with such questions. See Kessler 2000.

11. As Fausto points out, this interest was greatly encouraged by the exhibit *Iconoclasm* in Karlsruhe in 2002. What was new was less the interest in iconoclasm itself than an emphasis on comparing medieval and modern versions of it.

12. Much of the Catholic pulling back from relic cult at this moment was owing, as is well known, to the abuse of indulgence selling. But relics and *ex votos* continue to be important in many Catholic parts of the world today and include many sorts of objects that heal or are healed.

13. For important nuancing of the idea of an art-historical break between medieval and early modern, see Nagel and Wood 2010.



devotional logic of presence”: an understanding that a whole can be present as a whole in many different fragments and places or that the proliferation of examples can be a proliferation of the entire original, not the spread of copies (Orsi 2010: xvi).¹⁴ Hence a piece of a saint or a particle of a host is the whole saint or the whole Christ. Protestant rebukes that multiple consecrations of the Catholic Eucharist would lead to mountains of human flesh were, in this account, simply misunderstandings by the ignorant of how religion works. In such a sensibility, the Christian object becomes very much like the sort of object Fausto explains on p. 262: a thing that is a rather different sort of ontological truth from a unitary subject or an original and a copy.

More could be said. Here I have pointed to only a few ways in which Fausto’s use of the “soft comparison” to images in late medieval and early modern Christianity is sophisticated, useful, and enlightening. I have also suggested that his analysis of European religious practice would be strengthened and made more complicated if he consulted historians as well as art historians and considered Western religious objects as well as images. For historians, with their “material turn,” have now joined scholars of art history and the history of religions in forging new understandings of medieval and early modern European culture. I hope that those of us who have long relied on anthropology for inspiration can now return the favor by offering more of our own historical work to anthropologists for use in theorizing and in comparison.

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14. The idea comes close to what Fausto (p. 21) means by “qualitative indeterminacy.”



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