
The Magic of Images: Word and Picture in a Media Age

CAMILLE PAGLIA

EDUCATION HAS FAILED TO ADJUST to the massive transformation in Western culture since the rise of electronic media. The shift from the era of the printed book to that of television, with its immediacy and global reach, was prophesied by Marshall McLuhan in his revolutionary *Understanding Media*, which at its publication in 1964 spoke with visionary force to my generation of college students in the United States. But those of us who were in love with the dazzling, darting images of TV and movies, as well as with the surging rhythms of new rock music, had been given through public education a firm foundation in the word and the book. Decade by decade since the 1960s, popular culture, with its stunning commercial success, has gained strength until it now no longer is the brash alternative to organized religion or an effete literary establishment: it *is* the culture for American students, who outside urban centers have little exposure to the fine arts. I cannot speak for Canadian or European students, whom I have had little opportunity to observe closely over time. But because the US is the driving media engine for the world, what happens there may well be a harbinger for the future of all industrialized nations.

Interest in and patience with long, complex books and poems have alarmingly diminished not only among college students but college faculty in the US. It is difficult to imagine American students today, even at elite universities, gathering

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impromptu at midnight for a passionate discussion of big, challenging literary works like Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*—a scene I witnessed in a recreation room strewn with rock albums at my college dormitory in upstate New York in 1965. As a classroom teacher for over thirty years, I have become increasingly concerned about evidence of, if not cultural decline, then cultural dissipation since the 1960s, a decade that seemed to hold such heady promise of artistic and intellectual innovation. Young people today are flooded with disconnected images but lack a sympathetic instrument to analyze them as well as a historical frame of reference in which to situate them. I am reminded of an unnerving scene in Stanley Kubrick's epic film, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, where an astronaut, his air hose cut by the master computer gone amok, spins helplessly off into space. The new generation, raised on TV and the personal computer but deprived of a solid primary education, has become unmoored from the mother ship of culture. Technology, like Kubrick's rogue computer, HAL, is the companionable servant turned ruthless master. The ironically self-referential or overtly politicized and jargon-ridden paradigms of higher education, far from helping the young to cope or develop, have worsened their vertigo and free fall. Today's students require not subversion of rationalist assumptions—the childhood legacy of intellectuals born in Europe between the two World Wars—but the most basic introduction to structure and chronology. Without that, they are riding the tail of a comet in a media starscape of explosive but evanescent images.

The extraordinary technological aptitude of the young comes partly from their now-instinctive ability to absorb information from the flickering TV screen, which evolved into the glassy monitor of the omnipresent personal computer. Television is reality for them: nothing exists unless it can be filmed or until it is rehashed onscreen by talking heads. The computer, with its multiplying forums for spontaneous free expression from e-mail to listservs and blogs, has increased facility and fluency of language but degraded sensitivity to

the individual word and reduced respect for organized argument, the process of deductive reasoning. The jump and jitter of US commercial television have demonstrably reduced attention span in the young. The Web too, with its addictive unfurling of hypertext, encourages restless acceleration.

Knowing how to “read” images is a crucial skill in this media age, but the style of cultural analysis currently prevalent in universities is, in my view, counterproductive in its anti-media bias and intrusive social agenda. It teaches students suspicion and paranoia and, with its abstract European terminology, does not offer an authentic anthropology of the North American media environment in which they came to consciousness. Post-structuralism and postmodernism do not understand magic or mystique, which are intrinsic to art and imagination. It is no coincidence that since postmodernist terminology seeped into the art world in the 1980s, the fine arts have receded as a major cultural force. Creative energy is flowing instead into animation, video games, and cyber-tech, where the young are pioneers. Character-driven feature films, on the other hand, have steadily fallen in quality since the early nineties, partly because of Hollywood’s increasing use of computer graphics imaging (CGI) and special effects, advanced technology that threatens to displace the live performing arts.

Computer enhancement has spread to still photography in advertisements, fashion pictorials, and magazine covers, where the human figure and face are subtly elongated or remodeled at will. Caricature is our ruling mode. In the last decade in the US, there has also been a relentless speeding up of editing techniques, using flashing, even blinding, strobe-like effects that make it impossible for the eye to linger over any image or even to fully absorb it. There has been a reduction of spatial depth in image-making: one can no longer “read” distance in digitally enhanced or holographic films, where detail has a uniform, lapidary quality rather than the misty atmospherics of receding planes, so familiar to us from post-Renaissance art based on observation of nature. Movies have followed the TV

model in neglecting background, the sophisticated craft of *mise-en-scène*. Distorting lenses and camera angles producing warped, tunnel-like effects (as in Mannerism or Expressionism) deny the premise of habitable human space. Subtlety and variety in color tones have been lost: historical stories are routinely steeped in all-purpose sepia, while serious dramas and science-fiction films are often given a flat, muted, shadowless light, as if mankind has fled underground.

The visual environment for the young, in short, has become confused, fragmented, and unstable. Students now understand moving but not *still* images. The long, dreamy, contemplative takes of classic Hollywood studio movies or postwar European art films are long gone. Today's rapid-fire editing descends from Jean-Luc Godard, with his hand-held camera, and more directly from Godard's Anglo-American acolyte, Richard Lester, whose two Beatles movies have heavily influenced commercials, music videos, and independent films. Education must slow the images down, to provide a clear space for the eye. The relationship of eye movements to cognitive development has been studied since the 1890s, the groundwork for which was laid by investigation into physiological optics by Hermann von Helmholtz and Ernst Mach in the 1860s. Visual tracking and stability of gaze are major milestones in early infancy. The eyes are neurologically tied to the entire vestibular system: the conch-like inner ear facilitates hand-eye coordination and gives us direction and balance in the physical world. By processing depth cues, our eyes orient us in space and create and confirm our sense of individual agency. Those in whom eye movements and vestibular equilibrium are disrupted, I contend, cannot sense context and thus become passive to the world, which they do not see as an arena for action. Hence this perceptual problem may well have unwelcome political consequences.

Education must strengthen and discipline the process of visual attention. Today's young have a modest, flexible, chameleonlike ability to handle or deflect the overwhelming pressure of sensory stimuli, but perhaps at a cost to their

sense of personal identity. They lack the foolish, belligerent confidence of my own generation, with its egomaniacal quest for the individual voice. In this age dominated by science and technology, the humanities curriculum should be a dynamic fusion of literature, art, and intellectual history. Because most of my career has been spent at arts colleges, I have been able to experiment with a wide range of images in the classroom. The slide lecture, with its integration of word and picture, is an ideal format for engaging students who are citizens of the media age. Discourse on art works should be open to all humanities faculty. No specialist “owns” the history of art, which ultimately belongs to the general audience.

My students at the University of the Arts—painters, sculptors, ceramicists, photographers, animators, Web and industrial designers, screenwriters, dancers, actors, musicians, composers, and so forth—come from an unusually wide range of backgrounds, from working farms to affluent suburbs or the inner city. I have gotten good pedagogical results over the past two decades with canonical works of art that can be approached from the point of view of iconography. This method of art-historical analysis, sometimes called iconology, was formalized in the 1920s and 1930s by Erwin Panofsky from earlier theorizing by Aby Warburg and was further developed by Rudolf Wittkower and Ernst Gombrich. Iconography requires the observational skills and fine attention to detail of literary New Criticism but sets the work into a larger social context, consistent with late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century German philology. To help focus scrutiny, one must find images in art that are more vivid than what the students see around them every day. The point is not just to show pictures but to seek a *commentary* that honors both aesthetics and history. This is an exercise in language: the teacher is an apostle of words, which help students find their bearings in dizzy media space.

Works that make the most immediate as well as the most lasting impact on undergraduates, I have found, usually have a magic, mythological, or intensely emotional aspect,

along with a choreographic energy or clarity. Here is a quick overview of objects from the Western tradition that have proved consistently effective, as assessed by student performance on midterm and final exams. Among ancient artifacts, the bust of queen Nefertiti, with its strange severity and elegance; the monumental Hellenistic sculpture group of the Trojan priest Laocoön and his two sons being strangled by serpents; and the Varvakeion Athena, our small Roman-era copy of the colossal, chryselephantine statue of the armed Athena from the Parthenon. The latter in particular, with its dense iconography of coiled serpent, winged Victory, triple-crested helmet, and aegis with gorgon's head medallion, seems to burn its way into student memory.

Images from the Middle Ages, aside from elegant French Madonnas and Notre Dame's gargoyles and flying buttresses, have proved less successful in my experience than the frankly carnal images of the Italian Renaissance. A dramatic contrast can be drawn between Donatello's sinuously homoerotic, bronze *David* and his late, carved-wood *Mary Magdalene*, with its painful gauntness and agonized posture of repentance. Two standards never lose their power in the classroom: Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*, where the nude goddess of love stands in the dreamy S-curve of a Gothic Madonna, and Leonardo's eerie *Mona Lisa*, with its ambiguous lady, barren landscape, and mismatched horizon lines. From Michelangelo's huge body of work, the deepest response, independent of the students' religious background, has been to his marble *Pietà*, where a ravishingly epicene dead Christ slips from the lap of a heavily shrouded, strikingly young Mary, and second to a surreally dual panel in the Sistine Chapel ceiling, *Temptation and Fall*: on one side of the robust tree wound by a fat, female-bodied serpent, sensual Eve reaches up for the forbidden fruit, while on the other, an avenging angel drives the anguished sinners out of paradise.

Because of its inherent theatricality, the Baroque works resoundingly well with undergraduates. Paramount exhibits are Bernini's designs for St. Peter's Basilica: the serpentine,

95-foot high, bronze pillars of the *Baldachino* (canopy) over the main altar; or the elevated chair of Saint Peter—wood encased in bronze and framed by a spectacular *Glory*, a solar burst of gilded beams. Next is Bernini's Cornaro Chapel in Rome's Church of Santa Maria della Vittoria, with its operabox stage setting, flamboyant columns of multicolored marble, and over the altar the wickedly witty marble-and-bronze sculpture group, *Ecstasy of St. Teresa*, where spiritual union and sexual orgasm occur simultaneously.

Nineteenth-century Romantic and realist painting offers a staggering range of image choices. Standouts in my classes have included the following: Gericault's *Raft of the Medusa*, a grisly intertwining of the living and the dead, bobbing on dark, swelling seas against a threatening sky. Delacroix's *The Death of Sardanapalus*, inspired by a Byron poem, with its swirl of luxury and butchery around the impassive king of Nineveh, who has torched his palace and capital. Turner's *The Burning of the Houses of Lords and Commons* (chronicling a disaster Turner witnessed in 1834), where nature conquers politics and the Thames itself seems aflame. (Of several views in this series, the version owned by the Cleveland Museum of Art is best because most panoramic.) Manet's *Girl at the Bar of the Folies Bergère*, a penetrating study of social class and exploitation amid the din and glitter of modern entertainment: we ourselves, thanks to a trick mirror, become the dissolute, predatory boulevardier being waited on by a wistful young woman lost in the harsh night world of the city.

Twentieth-century art is prolific in contrasting and competitive styles but less concerned with the completeness or autonomy of individual images. Two exceptions are Picasso's still intimidatingly avant-garde *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. Version O)*, with its brothel setting, contorted figures, and fractured space, and second, his monochrome mural, *Guernica*, the most powerful image of political protest since Goya, a devastating spectacle of fire, fear, and death. Also unfailingly useful are Hollywood glamour stills from the 1920s to the 1950s, which are drawn from a slide collection

that I have helped build at the University of the Arts since 1990. I view these suave portrait photos, with their formal poses and mesmerizing luminosity, as true works of art in the main line of Western culture.

But an education in images should not simply be a standard art-survey course—though I would strongly defend the pedagogical value of survey courses, which are being unwisely marginalized or dismantled outright at many American colleges. Thanks to postmodernism, strict chronology and historical sweep and synthesis are no longer universally appreciated or considered fundamental to the graduate training of humanities professors. But chronology is crucial if we hope, as we must, to broaden the Western curriculum to world cultures. To maintain order, the choice of representative images will need to be stringently narrowed. I envision a syllabus based on *key images* that would give teachers great latitude to expand the verbal dimension of presentation, including an analysis of style as well as a narrative of personal response. I will give three examples of prototypical images for my proposed course plan. They would play on students' feeling for mystery yet ground them in chronology and encourage them to evaluate historical evidence. The first example is from the Stone Age; the second from the Byzantine era; the third from pre-Columbian Central America.



AMONG AND SOMETIMES boldly *on* the prehistoric paintings of animals found in the caves and rock shelters of southern France and northern Spain are eerie stenciled hands captured in circles of color (fig. 1). Powdered minerals—white, black, brown, red, violet, or yellow—were mixed with water and blown by the unknown artist through a reed or hollow bone over his or her own hand. At the Castillo cave complex in Santander, Spain is the so-called Frieze of Hands, a series of forty-four stenciled images—thirty-five left hands and nine right. In some cases, as at the Gargas cave in the French

Pyrenees, mutilated hands appear with only the stumps of fingers. It is unclear whether the amputation was the result of frostbite or accident or had some ritual meaning of root, primal power.

These disembodied hands left on natural stone 25,000 years ago would make a tremendous impression on students who inhabit a clean, artificial media environment of hyperkinetic cyber images. The hand is the great symbol of man the tool-maker as well as man the writer. But in our supermechanized era, many young people have lost a sense of the tangible and of the power of the hand. A flick of the finger changes TV channels, surfs the web, or alters and deletes text files. Middle-class students raised in a high-tech, service-sector economy are several generations removed from the manual labor of factories or farms.

The saga of the discovery of the cave paintings can also show students how history is written and revised. The first cave found, at Altamira in northern Spain, was stumbled on by a hunter and his dog in 1868. The aristocratic estate owner, an amateur archaeologist, surveyed the cave but did not see the animals painted on the ceiling until, on a visit in 1879, his five-year-old daughter looked up and exclaimed at them. Controversy over dating of the paintings was prolonged: critics furiously rejected the hypothesis of their prehistoric origin and attributed them to forgers or Roman-era Celts. The discoveries of other cave paintings in Spain and the Dordogne from the 1890s on were also met with skepticism by the academic establishment. Funding for the early expeditions had to come from Prince Albert of Monaco. The most famous cave of them all, Lascaux, was found in 1940 by four adventurous schoolboys who tipped off their schoolmaster. Thus children, with their curiosity and freedom from preconception, have been instrumental in the revelation of man's primeval past.

Cave paintings recreate a subsistence world where human beings' very survival was at stake—a situation that can come again in war or after severe climatological change. Was the

stenciled prehistoric hand a tribal badge or a symbol of possession and control over the painted animals?—whose real-life originals constituted a critical food supply in the Ice Age. Cave paintings usually follow strict realism: minutely varied species of horses, deer, bison, and mammoths, delicately painted with improvised brushes of grass or fur, can be identified. The fragility yet willed strength of human power symbolized by the stenciled hand is suggested by the sheer size of animals depicted. For example, seventeen images of the long-horned steppe bison (*bison priscus*) appear in the cave at Lascaux: speedy climbers and leapers, they were 6'6" in height at their hump. If one were trapped or speared, it could provide up to 1,500 pounds of meat for an extended family. The fierce, prehistoric aurochs, whose descendants include the ox and the Spanish fighting bull, were of even greater size, sometimes weighing over 2,800 pounds. There are fifty-two aurochs depicted on the walls at Lascaux: one is eighteen feet long.

The prehistoric hand, whether personal signature or communal avowal of desire, is clearly a magic image with copious later parallels. It might be juxtaposed with other upraised hands, such as the gesture of peace and blessing made by Buddha and Jesus or the signal of formal address (*ad locutio*, representing the power of speech) of Roman orators and generals, as in the restored Prima Porta statue of Augustus Caesar or Constantine's fragmentary colossus in the Capitoline Museum. There is a constellation of associations with the "speaking" hand movements of South Asian dance, called *mudra* in India and even more intricately refined in classical Khmer dance (*aspara*) in Cambodia. Then there are the operatic gestures of fear and awe made by wind-blown saints in Baroque art as well as folk motifs of the magic hand, such as the archaic Mediterranean charm with two fingers extended, still worn by Italians to ward off the *malocchio* (evil eye).



MY SECOND EXEMPLARY image is the Byzantine icon, in an early medieval style that survives in Eastern rite or Greek and Russian Orthodox churches (fig. 2). It was born in the great capital of Byzantium, renamed Constantinople (modern Istanbul). In late-medieval and early Renaissance Italy, this style was called *la maniera greca*, the Greek manner or style. Insofar as Byzantine religious art is commonly reproduced on Christmas cards and museum-shop curios, the Byzantine style remains part of contemporary culture in Europe and North America. The classic icon is a rather stern, even glowering image of Jesus, Mary, or a saint set against a gold or blue background. It may be a mosaic panel bonded to a church wall or dome or a portable image painted in shiny egg tempera on wood. Icons were paraded in cities on feast days and carried into battle to protect the armies.

The figure in icons is always static and seen in strict frontality (in contrast to cave paintings, where animals are depicted only in profile). Space is compressed, and composition is shallow, with the figure pressed against the picture plane. Even when a floor is shown, figures seem to hover. The human dimension is inconsequential. The Byzantine emperor and his queen, clad in heavy brocade robes studded with jewels and pearls, may appear but primarily as a conduit to the divine. Usually floating somewhere in the image is a vertical or horizontal strip of Greek letters, a sacred name or fragment of Scripture. This elegant black calligraphy, outlined against gold, presents words as magic. It seems to show sound soaring through the air—a ritual incantation, an abstract idea being transformed into words. The Byzantine icon, therefore, is an ideal marriage of word and picture. Church and basilica, with their architecturally embedded images, were living books for the masses. The soaring Byzantine domes emblazoned with the enthroned Virgin or Christ Pantocrator (“Ruler of All”) recall the painted ceiling of Lascaux’s Great Hall of the Bulls, a rotunda that has been called “the Sistine Chapel of Prehistory.”

The glittering Byzantine icon seizes student attention: its aggressive stare forces us to stare back. It also provides an excellent entree to long, tangled lines of cultural history. Until the late nineteenth century, Byzantine art was dismissed as a degenerate or barbarous form of classical art. The ornate Byzantine style actually originates in the luxurious ostentation of the ancient pagan Near East—notably the great capitals of Alexandria and mercantile Antioch. The figures in Byzantine icons exist as head and hand: if the bodies seem stiffly imprisoned or encased in their robes, perhaps it's because their distant ancestors were Egyptian mummies. The watchful, wary eyes of Byzantine icons, which seem to drill through and see past the viewer, descend from mummy masks of Roman-era Egypt, such as those found in a Hawara cemetery in the Fayum oasis southwest of Cairo. These vividly painted encaustic (wax) portraits, set into linen body wrappings, show only the dead's bustlike head and shoulders. The individualism of Fayum faces descends from Roman culture, with its stress on realistic portraiture. Stone busts—originally clay death masks—of Roman ancestors were kept in the family atrium and carried in procession once a year. The Fayum figures' enlarged, almost bulging eyes and dilated pupils (sometimes described as “haunting” or “insomniac”) reflect the mystical importance of the eye, identified with the god Horus, in Egyptian culture. The soulfulness of the Fayum portraits, whose originals were urban sophisticates in an anxious period of social change, survives in the ascetic faces of Byzantine saints: Osiris' promise of resurrection and eternal life has become Christ's.

The subject of Byzantine icons is inextricable from that of iconoclasm—the destruction of images because of their alleged solicitation to idolatry. Nothing could be more relevant to the dominance of images in our celebrity culture, which strives to turn us all into pagan idolators. Suspicion of or hostility to images persists in the American Puritan tradition, which surfaced at both extremes of the political spectrum in the 1980s: first, in the attempted legal suppression



Figure 1. Hand stencil in the Chauvet-Pont-d'Arc Cave (Vallon-Pont-d'Arc, Ardèche, France). French Ministry of Culture and Communication, Regional Board for Cultural Affairs, Rhône-Alpes Region, Regional Department of Archaeology.



Figure 2. *St. Gregory Thaumaturgis*, tempera on wood, 81 x 53 cm. The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia.



Figure 3. Turquoise and shell encrusted mask of Quetzalcoatl, the Feathered Serpent. British Museum, London, Great Britain (Werner Forman/Art Resource, NY).

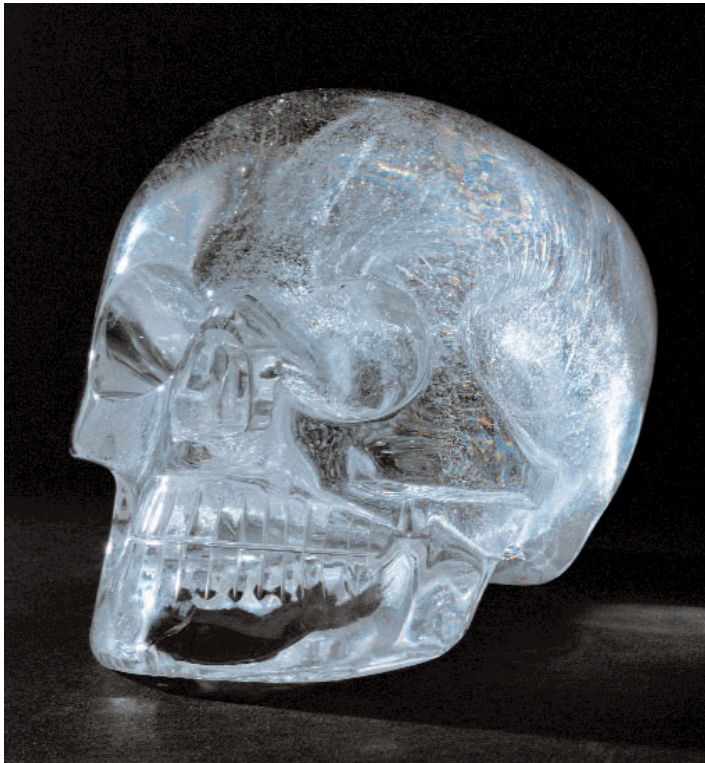


Figure 4. Rock crystal carving. Possibly Aztec or Mixtec, Mexico (ca. 14th–15th c.), or Spanish Colonial. Museum of Mankind, London (Werner Forman/Art Resource, NY).

of sex magazines, including mainstream *Playboy* and *Penthouse*, by anti-pornography feminists Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon; and second, in the attack by Christian conservatives on the National Endowment for the Arts for funding blasphemous, homoerotic, or sadomasochistic photographs by Andres Serrano and Robert Mapplethorpe. Literal iconoclasm was undertaken in Afghanistan in 2001 when the Taliban ordered the pulverizing by artillery fire of ancient colossi of Buddha, carved out of a cliff at Bamian.

Iconoclasm originates in the Old Testament's prohibition of making pictures—called “graven images” or “idols” in the Ten Commandments—of God, man, or animal. In Judeo-Christianity and its ancillary descendant, Islam (which forbids depiction of the figure in mosques), God is pure spirit and cannot be reduced to material form. During the bitter debate about this issue in early Christianity from the second century on, pagan image-making often won out, thanks to the momentum of Mediterranean cultural tradition. Protestant reformers such as Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin were severe critics of the image-intoxicated style of late-medieval Roman Catholicism. There was smashing of church statues and stained-glass windows in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries throughout Northern Europe, as there also was in England after Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries and during Cromwell's Puritan Revolution. The austere, white Protestant church in the seventeenth-century neoclassical style of Christopher Wren (the fount of American church design) is a temple to reason, with no images to distract the worshippers from Holy Scripture, the word of God.

Hence the battle in Western culture between word and picture can be traced over 2,500 years. The first outbreak of iconoclasm in the Byzantine empire occurred in 726 AD: when Leo III, the emperor and pope, ordered that a beloved icon of Christ be removed from its place above the Chalke Gate, the main entrance to the imperial palace, there was a violent riot by women, whose leader was later martyred and canonized as St. Theodosia. An edict by Leo four years later

reinforced his ban on use of the figure in church art because images, in his view, were being blasphemously worshipped. Leo's son, the emperor Constantine V, convened a council in 754 that institutionalized iconoclasm; he attacked the monasteries and persecuted iconodules (venerators of icons). Many icons were destroyed outright: mosaic images were hacked from the walls and crosses put in their place. Women, particularly among the imperial family, were fervent iconodules. The banning of images in Byzantium lasted, with several breaks, for over a century until the restoration of the icons in 843, after the death of the last iconoclast emperor, Theophilos, the prior year.

Portable icons were carried along medieval trade routes into Russia. At the conquest of Constantinople by the Ottoman Turks in 1453, many of the city's precious objects were dispersed even further into Russia and Italy. There was long controversy among Russian theologians about whether the iconostasis (from *eikonostasion*, medieval Greek for "shrine"), a partition or picture screen separating the altar from the nave in an Orthodox church, detracted attention from the Holy Eucharist as the center of the Christian service. The modern Orthodox iconostasis consists of fold-out screens with stacked registers (rows) of gilt wooden images of Christ, the Virgin, archangels, patriarchs, prophets, apostles, evangelists, and other saints, which the faithful read like posters. It resembles a modern newsstand, with its linear array of glossy magazine covers featuring celebrities and pop stars. A little area facing the front door in Russian Orthodox homes—*krasnyi ugolok*, the "red or beautiful corner"—was devoted to icon display. Bowing and crossing themselves, visitors saluted the icons even before greeting the host. Once again we detect female influence, since it was Russian women, who could not be ordained as priests, who created and tended the icon corners.

Byzantine icons hugely influenced European culture: their arrival in medieval Italy revived Italian art and, through their reinterpretation by Duccio di Buoninsegna and his stu-

dent Simone Martini in Siena, began the evolution toward the Renaissance. I recommend three Byzantine icons in particular that might intrigue students: the tenth-century mosaic panel of St. John Chrysostom (“Golden Mouth”) of Antioch in the north tympanum of Hagia Sophia in Istanbul; a twelfth-century tempera-on-wood icon of St. Gregory Thaumaturgus (“Wonder Worker”) in the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg; and a thirteenth-century tempera-on-wood icon of St. Nicholas of Myra in Bari, where the saint’s relics are preserved (this is the Saint Nick later identified with Santa Claus). In each case, a fiery-eyed figure, ornately robed, is standing against a gold background inscribed with floating Greek letters. Each saint is holding a book, a Bible studded with jewels. He catches it in the crook of his arm and steadies it with a shrouded hand, as if it were too sacred or numinous to touch. A book, in other words, is represented as the burning source of spiritual power.

Finally, I would invoke one of my favorite works of art, Andy Warhol’s *Marilyn Diptych* (Tate Gallery), which clearly demonstrates the childhood influence on Warhol of his family’s Eastern rite church. It is a modern iconostasis: fifty images of Marilyn Monroe are lined up in registers on two large screens. On one, the orange-yellow riot of Marilyn’s silk-screened images illustrates her cartoon-like stardom. On the other, her photos have faded to smudged black and white, like newsprint washed by rain or tears. *Marilyn Diptych* suggests that in a media age, words melt away, and nothing is left but images.



MY THIRD and last exemplary image is that of the skull in pre-Columbian art (fig. 3). This is another area of tremendous controversy: life-size crystal skulls continue to be touted on New Age Web sites as Aztec, Mayan, or Incan artifacts that allegedly function as archaic magnets or radio receivers to capture cosmic energy and confer prophetic power (fig. 4).

These weird objects, I submit, would be highly useful for warning students of the still-unreliable state of Web resources. My commitment to the Web as a new frontier is unshaken. (I was a columnist for *Salon.com* for six years from its inaugural issue in 1995.) Nevertheless, I still believe that only through prolonged, comparative study of books can one learn how to assess ambiguous or contradictory evidence and sort through the competing claims of putative authorities.

Though most major studies of Meso-American culture acknowledge the enormity of human sacrifice that occurred, particularly in the two centuries before the Spanish conquest, the issue has been de-emphasized over the past thirty years in the ideological campaign to convict Christopher Columbus of genocide. Otherwise well-produced picture books of Chichén Itzá, for example, the mammoth Mayan complex in the Yucatán, document the great step pyramid, the ball court, the domed observatory, and the temple of a thousand pillars crowned by a raffish Chac-Mool statue holding a belly plate on which freshly extracted, still-quivering human hearts were laid. But it is difficult to find photographs, much less comprehensive ones, of Chichén Itzá's centrally situated Platform of the Skulls, where the severed heads of sacrificed prisoners, ritual victims, and even losing ballplayers were displayed on wooden racks to bake in the sun. Around that imposing stone platform, which I have personally inspected, runs a complex frieze of stone skulls still bearing remnants of bright red paint. The widespread view of the Maya as peaceable, compared to the bloodthirsty Aztecs, certainly needs adjustment.

Such platforms, called *tzompantli*, date from the prior Toltec era in Central Mexico and northern Yucatán. Among several eye-witness accounts by Spanish soldiers and priests in Cortés' expedition, one extravagantly estimated that 136,000 skulls were displayed on the *tzompantli* in the main Aztec temple complex of Tenochtitlán on the site of present-day Mexico City. A codex ink sketch by Friar Diego Duran shows tiers of skulls tightly strung like an abacus with rods

piercing the cranium from ear to ear. In their orderly symmetries, these vanished skull racks resemble Byzantine icon screens as well as the tall magazine shelves of modern libraries. The grinning, pre-Columbian skull also appears in isolation on stone altars and on the heads, crowns, or trophy belts of ferocious earth goddesses like Coatlicue (“She of the Serpent Skirt”), who represents the cycle of fertility and death. Even more striking are unearthly masks worn by Aztec priests: an example in the British Museum, which may have belonged to king Montezuma himself, consists of the front half of a real human skull surfaced with mosaic and tied around the face; it was worn with an elaborate feather headdress. The finest of these mosaic masks are faceted with brilliant turquoise jade, with detail work in red or white seashells and obsidian, a black volcanic glass.

These authentic Aztec masks, which have circulated in Europe since Cortés’ first shipment of booty, undoubtedly inspired today’s notorious crystal skulls. At least fourteen crystal skulls, some transparent and others varying in hue from smoky brown to rose and amethyst, are currently heralded by New Age spiritualists. Several were once in major museum collections and loaned out for scholarly exhibitions. In 1996, however, a BBC TV crew, in the course of making a documentary, subjected a series of crystal skulls to scientific testing and revealed that microscopic evidence of machine polishing showed they were probably made in Germany some time since the nineteenth century. Dismayed officials at the British Museum and Smithsonian Institution immediately withdrew their crystal skulls from public display.

There is a Canadian connection here. The world’s most celebrated crystal skull—the so-called Skull of Doom—is owned by Anna Mitchell-Hedges, who lived as a child in Port Colborne, Ontario. Her stepfather, a British-born adventurer, claimed she had discovered the skull at a Mayan ruin in Belize on her seventeenth birthday in 1924. From 1967 on, the skull, which weighs eleven and a half pounds, was kept in a felt-lined case in her house in Kitchener, to

which pilgrims came from all over the world. A Toronto medium did work with the Skull of Doom and reported on its prophecies in a 1985 book, *The Skull Speaks*. The BBC producers traveled to Toronto to interview Mrs. Mitchell-Hedges, but she did not allow the skull to be tested. Its present whereabouts are unknown.

Crystal skulls, fabricated or not, are splendid symbols of human brainpower and vision. A skull, stripped of gender and identity, reduces the face to eyes and jaw—to seeing and speaking. Yet it has neither lips to shape syllables nor throat to generate breath. Images like the Aztec skull can help students bridge the vast distance between the archaeological past and futuristic cyberspace. But it is only language that can make sense of the radical extremes in human history, from the ecstatic spirituality of Byzantine icons to the gruesome barbarism of Aztec ritual slaughter. It is language that *fleshes out* our skeletal outline of images and ideas. In a media age where books are no longer the primary medium for information storage and exchange, language must be reclaimed from the hucksters and the pedants and imaginatively reinforced. To save literature, educators must take command of the pre-rational world of images. The only antidote to the magic of images is the magic of words.