Deborah Klimburg-Salter

Sacred Biography and the Visual Text[1]

Since the goal of the workshop was to encourage open exchange between the participants, the sessions were open only to the Wissenschaftskolleg. The workshop was introduced by Deborah Klimburg-Salter who also summarized the discussions held at the Wissenschaftskolleg on related themes with Elizabeth ten Grotenhuis (Boston University) during the previous week.

Theme: The basic hypothesis of the workshop is that hagiography plays a central role in Indian and Tibetan culture: in different contexts, visual, literary, or oral texts can be considered by the community as "authoritative". This position contrasts with the commonly held perception that privileges the written text alone as "authoritative". It was hoped that the discussion would clarify the structure and function of the sacred biography with particular emphasis on the visual representation. To be taken into considerations: 1) The precise definition of sacred biography and the distinctive characteristics of each media: How does the narrative function? What are the terms of the discourse? How is the message conveyed in literary, visual, and oral texts? How is the message received? 2) What is the distinctive function of the visual hagiography in comparison with the literary and oral narratives? From the "receivers'" perspective, how can the "authoritative" text be determined?

Although the workshop was conceived in an interdisciplinary and intercultural perspective, the overt goal of the workshop was to clarify the function of and appropriate interpretive strategies for sacred visual narratives in the Indian and Tibetan cultural spheres. It was believed that an examination of narrative within an intercultural context would help to illuminate the variable structures of meaning within the visual narrative as well as the manner in which the different forms of narrative interact.

Each of the participants in the workshop was asked to organize a presentation that focused on one of the themes of the workshop.
Dore Levy, Boston University: "Narrative at the Intersection of Language, Text and Image"

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[1]   Workshop held at the Wissenschaftskolleg, June 7–9, 2001 under the auspices of the Otto and Martha Fischbeck Foundation.

Michael V. Schwarz, University of Vienna: "Screening the Naumburg Screen: Written, Painted, and Carved Texts on the Passion of Christ"

Ernst Steinkellner, University of Vienna: "Why Attach Literary Text to Visual Text? Remarks on Cases at Tabo and Beyond"

Michael Oppitz, University of Zurich: "Oral Narrative in the Tibetan Cultural Sphere: Example of the Nakhi"

Deborah Klimburg-Salter, Fellow of the Wissenschaftskolleg: "The Liberations Story: Walking along the Path to Enlightenment. The Example of the Sudhana Story at Tabo Monastery 1042"

Janet Gyatso, Harvard University: "Temporality and Authority in Tibetan Narratives"

Also present at different times during the workshop were: *Narayana Rao*, *Carole Bernstein*, *Goeffry Hartman*, *Ena Desai*, *Partha Chaterjee*, *Chhaya Bhattacharya-Haesner*.

Each presentation was followed by extensive discussion.

Summary

The participants concluded that the discussions and presentations enlarged their understanding of their own research topic and methodologies. All the participants were interested in the reception of the narrative at the level of human experience. We felt that the original questions created a process whereby new avenues of research were suggested and explored. Thus, the initial questions could be reformulated.

In contrast to the initial premise, we decided that, from a functional and historical perspective, it is not meaningful to separate oral, visual, and literary narrative. The different examples demonstrated that oral, visual, and literary narrative always interacted in the historical process, leading to the production of a specific narrative rendition. Since individual experience varies according to the context, it is important to locate precisely the intersection between the narrative and the receiver – and then to define precisely the contexts – spatial, social, historical, etc. The reception of the sacred narrative was influenced by many factors, including the received cultural message of the narrative, which consisted of both the implicit background text and the explicit narrative variables. The narrative texts in different cultures were transmitted over time in oral, visual, and literary forms in varying degrees. The reception of the visual narrative of the Sudhana story in Tabo Monastery, India, for

example, could be understood only against this complex historical and experimental background.

The question of "authority" and how it functions in the formation of a narrative tradition remains to be examined. It was noted in both the visual and oral narrative that the "authority" was implicit, that is, it served as the background for the narrative. In Buddhist and Christian art, the canonical authority provided the consistent background message. The local variables in interpreting the canonical message, which in the art were contributed through variations in style and iconography, permitted the reception of the message at any one particular historical moment.

Included in the question of "authority" in Christian and Buddhist narrative was the role of the "book". Comparing examples from Indian, Tibetan, and medieval Christian visual and oral narrative, it seemed that the authority of the book was rather more symbolic than actual, but always loomed in the background.

The participants concluded that the discussion of the narrative process and the analysis of the reception of the narrative were enhanced by a comparative and interdisciplinary perspective. I agreed to send a written summary of the discussion to all of the participants for their comments and to integrate the results into an essay that could serve as an introduction to a volume containing the papers presented at the workshop. The volume will be edited by Dore Levy and myself. The possibility was left open that one or more additional contributions to the proposed volume be requested in order to make the discussion of the volume more coherent.