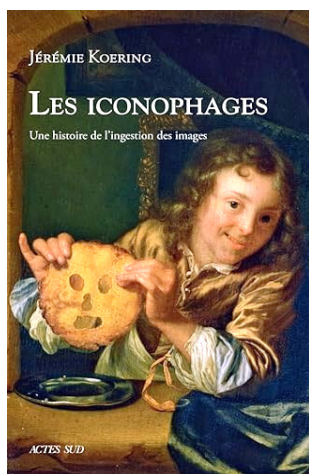


BOOK REVIEW:

Jérémie Koering, *Les Iconophages. Une histoire de l'ingestion des images*, Arles: Actes Sud, collection *Les Apparences*, 2021, 348 p.



Certain somewhat miscreant Boeotians will be quick to declare anathema: how could we not cast into some circle – of some hell, of some library, somewhere between the iconophiles and the iconodules – the iconophages, so much their relationship with images defies comprehension. Drinking water spilt on a stele, licking a statuette, scraping a fresco to make balms, crushing a holy image to use as a potion, chewing an engraving, or simply swallowing the diluted ashes of ancestors: such are these anomalies of the senses. At best, critics will greet these “oral urges”, which oscillate between high piety and low madness, with perplexity.

Rest assured, *Les Iconophages* is not a stylistic exercise, a simple *plaisir du texte* relying on gratuitous allusions or metaphorical speculations about passionate relationships with images – the kind of frivolity that sometimes leads us to (in Romanian) *a sorbi din priviri* or (in French) *dévorer des yeux* our beloved. On the contrary, Jérémie Koering’s investigation is of the highest scientific rigour. His book meticulously traces the evolution of a phenomenon that has too long remained bereft of an overarching synthesis. The undertaking is as ambitious in terms of its temporal scope (from ancient Egypt to Dennis Oppenheim) as it is daunting in its abundance of primary sources – more numerous than was previously thought – on this other *raison d’être* of images. This historical putting into perspective is coupled with visual acuity: the iconographic corpus has been meticulously compiled and includes over a hundred illustrations.



Jérémie Koering traces the history of edible images in a synchronic and polyrhythmic fashion, from ancestral practices to contemporary creation. He is concerned with grasping the performative shift from a scopic to a gastric regime, perhaps even the symbiosis of the two. By its very pulse, the *phagia* – *philia* conjunction seems to point, on the base side, to a “régression dans l'échelle de notre rapport aux choses, du spirituel vers le bas matériel” (p. 13). On the noble side – whether religiously, anthropologically or politically motivated – it suggests an inextinguishable desire to take the visible into oneself, an ontological need manifested in its most tactile forms, a devout attachment to that which, in an image, *fait foi*, to the point of wanting to incorporate it.

The author surveys the many visual pharmacopoeias that are manufactured, manipulated and subverted for curative or protective purposes with a view to an *ingestion constituante*. In this way, various ceremonies ritualise the consumer's entry into a particular community, which the author terms *ingestion instituante*. The book is divided into three parts, each of which allows ample space for the full range of the author's arguments, substantiated by emblematic case studies. The first – “L'image en soi” – examines the materiality of supports and the *raison d'être* of artefacts destined for the mouth: *tortae*, *cialde*, *terra sigillata*, blessed waxes, etc. It explores the catalytic role played by images in Egyptian magic, notched fragments of gems given to drink, the proto-Christian trade in eulogies, the dismemberment of relics into edible form, the tactile relationship with holy images in Byzantine art, *Schluckbildchen* as appetising printed matter, and so on. The second part – “Imaginaire de l'ingestion” – demonstrates that, in addition to apotropaic, prophylactic, or therapeutic virtues, the ingestion of images serves to “connect” the individual to religious communities and sometimes to exclude him from them (trials by ordeal). In this “oral stage”, the bonds of the religious community are also cemented through founding hagiographic narratives such as Mary's lactation (Saint Bernard) or Christ's bleeding wound (Saint Catherine). The metaphor of rumination (the Books of John or Ezekiel) as the incorporation of knowledge allows the author to play on two literary registers at once, biblical and artistic, since edification through the mouth finds itself actualised by the pedagogues and moralists of the Renaissance as well as by famous trattatists (Cennini, Vasari, Zuccaro, etc.), each defining in their own way the precept of *imitatio* as the bodily assimilation of profane knowledge. The third part – “L'image en partage” – focuses on the various ceremonies, meals, masses and agapes that ritualise iconophagy. From antiquity (sacrificial cakes) via Christianity (*cialde*, blessed waffles, *Lebkuchen*) and up to the tables of princes, various edible delights are artistically laid out before the eyes of guests. Commensality provided the ideal time and place for forging links between communities, whether religious (Mass of Saint Gregory), familial (heraldic dishes) or political (exuberant food decorations during receptions). These initiatory

parodies of ancient banquets merrily extend into artistic territory, as attested by Vasari's descriptions of the Compagnia del Paiuolo and the Compagnia della Cazzuola.

Jérémie Koering also examines the shadowy side of these images. He explores this dark continent by following the phenomenon of iconophagy down its sceptical slope, from devotional cannibalism (the theophagy abhorred by Protestants), via the critique of pure unreason (Hogarth, *Enthusiasm Delineated*), through to the satirical and political depreciations of the nineteenth century (the gingerbread Louis-Philippe).

Needless to say, the gamble of *Les Iconophages* hinges on striking the right balance between history of images and history of art. Undeniably, these practices – once pious, now heterodox – constitute “paradigms of contact” that seem to challenge the monopoly of sight. On the condition – a lax one, of course – that these images are understood not as inert, fossilised by time, or fetishised in museums, but as living entities, “en acte, agies, dans la bigarrure de leurs usages et des sociétés qui les ont vues naître” (p. 25).

To move between different fields in such an unrestrained yet rigorously documented manner is an unmistakable sign of intellectual ease. One can only imagine what it cost the author to leave the boulevard of High Art, taking instead the treacherous paths of magic, medicine and theology. In each case, Jérémie Koering takes care to clear the terrain by reducing it to its essence (agency, *virtus* of the image, thaumaturgic *potentia*, principle of sympathy, presentification, thingness of the image, *transitus*, etc.). The metabolic knot of “alchemical” relationships is thus made all the tighter. Everything hangs together admirably thanks to the structure of the book, and is conveyed in a poetic style that is a pleasure to read. This is a literary feast that satiates omnivores and omnivoyants alike.

It is relatively easy to discern to which ranks this book aspires. Page after page, Jérémie Koering enters into a kind of *sacra conversazione* with his illustrious predecessors of recent decades: Freedberg, Belting, Gell, Bredekamp, and Descola, to name but a few. Let us venture that his theoretical approach to iconophagy will further fuel an inexhaustible debate that seems to haunt thinkers of the image. *Les Iconophages* is an ambitious and brilliantly successful undertaking; the kind of *livre à thèse* that is indispensable if one wishes to seriously study images. Praised by its peers, critics and journalists, the book was awarded the Prix Pierre-Daix (2022). A translation into English is currently being prepared by the prestigious New York publishing house Zone Books. It is sure to become a classic. Romanian translators, sharpen your pencils!

Translated from French by Sarah Jane Moloney

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