teaching with visualization technologies

introduction

The history of media is a dense genealogy of debate over getting the world right. The slightest change in the way we communicate provokes deep unease. That's because communication is about connecting with people but also about memory, the uses of the past and the resources we bring to bear on arguments about the way things are and the way they ought to be. Media connect us to one another, to our children, and to our ancestors, and therefore color any lesson that anyone might like to draw from human events.

There is a powerful force at work in our reliance on media: our urgency to forget that we are speaking in and by means of as well as speaking to and about something. We are fond of assuming that the communicative tools we wield grasp reality itself with nothing of a gap or slippage between the two. We like to believe that reality comes neatly packaged in the shape of media we use—not simply or even primarily television news, which is often so nationalistic, commercial and editorial that it is difficult not to notice and therefore to suspect its inclinations. More important than commercial mass media in everyday life are the devices we use to connect us to one another and to conduct our work. When the television goes awry, I do something else to amuse myself. But when my laptop burns out or the university server crashes, a numbing pall of inaction falls over me. What am I supposed to do?

The immediacy that media afford us depends on their capacity to become invisible. The only time we notice them is when they don't work. The best medium is the one that blends into the very thoughts its users are seeking to convey.

So changes in media are perilous and anxiety inducing. Consider the debates over changes in the translation of sacred scriptures, liturgical books or hymnals; or think of the vituperation that issues over debates regarding the language and format of rituals, whether incense or bells are proper, or disagreements over the day, the dress, the food or the space that attend civic or religious rites—all of these are media conveying messages and linking people in the present to one another as well as to those who came before them and those who will come after. Whatever else it is, ritual is a complex form of social communication and one that comes in the broadest variety of media—from bodies to buildings to drink to texts inscribed on banana leaves. And the longer a medium stays around, the thicker the patina of authority that coats it.

Material culture scholars are in the business of parsing these facts and they never tire of doing so. Critical reflection on their trade therefore entails thinking about the media they depend on to study their subjects. But the impact of new media is not limited to changes in scholarly method. It also exerts considerable influence in the classroom and the museum. Given the extensive deployment of digital technology in the academy and the professional worlds of scholarship, public education and museum work, it seems more than suitable for Material Religion to host a timely conversation on the relevance of new media for our work as scholars and educators of one sort or another. We invited someone active in this endeavor to help us do this. Professor Caroline Bruzelius is Ann M. Cogan Professor of Art History at Duke University; her area of specialization is the sculpture and architecture of religious orders in late medieval urban Europe. But in recent years she has become keenly involved with a group at Duke engaged in the integration of new technologies in teaching. The editors asked Professor Bruzelius to discuss her experience as a way of eliciting reflection on the institutional situatedness of the use of new media and its impact on teaching.