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Tonio Hölscher, Visual Power in Ancient Greece and Rome: Between Art and Social Reality.

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BOOK REVIEWS

Tonio Hölscher, *Visual Power in Ancient Greece and Rome: Between Art and Social Reality*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2018. Pp. 426. Cloth (ISBN 978-0-520-29493-6) \$49.95.

It would be impossible to overstate the importance of this sophisticated and powerful book, based on the author's 2007 Sather Lectures. For while the approach and many of the ideas here may be familiar from his other work, most famously, his landmark *Römische Bildsprache als semantisches System* (Heidelberg 1987 = *The Language of Roman Images*, Cambridge 2004), it is here that they receive by far their fullest and most forceful elaboration, as Tonio Hölscher proposes to fit virtually all of ancient art into one coherent system, across time and space.

This system makes two fundamental assumptions, outlined in the Introduction, each posing a specific challenge to the methods of art history, even despite the field's recent social, spatial, and other "turns." First, art (the world of images) and reality (or, to use Hölscher's term, the *Lebenswelt* ['lifeworld']), should not be viewed as opposites, or distinct spheres of activity, since both are perceived visually and ascribed meaning in the same highly subjective ways. Real life, in other words, is itself an image. And second, at the same time, all images in pre-modern societies had their own life force and autonomy. The intensive "metalevel" viewing inherent to art history had no place in antiquity, where one saw and was seen, even by those entities which we today would consider works of art. In sum, the "culturally stamped" (9) *Lebenswelt*, together with the images that were its agents, framed and shaped the experiences of social life to an extraordinarily high degree, whether in Archaic Greece or Imperial Rome.

Each of the six chapters focuses on a particular aspect of ancient visual culture, beginning with a discussion of space (Ch. 1), "the basic dimension of the *Lebenswelt*, in which social life develops" (16). Three main ways in which space was given meaning are explored: one, the mutually reinforcing interaction between "experienced space" (how it was perceived in real life) and "conceptual space" (how it was imagined or ordered mentally, which in antiquity was consistently as a series of concentric zones radiating outward from an urban center and governed by a powerful inside/outside distinction); two, the intentional formation of space through monumental architecture; and three, the stage-like fashioning of space through religious ceremonies and other communal activities, which aimed at presenting real life *like a picture* and the human actors performing their social roles as "living images" (1 [and *passim*]) within it. This is the book's densest chapter, both because it covers so much ground—from the topographies of Attika and Rome to the depictions of ceremonies on imperial reliefs—but also because it lays out so much of the

theoretical groundwork, with the interaction between conceptual and experienced space providing a crucial analogue for Hölscher's overarching thesis about art and reality, both equal players in creating the experience of the *Lebenswelt*.

The focus of Chapter 2 is memory, a topic that has obviously been much discussed, making the freshness and clarity of the ideas presented here all the more invigorating. Hölscher begins with an impassioned reminder, one which deserves reading well outside the walls of academe, that the whole notion of "historical identity" is a deeply dangerous one, not only in antiquity but in any period, including today. Conscious references to a specific historical past, whether by an individual or a society, are, by definition, extremely narrow and selective; asserting a claim of uniqueness and superiority, they are inherently *aggressive* to other identities, and thus always have the potential to create conflict. Some ancient monuments did weaponize the past in just this way (such as at Olympia and Delphi, as *poleis* raced to assert patriotic glory following the Persian Wars). Others, however, were not as retrospective as often thought, but were essentially "*presentic*: that is, more or less neutral toward time" (101). Augustan visual culture, to take a prime example, exploited the Classical style not because it looked backward 450 years to a small Greek *polis*, but because it was appropriate for communicating certain *contemporary* values (namely, *dignitas*, *gravitas*, *maiestas*). Accordingly, Hölscher proposes a new theoretical model distinguishing between these two categories of memory, which are then mapped onto the topographies of Athens and Rome. On the one hand, there were *monuments* that privileged descent from a recognized set of ancestors and/or specific territory, and were therefore highly exclusive and, potentially, combative. On the other, there were *sites* or *places* that commemorated the community's paradigmatic models, valued for their ethical qualities or achievements, and were therefore much more inclusive.

Chapter 3 turns to living protagonists of the *Lebenswelt*, with the specific goal of explaining the conceptual place of the individual in ancient portraiture. For while earlier theories, which saw the portrait as a realistic document of an individual's appearance and character, have rightly been rejected, Hölscher argues that the current emphasis on the portrait as an expression of political and social roles has swung the pendulum too far the other way. If the portrait was only an expression of cultural norms, why was any effort at all made to render individual faces distinctive and unique? This, too, is resolved by returning to his foundational premise concerning art and reality. After all, individuals intentionally style their appearance in both spheres—through their dress, hairstyle, gestures, attitude, etc.—to communicate their social roles. Portraits of Alexander show him clean-shaven and long-haired because this was the look he actually cultivated, advertising himself as a youthful, dynamic hero-leader, in contrast to the mature (and bearded) authority figures of the past. By the same token, Perikles and Augustus were *represented* with calm and dignified expressions because they *presented* themselves so to the public. While not

totally “realistic” in our sense of the word, the portrait did correspond in its most basic features to social reality. At the same time, the rise of the portrait should be attributed not to an antithesis between individual and ideal, but to a desire to distinguish the individual, who embodied collective values in a unique and extraordinary way, from the rest of his community. Hölscher puts it neatly: “Persons of great distinction are ‘distinct’” (201).

In Chapter 4, he continues to contest the idea that art transcends, or is somehow “more than,” reality; instead, we should take seriously ancient authors’ insistence that art was fundamentally mimetic. An image of an object (unlike a word) is, after all, inextricably linked to its “essential traits” (208). And while ancient images do not—in fact, cannot—represent every single aspect of an objective reality, they do aim at a “conceptual realism” (215), in which partial aspects of reality (those judged most meaningful) are selected and concretized, just as in real life we attend to some features and experiences of the *Lebenswelt* more than others. Thus, for instance, the predilection for representing hoplite warfare as pairs locked in single combat, rather than phalanxes, is explained: it captured the predominant *psychological experience* of the real-life warrior, whose helmet, by narrowing his field of vision, prevented him from seeing his fellow soldiers on either side, effectively forcing him into an isolated fight with his opponent. The remarkable result of this approach is to show how all ancient art, regardless of style (Archaic, Classical, veristic, etc.), was “realistic,” not aiming at a single perfectly objective reality, from which it might deviate more or less, but at representing whichever *conceptual realities* society sought to emphasize at a given period.

Viewing and the role of the viewer are the focus of the final two chapters. In Chapter 5, Hölscher is at pains to emphasize the differences between the experience of encountering art today, primarily through spaces that foster subjective and intense contemplation (books and museums), and in antiquity, when images were always displayed in social places, public or private, with a social function. Specifically, they made present persons and objects, who could not otherwise be there: gods, heroes, deceased family members, and distinguished individuals. Their aesthetic qualities linked, but always subordinate to, the collective values they incorporated, images were active, contributing members of the “conceptual community” (264) in ideal form. Consequently, viewing images was neither an act of spectating nor of creative interpretation, but one of *participation*: viewers simultaneously exposed and assimilated themselves to images, in ways that were much more corporeal than intellectual.

The volume concludes with a short but captivating discussion of *decor* (Ch. 6), which Hölscher argues also had its own power and autonomy. Rich ornamentation, high-quality workmanship, precious metals, and, especially, figurative representations were all used to produce “an atmospheric ‘visual sound’” (331), which in turn amplified the cultural value of a given space, building, or object. Viewers might attend to this visual sound

carefully or partially, or tune it out completely. Similarly, images and iconic programs could be placed high above the viewer's head and out of sight, as on the Parthenon frieze or Trajan's Column, or make little or no attempt to inform the viewer on the decorated objects of normal life (like the notoriously unhelpful inscriptions on Athenian vases, or the complex, small-scale imagery of Roman coins). Decoration, like all imagery, had a crucial role to play simply by being present: to stamp the *Lebenswelt* with meaning.

As with all his writing, Hölscher wears his immense learning lightly, distilling the most complex ideas, his own and others', into crystalline prose, and his arguments here are elegantly supported by nearly 200 maps, plans, diagrams, and photographs. To experience the full thrust of his arguments, one ideally should read this book from start to finish, though one of its most exciting aspects—how it injects new vigor into subjects one thinks one knows well, like Pierre Nora's concept of *lieux de mémoire* (Ch. 2) or the rise of the portrait (Ch. 3)—is equally available at the level of each individual chapter. But it is the sheer scope of this book, together with the richness of its material, that makes it difficult to think of a parallel, at least from the field of ancient art history. Indeed, its reach feels all the more refreshing given the current emphasis on individual specialization, although this will inevitably invite criticism from some—as much as for what has been left out, as for the actual content. Here, I would note that, overall, the evidence is weighted somewhat more heavily toward Greece than Rome, presumably explained by the fact that Hölscher's system privileges a homogeneity of image-makers and viewers (“the community”), which is easier to accept for some periods (like 6th century Athens) than for others (e.g., Imperial Rome). Nevertheless, with this book, he has given us a compelling and coherent theoretical model, applied across a staggeringly wide range of genres and historical periods, which must play a crucial role in the study of visual culture for years to come.

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Jacqueline de Romilly, *The Life of Alcibiades: Dangerous Ambition and the Betrayal of Athens*, translated by Elizabeth Trapnell Rawlings. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019. Pp. 228. Cloth (ISBN 978-1-5017-1975-2). \$29.95.

To students of Greek history, Alcibiades needs no introduction. Ward of Pericles, wanton playboy, and brazen politician, Alcibiades spent fifteen years at the forefront of politics in the Greek world, inextricably linked to the changing tides of the Peloponnesian War. However, this volume is not primarily for those students. Originally published in 1995 as *Alcibiade, ou, les dangers de l'ambition* (*Alcibiades: The Dangers of Ambition*) and now