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Reliability, Accountability and Forgery in Religious, Scientific and Social Images

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Visual Trust

Reliability, Accountability and Forgery in Religious, Scientific and Social Images¹

Roger Canals

- 1 Our present is immersed in a crisis of trust. This crisis is most evident in the domain of images, which are not perceived as visual evidence anymore –if they ever were. “Faketuality” (Pilipets, 2019), post-truth and misinformation are concepts used to refer to the alleged loss of objective patterns for assessing the truthfulness, accountability and reliability of the information we receive about the world. However, trust is not a matter of all or nothing: it is a contextual relationship, an issue of “ordinary ethics” (Lambeck, Saas, Fassin, Keane: 2015) whose study requires empirical data. Indeed, we must recognize that, despite living in times of visual uncertainty, we all still trust some images as mediums (or media) for knowing and communicating. But on what basis? What makes people “trust” some images and not others? How is visual trust “crafted”, “distributed” and “assessed”? And finally, what visual methodologies could we employ to explore ethnographically the confidence in images and the ethical stances adopted vis-à-vis the visual fake?
- 2 These are some of the main questions of the research programme *Visual Trust. Reliability, accountability and forgery in scientific, religious and social images*. In this article, I would like to present some of the main ideas of this research programme, thus opening up a conversation with readers that I hope to pursue during the years to come².

What is *Trust*

- 3 “Trust” has become a key topic in social sciences (Jones 1996, 2012, McMyler 2011), whether in the field of philosophy (Uslaner, 2002), religion (Zagzebski 2012), sociology (Sztompa 1999, Cook 2003), political theory (Fukuyama 1996), social theory (Hardin 2006, 2004, 2002, 1996) and, to a lesser extent, anthropology (Corsín 2011, Ingold 2000, Shipton 2007, Carey 2017). “Trust” is a difficult concept to define. In very general terms, “trust” is a feeling, belief or expectation that someone or something is good, reliable and honest, and capable of meeting expectations. It is thus one of the main

factors uniting any social group. There is no society without trust (Luhmann 1979, Baier 1986). In this regard, as Broch-Due and Ystanes (2016) aptly point out, “trust” cannot only be understood as an abstract rational judgement performed by self-conscious individuals driven by self-interest who apply a calculation of risk and benefit to their relationships with others, as the majority of economic theory has done (Ostrom and Walker 2003). On the contrary, trust is “a disposition, a powerful affect, a stand towards the world expressed in a confident reaching out to others” (Broch-Due and Ystanes 2016:1). In other words, it is a way of dwelling in the world (Ingold 2000). As a relational category, “trust” involves an extension of the Self: we “give ourselves” (Mauss 1950) in the individuals, groups, institutions or objects in whom we are confident. Through this act, we can achieve what we could not do individually. Trust unites life paths and creates common goals. In addition, trust is an explicitly performative term: it allows us to do things. Trust points to the future. It is actually the main principle of future-making.

- 4 Relations of trust can be woven between different types of social agents: they may involve people (we usually trust relatives, friends, or neighbours) but also, depending on the cultural and social milieu, they may concern non-human beings (animals, spirits, ancestors). Every day we trust technological devices for our day-to-day tasks (GPS, mobile phone, cars) as well as “scientific” devices and outcomes (medical treatments, meteorological forecasts, economic analysis provided by “experts”). Likewise, we can also trust—or mistrust (Farocki 2015)—images. In all cases, trust is a relative and contextual tenet, culturally and socially determined. In a nutshell: trust is a matter of *ordinary ethics*.
- 5 The fact that trust is such an omnipresent principle today is precisely because we live in a society of risk (Beck 1992; Giddens 1990) marked, as several authors have argued (O’Neil 2002, O’Hara 2004), by a severe crisis of trust (Seligman 1997). In response to this crisis, a new rhetoric based on the principles of transparency (Strathern 2000), verification and reliability has been created (Terranova 2004, Taddeo 2011). Corsín (2010) maintains in this regard that trust has become capitalism’s new political epistemology. This crisis of trust translates into the suspicion the majority of the population feels in relation to some of the pillars of contemporary society, such as the role of the state as an agent that regulates and solves social inequalities. Likewise, people mistrust the will and ability of political leaders to solve global problems such as climate change, and the intentions of large technological corporations and global companies (Coeckelbergh 2012). We live in a time of uncertainty; a time of post-truth (D’Ancona 2017, Blitz 2018), conspiracy theories and rumours. There is a perception that the world is governed by a set of hidden and intentionally opaque powers whose “plan” we do not know. In this context, the future is perceived with a mixture of fear and hope (Escobar 1995, Salazar *et al.* 2017, Bryant and Knight 2019).
- 6 One of the fields in which this crisis of trust is most evident is in the domain of communication and information and, more specifically, in the field of images.

Visual Uncertainty

- 7 It is often said that we live in a society of images (Debord 1967). This statement is a cliché that needs to be discussed—visual images cannot be separated from other modes of communication and signification such as words or sounds (Cox *et al.* 2016). “Image”

is a polysemous category, debated at length (Aumont 1990, Jenks 1995, Mitchell 1992, Elkins 1999). According to one of the most accepted definitions, an image is a visual sign or representation of something or someone (Hopkins 1998). This definition, based on the principles of mimesis (Taussig 1993) and analogy (Stafford 1999), has been, however, to a large extent, surpassed. In the digital era (Lister 2013), the uses, functions and meanings of images —and especially of photographic and cinematic ones— go beyond the parameters of the semiotic theory of referentiality (Favero 2018). Today, images cannot be only understood as “signs” or “representations” of the world (in fact, they have never only been this) but rather as social agents: they do not copy or reflect “reality” but rather they make it. As “living signs” (Mitchell 2005), images follow a permanent nomadism, passing from one medium to another. They circulate, as Belting would say (2011), between objects, bodies and mental representations. In our time, images are everywhere and they serve very different purposes. A painting, a traffic sign and a photograph of an ancestor of ours are all images but the relations we establish with them —and what they produce— are very diverse. Nor do we establish the same relation with a snapchat selfie sent by a friend or an x-ray of our body taken by a medical professional. But we do not only perceive images: we also make, transform and distribute them. We all take part in what I will call the processes of *image-intensification* — the processes through which the meaning and uses of images are updated and transformed.

- 8 The disparity of forms, uses and functions surrounding images, as well as the emergence and popularization of new optical devices (Kittler 2009), has generated an atmosphere of visual uncertainty on different levels. Thus, we are witnessing an unprecedented mixture of love and rejection towards images and the visual: we adore images (we like taking them and looking at them) and at the same time we attribute the majority of the negative parts of contemporary society to them —such as solipsism, misinformation and violence. From an epistemological perspective, we no longer know if we can rely on images as valid sources of information and communication: we have incorporated a principle of visual suspicion. We are in a time of post-truth and post-photography. It may seem that images, and especially photographs, have lost their power as visual evidence: we would not trust them anymore.
- 9 This crisis in terms of visual trust³ is to a great extent the consequence of the criticisms towards the objective paradigm of photography and of the irruption of digital image and the visual fake (Crăciun 2012, Bannatyne et al. 2019). Since its birth, photography was labelled as a paradigmatic example of the objective image (Frizot 2003). Fox Talbot, one of its inventors, called it “the pencil of nature”: the device through which the world could create a self-portrait of itself without the intervention of the human hand. Barthes defined it as a “necessarily real” image, as a certificate of presence (1980). Documentary photography and photojournalism developed essentially under this principle (Chapnik 1994). We have all learned to look at photographs as an evidence of the world —and, in part, we still do this. The belief in the objectivity and immediacy of photography (Bazin 1976) has been severely called into question for a long time (Sontag 1977). The irruption of digital photography accentuated this criticism, giving rise to the paradigm of what is known as “post-photography”. As has been largely argued, digital photography can no longer be understood on the basis of the old analogical paradigm according to which photography would be a sign maintaining a “natural” or “consubstantial” relationship with the external world —

what Pierce would call an “index”. In digital image, retouching, modifying using filters and altering images are no longer exceptions or alterations to a supposed “original”, but they are part of the actual process of creating the image. The digital image is no longer just a matter of “light” but of algorithms (Favero 2014). We do not take photographs, we make them. And most of the time it is not even us, but optic devices that have acquired an almost-autonomous life –like surveillance cameras (Greene 2015). The “natural” link that analogue photography maintained with the world has been broken. Post-photographic trends have insisted on the fact that the digital image has revealed what photography has always been: “an ideology of that which is visible” (Comolli 2004), an interpretation of the world, a political artefact. Photography per se is not – and has never been– proof of anything (history is full of images that were seen as objective documents when in fact they were manipulations or *mise-en-scène*). Its “truth value” does not lie in that which it shows but in its uses.

- 10 Today, in the era of Photoshop, Instagram, and mobile apps, it has become hard to say what is and what is not “a photograph” (Demos 2013). Sometimes the question does not even make sense. Some apps offer “photographs” without any referent –Faceapp, for example, provides “a photograph” of an aged version of the user. Moreover, videogames, augmented and virtual reality and immersive experiences point towards a new relationship with images which highlights the multi-sensorial experience and the sensation of “being there” (Ijsselsteijn and Riva 2003), calling into question the actual value of the images as *images* or representations – that which Pinotti (2017) aptly calls an-iconology. Within this context, the question of the “reliability” of the image seems to be subordinate to the principle of its “emotional intensity” (Boler and Davis 2018). The effect of the image, which has become almost self-referential and freed of the notion of authorship, superimposes its value as a reliable medium. We are in the era of memes, of Deepfakes and of visual forgery. We are also changing our habits in terms of vision. With new optical devices, vision has become a playful but also a dangerous and uncertain experience (Nanay 2015). This new paradigm has contributed to a new way of looking at images (Emmison and Smith 2000). The history of photography (Frizot 1994, Flusser 2000)–and of images in general– has been partially rewritten. Within this (relatively) new visual regime, we have got used to living with the presence of visual falsity. Still, this does not mean that we do not trust images anymore –actually, we are constantly doing it when we make images, receive them or make them move! What happens is that our relations with images in *ethical terms* have become more complex and changing.

Towards an Anthropology of Visual Trust-making

- 11 In the volume *Trusting and Its Tribulations* (2016), one of the major contributions within the field of “anthropology of trust”, Broch-Due and Ystanes highlight the need to carry out ethnographies of (dis)trust based on specific empirical research. They criticize the excessively abstract approach taken by most of the books on “trust” and call for research that takes into account the specificities of each cultural context and the plurality of meanings that the word we usually translate by “trust” may adopt. In this research programme, I want to take on this challenge, proposing a comparative, multi-disciplinary and bottom-up research, based on a plurality of methods, on the (dis)trust in images in contemporary society. In other words, what I propose is an anthropology

of visual trust-making. I am interested in determining what people base their judgments of trust and distrust in images on, and how this is related to the perception of visual deception. To achieve this goal, I propose analyzing how the (dis)trust in images is forged, perceived and expressed by social agents from different countries and social and cultural contexts, as well as what actions and performances this (dis)trust generates.

- 12 To achieve this goal, this research programme is designed around a critical comparison of the relations established with three different kind of images, which I will tentatively call (1) social images (images of documentary photography and photojournalism; images of websites of “real” and “fake” news), (2) religious images (Afro-American and Asian religions, such as Hinduism) and (3) scientific images (images of outer space and from inner human body). Without question, the study of each of these images would deserve a research programme in itself. Yet my aim is to relate them theoretically *and methodologically*. Before continuing it is important to make two clarifications. The first is that the distinction between “social images”, “religious images” and “scientific images” is a merely heuristic classification. In this regard, contemporary anthropology has underscored the impossibility of separating these three domains. The nature/culture dichotomy has been widely discussed (Descola 2005) as well as the separation, in any religion, between the social and the sacred spheres (Palmié 2013). In fact, this research programme starts from the premise that these three fields are inextricably mixed –also, and perhaps especially, in the field of images. This leads us to the second clarification which is related to the importance of comparison. Anthropology has always been a comparative discipline. It has always assumed the need to compare different “societies” and “cultures” in order to understand them. But comparison is not only a “method”, it is also a cognitive principle. We learn by relating previous knowledge with new experiences in an on-going and relational process with other agents.
- 13 Thus, one of the starting points for this research is that images must be studied from a serial perspective, in other words, in networks of images (Canals 2017). This means ceasing to think only of images as representations of things and to understand them through the relations of complementarity and difference that they establish with other images –and other modes of significations like texts (Rancière 2003). This is a key principle of the contemporary theory of images (Didi-Huberman 2003, Latour 2002) – even from an evolutionary perspective and from the appearance of image-making (Withney 2986). The way in which we relate to an image is determined by the relations we establish with other images –also the way we produce, distribute and destroy them. We all have a (often unconscious) visual biography that determines how we relate to images and what expectations we have of them. Indeed, despite their apparent disparity, religious, scientific and social images are consubstantially related to each other, as well as materially and cognitively.
- 14 It is important in this regard to point out that at a phenomenological level, we all constantly relate to images of different natures. In one single day, we may interact with scientific images, social images, artistic images or religious ones. We may also be in contact with images that do not fit into this classification –a classification that this research programme will critically discuss. And with these images, we establish different relations of visual (dis)trust. The fact that these images are connected at

“cognitive”, “material” and “phenomenological” levels justifies a comparative approach aimed at establishing an over-arching theory of the (dis)trust in images.

In Image We Trust?

- 15 What does it mean to “trust” an image? To trust an image means considering it as a reliable and accountable visual medium for knowing the world and communicating to others. It also means relying on it to intervene in the world. For instance, if a doctor shows us a “scientific image” of our body, we will probably “trust it”. We usually trust the maps displayed on our GPS. On the contrary, we do not rely on most of the allegedly “realistic” photographs that we find on the internet or the tourism advertising that decorates many travel agencies. Iconoclasts trust images as a way of attacking iconophilia. To trust an image is not exactly the same as to say that an image is “true”. The truth of images is a major aesthetic and philosophical problem that has been the object of countless discussions (Mitchell 1992)–as well as the notion of “truth” itself (Holbraad 2014). We usually say that an image is “true” when we consider that it maintains a certain link of analogy, mimesis or similarity with that which the image depicts. Therefore, in order to say that an image is “true” we must know something about the ontological properties of the image (is it a photograph, a drawing, a computer-based simulation?) and, more specifically, about its formation process (Roberts and Webber 1999). In other words, we must possess a minimum level of knowledge about the connection between the image and “the world”. *The principle of visual trust, on the contrary, emerges precisely when there is a lack of knowledge.* In this regard, “trust” operates on a horizon of uncertainty and doubt. In general terms, we may say that we “trust” an image when we evaluate it as a reliable medium *although* we ignore (at least partially) what kind of image it is and how it has been done.
- 16 As one scholar has suggested (Kemp 2014), in our current visual regime, marked, as I have argued, by the tenet of visual uncertainty and by an overwhelming multiplicity of images whose origin and nature we are mostly unaware of, our relations with and through images are driven by the principle of (dis)trust (Marwick 2018). We do not know whether most of the images we receive are “true” but we still trust some of them. These judgements are most of the time ambiguous and even paradoxical. Sometimes we distrust images that look “real”. Sometimes we trust “false” images (as in some artworks or computational images). Sometimes we feel hesitant.
- 17 The principle of visual trust does not concern solely our reception of images: it also guides our actions as image-makers and image-distributors. We make images because we rely on the technological mediums we employ. Very few people know how a digital camera or a mobile phone works but everyone uses them to make and send images. Any channel of image-distribution is based on a principle of trust. Indeed, if we circulate images via social networks it is because we trust the system as a reliable platform for exchanging information –although this feeling may mix with one of profound suspicion. If a scientist makes an image of outer space from the data sent by a satellite it is because she or he trusts this technological device as a reliable medium. Likewise, followers of many religions consider icons as trustworthy agents to enter into contact with the beings these images represent –although they do it in very different senses and through different ritual practices.

- 18 Trust is not only a form of mediation but there is no mediation without a minimum level of trust. Moreover, what these examples show is that, given the inner ambiguity of images (Goody 1997), trust is a fundamental tenet regarding the relations with images in general –and not only for “photographic” or “post-photographic” ones.
- 19 If we observe what people do with images and through them, we will realise that, despite the collapse of the classic objectivist paradigm of photography the criticisms towards the referential theory of images and the advent of the so-called post-truth era (Jandric 2018), we continue to have expectations of images as mediators (Engelke 2010), in other words, as mediums for learning, communicating and relating with others and with the world. We continue to rely on images to make us see that which they are not (or to communicate to others), and we demand that this visual mediation be reliable (and we have the *right* to do so). The principle of trust continues to govern part of our relationship with images –even in 3D images and immersive experiences. As Eco said, no one can live in a world that is governed solely by falsity.
- 20 What happens is that in our relations with and through images we often mix trust with the principle of suspicion. For example, we question digital images circulating on the internet, but when we browse the internet we cannot avoid distinguishing between “reliable” images and images that we cannot trust –but we can nevertheless have fun with them, as is the case of some fake news. The problem is not the lie, but the deception: an explicitly false image does not deceive anyone, but many images appear as vectors of information when in fact they are not. That is why networks of visual trust are acquiring more importance in our relations with images. If a friend sends us a photo on WhatsApp of an event that took place in some part of the world, we will tend to trust it –not because the image is proof, but because it falls within a *relational network of trust*. And what about science? If we see an image of a far-away galaxy in a museum we will tend to trust it. Lastly, religion is not removed from this debate. In fact, it is in religion where for the first time the subject of the true image was considered (and consequently, a research programme such as this one cannot omit it). Our way of relating to images has been inherited from this tradition. Believers of many religions continue to trust in the images of certain divinities to make contact with the beings that these images represent. In religion, though, there is also deception, fakes and distrust. In short, what we observe is that trust in images –and “trust” in general– is not an abstract, de-contextualised judgement or an all-or-nothing matter: on the contrary, it is a form of relation, an event, a moral and epistemological commitment to the world and others, often unstable and doubtful, that always takes place in a specific cultural and social context. Today there is deep uncertainty surrounding how our relationship with images operates in terms of trust-making. We do not know why people trust certain images and do not trust others nor how they perceive and conceptualize visual forgery. The question of VISUAL TRUST needs to be reassessed based on empirical and comparative research. We must study the specific processes of visual trust-making.

A Mixed-methods Approach

- 21 My objective in this research is to study trust in images and the perception of visual falsity through a transdisciplinary, mixed-method and bottom-up study, through which I seek to perform a comparative analysis of the relations of (dis)trust that different

agents belonging to diverse social and cultural spheres establish with images of different natures. I consider that research about the (dis)trust of images must be able to bring together a variety of images belonging to different cultural contexts and to assume the risk of incorporating both classic debates in anthropology and image theory –such as religious images– and contemporary matters linked to media and the information society, such as Deepfakes. It must also take into account the contexts of image-making, image-circulation, image-reception and iconic verification.

- 22 Thus, VISUAL TRUST is based on a plurality of experimental and visual methods (use of camera, photo-elicitation, collaborative editing). If I chose this approach, it is because I consider that there must be a certain *homology* between what we are studying and the way we are studying it. If images today are multiple, creative and dynamic, open to a myriad of meanings, the methods used to study them should be all of these things too. This research programme also has a recursive approach. Along the lines of Corsín (2011), I consider that an anthropology of trust should reaffirm the trust in anthropology (and in social sciences in general). In this regard, one of the aims of this research is to reinforce trust in the visual within social sciences and to investigate how, as social scientists, we can create and use images in a trustworthy manner –or to use visual forgery and deception for our purposes. I will also explore how we can involve people in relations of trust in audiovisual ethnographic researches (Pattenden 2015)

The Lives of Visual Trust

- 23 There are three main research questions that will structure the research programme and serve as a conceptual guide for each specific period (or phase) of fieldwork:
- 24 *How is (dis)trust in an image “crafted”?*
- 25 This question focuses on the origin of the images. Its main category is that of “laboratory”, understood as the device where “facts” are made by a specific community, thereby becoming epistemological black boxes and establishing truth standards. Latour (1979) has shown how laboratories do not reproduce the world –rather the contrary. The idea of a laboratory (or workshop) can apply to all types of images, not just scientific ones. Thus, photography studies can be understood as “laboratories” as well as workshops or factories where religious images are designed and produced. What I seek to investigate is where, how and with what aim images (scientific, religious or social) are brought into existence and what aesthetic resources their authors use to render them “trustworthy” for an audience. Likewise, I want to see how visual falsity is produced in relation to the present day, science and religion. One of the strong points here is analysing the relationship established between reliability and creativity. In this regard, my goal is to understand how images are retouched, altered and modified before being shared publicly. In short, the aim is to conduct a comparative ethnography of image-makers.
- 26 *How is visual trust distributed and intensified?*
- 27 This second research question refers to the subject of the reception and circulation of images. This section revolves around the category of “intensification”, understood as an updating of the image’s potential as a trustworthy device of information and communication. As I have mentioned, I start from the premise that reliability is a relation, an event. Images do not “mean” or “serve for” anything beyond the social

relations into which they fall. Following the notion of *iconic paths*, I will analyse contexts of circulation of images (editorial offices, museums, universities, internet, social networks) and, through interviews and the focus group and participant observation, I will investigate how people relate to different types of images in terms of trust or distrust, highlighting the concept of “networks of (dis)trust”. The main concept involved in this question is that of “iconic path”. This category refers to the lives that images take through their existence, via which they weave relations with other images and with different social agents, transforming themselves. During their iconic paths, images pass from one medium to another, falling within different regimes of discursivity, acquiring new meanings and functions. The iconic path is an intensive [word missing?] (Viveiros de Castro 2009) and processual category that surpasses the concept of “representation”.

28 *How do iconic verification processes work?*

29 Lastly, I want to research the iconic verification and image-checking processes at work within scientific, religious and contemporary images. By “iconic verification” I refer to the procedures of verifying the truthfulness and reliability of images. For example, in recent years, in the field of digital images a range of initiatives about forensic images and forgery detection has emerged (Gloe 2007, De Rosa et al. 2010, Redi et al. 2011). Documentary photography festivals have started to demand —with varying levels of success— receiving the images in RAW format in order to avoid the increasing number of “manipulations”. Are these strategies successful? What is the equivalent in the religious sphere or in the sphere of scientific images? One of the main concepts here is *visual traceability*.

30 These questions will be applied to the different specific investigation of the research. As I have already mentioned, these investigations will focus on what I have called “social images”, “religious images” and “scientific images”. But to what images do these terms refer?

31 I understand by “social images” those “visual representations” presented as accounts of the “social world”, that is, the political situation of current world. We are constantly interacting with images of this type, especially “photographs”. We see them in the press, on television, on the internet and in the public space. We also see them in art. And we do not assess them all in the same way in terms of trust. Within this section we will analyse two types of images: Images made by documentary-makers and photojournalists, on the one hand, and digital images found on Internet on the other hand. The former refers to the images made by “professional” photographers and filmmakers aimed at “portraying” the current social and political situation of the world. I will also include other modes of representation —there are increasingly more documentary-makers who use drawing and animation and it is interesting to know why (Causey 2016). I am interested in seeing how these images are brought into existence (how professional image-makers work) and how “trust” in them is produced through different procedures —such as retouching and the use of filters (Demos 2013). I will also analyse the dissemination channels of these images (editorial offices, exhibitions, web pages, among others). I also want to see how (and why) some image professionals play with visual deception. The other group of social images that I will analyse are those that appear on blogs and websites presented as “real” and “true” information platforms, with authentication and fact-checking criteria. How are images presented and contextualised in these platforms? What aesthetic resources are used? We will

contact the managers and readers of these platforms in order to understand their procedures and mode of working. In addition, we will also analyse web pages that, often ironically and disrespectfully, circulate explicitly false or deceptive images. This section will be based on an online ethnography.

- 32 The second group of images that we will work on will be the images of what we can call the “sacred world”, in other words, images that represent divinities, spirits or supernatural entities and that are not directly noticeable in daily experience (although believers state that they are constantly operating between us). Images are a dispositive of presence (Engelke 2007, Houtman and Meyer 2012). Holy cards, for example, are amulets that protect people as they face the future. People trust in them. In the context of rituals, divinities become present through images –or should we say *as images*. The subject of “belief” in the images of divinities is a longstanding debate in anthropology that has historically brought iconophiles and iconoclasts face to face – those who trust an image as a way of accessing the divinity, and those who reject it (Gruzinski 1990, Gamboni 1997). We will focus on two cases in which interaction with the images is particularly important. On the one hand, we will analyse the relations with and through images in Afro- American religions (Mintz and Price 1976). These “religions” are characterised by what I have called “visual creativity” (Canals 2017) understood as the process of production of new images and of resignification of older ones. In these “religions”, visual creativity appears as a strategy of mediation with the other world. “Religious” images are in constant movement, and have a huge presence on the internet, which we will analyse. The other religious tradition in which we will analyse the “trust” in images is that of Hinduism. This is a religious practice with an abundance of visual signs (Elgood 2000). I am interested in seeing why people (dis)trust these images and how they blend with digital culture and the perception of visual deception
- 33 Finally, the case of scientific images is a paradigmatic example of trust in images (Carusi and Hoel 2014). By “scientific images” I mean those visual representations of the world created with the claim of knowledge and reliability by members of the scientific community, and disseminated mainly via specialised channels –although many people get in contact with these images through non specialized channels, such as anonymous blogs and pseudoscientific websites on internet. Science has shaped our way to see the world (Edgerton 2009). Thus, for example, we tend to attribute truthfulness to “photographs” of bacteria, full of colour and details, which are published in specialised journals although we are unaware of how these images have been created and the semiotic relation maintained with their supposed referent. We trust them based on the context in which the images are shown and on who is showing them. The scientific image often appears as a “fact” (Latour 1979). This task aligns with a long tradition of studies on representation in the scientific context, and particularly with STS studies. We will focus on two kind of images. The first group is formed by images of outer space. In this regard, we will contact spatial “photography” and “video” laboratories to see how these images are made, and how they are retouched and distributed. These images are relevant because they point to the limits of our visual regime: they are the limits of the visible. The other group of images is of the inside of the human body. We will focus on the progress made in medical images that enable us to explore the inside of our body and the visual representations made of it. What interests us here is seeing how visual mediation is changing the ways in which we conceive and relate to our own body. This task complements the preceding one: here we do not focus on analysing images that are too far from us to be directly seen, but on

what is inside ourselves. I want to see how these images are made and presented, and how and why people trust them (if this is the case).

- 34 Before closing this section, I would like to provide some comments on art and the Internet, since these are two of the main domains of image-creativity.
- 35 Apparently, we do not establish with “artistic images” a reliability criterion as we do with contemporary images or scientific images —and, from another perspective, with religious images. However, things are not that simple. Many artists experiment with images and create works that reflect on topics that are very similar to those I want to explore in this research programme (Kemp 1992, Kane 2014). The works of many artists are based on ethnographic and scientific research, or they examine theological subjects. The lines separating artistic activity from research and intervention is called into question now more than ever. We learn about the world and about others through art. Thus, this comparative research programme will include an online research about the works of artists who work with religious, scientific and contemporary images. These images will be incorporated into the photo and video-elicitation exercises that will be carried out at the end of the research programme. The subject of art will be present in all areas of the research. Indeed, there is an inherent “artistic” activity and sensitivity in the production and transformation of (scientific, social, religious) images —even in software (Manovich 2020)—, understood as a creative skill that triggers a whole series of aesthetic resources. Therefore, within the multi-disciplinary perspective that I consider here, the subject of art and the limits between art, science, religion and society will be a leitmotiv of the research.
- 36 Internet and new technologies will be an important aspect of the research. Thus, we will analyze how social, religious and scientific images occupy and circulate within the digital space and what comments they trigger. Thus, this research seeks to dialogue with studies on the anthropology of the media and digital culture.

Conclusion: A Multi-modal Research on VISUAL TRUST

- 37 As an anthropologist, I have always had the impression that the majority of the works on post-truth, fakery and communication tend to adopt an excessively abstract and generalised perspective when analysing the relationship we have with images, a perspective with few nuances, loosely rooted in the specific practices of people. Reading some of these works, it seems that people everywhere (and in all cases) permanently question all images and in the same way, and I do not think that this is true. No one can live in a world governed solely by the principle of falsity. Actually, my stance is that, if we pay attention to daily life and observe what people do with and through images, we will see that, although we live in a context of suspicion and uncertainty, the relationships with images in terms of trust and distrust (the judgement of authenticity, reliability and suspicion) are much more complex, multiple and changeable. People trust some images, and do not trust others. Likewise, people might not know how the images were taken, but at the same time trust them as media that are capable of making us discover something about the external world —even if it is partially. This is what happens with scientific images or with some images of the current political and social situation of the world. In the religious field, people may “trust” some images to access the other world, as a way of being in contact with the

represented being. Even on the internet, the paradigmatic platform for visual deception, people look for—and eventually find—certain flickers of visual trust. They can even recognize and afford a certain degree of veracity to images that nevertheless are judged as being constructed or “false” (Craciun 2012). The judgement about the reliability or falsity of the images, which sustains our relationship of trust towards them, is generally made intuitively, without reflection, and is often steeped in contradictions. The question of the visual “economy of trust” (Ingold 2000) and the perception of visual falsity has a moral dimension, and it is the aim of this research program to explore it experimentally.

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NOTES

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2. I would like to thank the editors of AnthroVision for publishing this article and for their inspiring insights on the project.
3. In her doctoral thesis, Zenadia Osorio employs the term "*confianza visual*" to historically explore the uses and significations of photography in the development of journalism in Colombia during the XIX century and the beginning of the XX century. I use the term "visual trust" to refer to as a general attitude towards images (be them religious, social or scientific, digital or material) within the contemporary context of radical visual uncertainty marked by the presence of the "fake".

ABSTRACTS

The aim of this article is to present the research programme *Visual Trust. Reliability, Accountability and Forgery in Scientific, Religious and Social Images*. The main objective of this programme is to explore how people from different countries and socio-cultural milieu interact with and through

images in terms of trust and distrust, and how visual forgery and falsity is perceived and assessed. The research programme draws a comparison between religious images, social images and scientific images. It is based on several ethnographic investigations, to be conducted in Europe, Asia and America, both on-line and off-line. Its final goal is elaborate, through visual means, a general theory of (dis)trust in images in the contemporary world.

L'objectif de cet article est de présenter le programme de recherche *Visual Trust. Fiabilité, responsabilité et falsification dans les images scientifiques, religieuses et sociales*. Le principal objectif de ce programme est d'explorer comment des personnes de différents pays et milieux socioculturels interagissent avec et à travers les images en termes de confiance et de méfiance, et comment la falsification et la contrefaçon visuelles sont perçues et évaluées. Le programme de recherche établit une comparaison entre les images religieuses, sociales et scientifiques. Il s'appuie sur plusieurs enquêtes ethnographiques, qui seront menées en Europe, en Asie et en Amérique, à la fois en ligne et hors ligne. Son objectif final est d'élaborer, par des moyens visuels, une théorie générale de la défiance à l'égard des images dans le monde contemporain.

resumen El objetivo de este artículo es presentar el proyecto de investigación Visual Trust. Fiabilidad, responsabilidad y falsificación en imágenes científicas, religiosas y sociales. El objetivo principal de este proyecto es explorar cómo personas de diferentes países y medios socioculturales interactúan con y a través de las imágenes en términos de confianza y desconfianza, y cómo se percibe y evalúa la falsificación visual y el engaño visual. El proyecto de investigación establece una comparación entre las imágenes religiosas, las imágenes sociales y las imágenes científicas. Se basa en varias investigaciones etnográficas, que se llevarán a cabo en Europa, Asia y América, tanto on-line como de forma presencial. Su objetivo final es elaborar, por medios visuales, una teoría general de la (des)confianza en las imágenes en el mundo contemporáneo.

INDEX

Mots-clés: fiabilité visuelle, Fake, anthropologie visuelle, fiabilité, éthiques du visuel

Palabras claves: confianza visual, fake, antropología visual, confiabilidad, ética visual

Keywords: visual trust, Fake, visual anthropology, reliability, visual ethics

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