

# Cooperative use of images

## Methodological reflections

*Ulrike Mietzner*

Societies and within them various social groups and people act through images. Perception is pictorial and synaesthetic and always also cultural and historical as well as group- or person-specific. Photographs and other differently generated images inform, manipulate, and propagate, they are means of expression and power, and they shape our ideas – in times of crisis and upheaval more than ever. Classical image analysis serves to capture imagery and the potential of images of all kinds. However, images – be they drawings, artistic or AI-generated images, graphics and, above all, photographs – always appear in contexts, at specific times and places, and often contextualized with other images and embedded in texts. They draw their impact, styles, and motifs from current and historical pictorial references. Today, images are compiled by different algorithms; AI develops image motifs, memes, and photographs that document seemingly true events.

Because of the specific nature of the visual, the scientific study of images must always return to the beginning of "What is an image?" in order not to lose sight of the inherent logic of the image; and to ask questions about, for example, the creation of imagery and visibility, their technical conditions, and their effects.

The "Transformative Bildlichkeit" network has set itself the task of jointly researching these complex social functions and effects of images – especially those of photographs. The well-known forms of image analysis are used and further developed.

From the very beginning, the central concern of the network was to use and expand the different competencies and accumulated visual experiences of those involved in dealing with images in order to explore the important social role of images. Because of their complexity and ambiguity, images are and have always been the subject of different scientific approaches, the results of which have become important for the respective disciplines. However, there is hardly any cooperation in the sense of an interdisciplinary discourse so far – at least not

systematically justified. Our collaboration has reinforced the realization that the different approaches, none of which is favored, are necessary in order to determine the visual constitution of reality and its social effects. Knowledge not only of photography, but also of drawings, scientific graphics or other, e.g. artistic images is a prerequisite for and promotes visual perception and understanding.

Image competence can only be achieved through collaboration. People from art and visual studies, political and social sciences, sociology, philosophy, education and history, and, of course, media studies and also from the artistic or journalistic fields of application of photography take part in such debates. Cooperative imagery is part of the answer to the question of how image literacy can actually be achieved.

As a multiplier, the network also promotes "visual competence", which should be taken into account by scientific image analyses, and thus also fulfils demands from the [German Photo Council](#), which was founded in 2023, if the ability to reflect on images is further developed. The question of visual competence must be approached from several sides: on the one hand as a demand on media education and political-cultural education, directed at adults as well as children and young people, and then as a further development of the respective interpretive approaches – directed at the professional side, which ranges from science to application. If image comprehension is to be a central competence within political education, then it is not enough to just develop scientific methodological competence, but it is necessary to help develop areas and possible applications. This, too, has strengthened the idea of a common approach to images and sees it as fundamental for the development of image competence.

The acquisition of visual literacy is therefore a co-operative process that cannot be completed. It is constantly evolving in line with new images and media forms.

However, this necessary loop does not only have to do with new images and media forms. Even the concept of the image is not unambiguous – not even if we focus primarily on forms of materialized images. When images appear in a publication, e.g. an online newspaper or on social media, they are framed differently: Does the caption or an article belong with the image? In the case of social media, an image is hardly ever viewed on its own: The tableaux visible in each case are at least reference variables, if not part of the image. On the one hand, images are context-dependent – some contexts turn them into images in the first place (a museum) – and on the other hand, they also exist on their own – the context can get lost when

viewing the image. It is between these poles, between the focus on a single image and on the entire context – from the concrete appearance and distribution to the logics and contexts of creation – that image competence spans. This applies more than ever to digital media forms, but also to the complex visual worlds of earlier societies. The transition of images from one specific context to other areas is also part of pictorial power. Thinking about images appropriately means understanding them as communication media that are interwoven with language and speech and their processing methods. It is also important to take note of the technology and place of their appearance.

This diversity and combination of approaches characterizes a cooperative approach to images, which always includes image comparisons. These achieve more than individual image analyses.

Two photographs serve as examples: the one by press photographer Nilüfer Demir of the dead boy Aylan Kurdi on the beach near Bodrum from September 2, 2015 and a photo series by Jörg Brüggemann from August 2015, in which he also shows how the arriving refugees were surrounded by journalists, photographers, and tourists in 2015. (<https://www.joergbrueggemann.com/projects/tourists-vs-refugees/>)

Simply knowing the other published photographs by Nilüfer Demir makes it easier to ask some questions about the image transmission and the image effect: Why did this particular photograph become so famous? Why did it spread across the globe within a short space of time? What function do images and photographs of migration have for the (European) understanding of refugees? What constitutes looking (and looking away)? Why did a representative of Human Rights Watch, Peter Bouckaert, decide to publish one of the photos of the dead boy on Twitter (see Mattus, 2020), even though photographs of dead people – especially dead children – are not usually published in the context of aid organizations? What do we actually perceive? How was the photo used? And further used as a mural, as a form of protest, etc.?

Even with Maria Mattus' extremely comprehensive approach to media studies, questions remain unanswered on the iconic level, such as why the image in the cropped form – the child alone, parallel to the eye of the viewer – is so prominent in the collective memory. Media studies can provide excellent answers to many questions regarding the reception of images. The scandal of the deaths in the Mediterranean was encapsulated in this one image, although

other images had also shown it already. But why were we affected by this one image in particular, what was also captured here in the visual? On the one hand, the pictorial history of such political pictorial icons could be introduced here (see Paul, 2008; Kanter, 2017). On the other hand, approaches from the field of image studies, such as phenomenological ways to viewing photography, could promote a convergence at the pictorial level that understands seeing as tactile perception (see, for example, Hasse, 2020).

In the sense of comparative seeing, Brüggemann's photograph of the photographers waiting for arriving refugee boats as a photo motif opens up other questions. The photograph contradicts a seemingly real event conveyed in many photographs: that the refugees were alone and abandoned. This may be true in a figurative sense – but they arrived in August 2015 before the eyes of many. At an event organized by the Ostkreuz photo agency, the photographer reported that his distanced view also caused anger among his colleagues, because it made the hunt for the one – seemingly particularly “authentic” – photograph visible. However, this photograph by Brüggemann and his series allow the many photographs of refugees circulating then and now to appear in a different perspective and raise the question of what photographs also convey beyond actual events.

An adequate handling of images therefore always includes comparisons from the different perspectives of the involved actors.

This desire to understand more and the ability to understand differently are central qualities of cooperation – especially when different disciplinary perspectives come together: when, for example, an art historical perspective seeks the tradition of such images; or atmosphere and being touched come into view from a phenomenological point of view while media studies research ways of distribution; or when different social interpretations and uses of images are examined from a sociological perspective.

Then it can also be taken into account that photographs can move into other media in the course of their use or are moved there, used several times and with different intentions, and can become a point of contention or icons.

A cooperative approach to images ultimately applies to all genres. After all, they are always socially, historically, and technically contextualized. In relation to photography: historical photographs, amateur photographs, private photographs, photographs that circulate publicly

or the many semi-private photographs that fight for algorithmically determined visibility on social media are all subject to very different conditions, which, in their entanglements, sharpen and critically expand our view. And, of course, knowledge of many images – not just photographs – is a prerequisite for image literacy, because image motifs shift and change, unfolding their visual impact also by linking to existing images, often communicating over long periods of time (Raulff, 2010).

Although image research is aware of the powerful and at the same time subtle effect of images, it is rarely really grasped in its complexity.

The novel by the writer Nino Haratischwili shows the immense capacity of photography, which means different things to different people. In "The Lack of Light", the photographs of one of the protagonists, a professional photographer, evoke painful memories of the period of upheaval in Georgia decades after they were taken. This period thus also appears in glaring light for the readers and it becomes possible to experience a foreign world and historical time.

According to Sebastian Schönemann (2021), the 'remembering seeing' as a central part of historical memory opens up new visual experiences – again in the joint viewing process. Images are central to historical awareness, which goes beyond one's own immediate experiences ([Memory](#)).

However, the processes of interpretation are not only about these pictorial effects, which can almost only be grasped atmospherically. The knowledge of photographs changes their effect. In this respect, image research is part of the investigation process. Again, in the spirit of cooperation, research is carried out in many directions: Image contexts are collected as well as comparable images, production and publication histories as well as research on the photographer. The image interpretation methods used are considered equal. Image hermeneutic methods stand alongside documentary image analysis, serial-iconographic photo analysis alongside segment analysis. And in the methodological approach, it always remains to be considered whether the verbalizing process of seeing and interpreting images does not bury the image under words, so to speak. How images are spoken and written about, how text and image are interwoven, how an appropriate language for images can be found, has not yet been researched enough.

Ultimately, the peer process to which texts about images are subjected is not only that of the other's gaze, but the different equal participants in the interpretative process examine

whether their and the others' analyses have been done justice and whether the references have been made mutually fruitful.

The cooperative handling of images, as practiced in the network, and the processes of interpretation embedded in it are characterized by a number of factors:

- The process of perception and interpretation oscillates between the image to be viewed on the one hand – as a single image – and the place of its appearance – i.e. the context – on the other.
- In the process, further image contexts are called up and researched and images that are assumed to be connected are compiled and compared. This ties in with the idea of Aby Warburg's mnemosyne atlas.
- Despite the repetitive loops of interpretation, the first impression of the image also applies. The first impression's immediate and synchronous perception and effect are essential to the pictorial.
- The struggle for processes of verbalization appropriate to the image accompanies the entire process of image interpretation.
- Theoretical reflections and research are part of understanding. The different source qualities of the written and linguistic, the fundamental changes brought about by digitization, which brings moving image, stills, text and sound closer together in the sense of multimodality, are such theory-related topics.
- Comparative seeing is central to the interpretative processes: How do images of dictators and rulers differ, for example, and how are female rulers represented? When are which pictures of refugees taken and shown, etc.
- Comparative seeing necessarily includes historical image references.
- And as simple as this seems, it is important to give the individual photograph or the individual image space again and again and to take one's time for seeing, which is practiced again and again.
- Perspectives on the image are expanded by intergenerational and diverse groups.

Cooperative image handling as a process and method is a requirement of academic work with images as well as seeing in the context of shared image experience in everyday life, for example as part of cultural, political, and historical education. When photographs are used in memorial sites, their creation process must be questioned and their visual impact explored, as this changes from generation to generation, each of which draws on different experiences and viewing patterns. This applies to the daily consumption of images as well as to the use of images in museums. It is important for everyone involved to see, and seeing sharpens the critical eye when viewing together. At best, this enables us to adopt new perspectives that differ from our own. And this is more than ever a societal task.

"The joke is that the sovereignty of images, their autonomy, remains resistant to interpretation." (Schuh, 2004; translated from German original by Author)

## References

- Haratischwili, N. (2022). *Das mangelnde Licht*. Frankfurter Verlagsanstalt.
- Hasse, J. (2020). *Photographie und Phänomenologie. Mikrologien räumlichen Erlebens* (Vol. 3). Karl Alber.
- Kanter, H. (2017). Soziologische Kurzsichtigkeit? Was Bilder zum Erforschen von Gesellschaft beitragen können. *Soziopolis: Gesellschaft beobachten*, 1–13.  
<https://doi.org/https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/handle/document/80753>
- Mattus, M. (2020). Too dead? Image analyses of humanitarian photos of the Kurdi brothers. *Visual Studies*, 35(1), 51–64. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1472586X.2020.1731325>
- Mersch, D., & Ruf, O. (2014). I. Grundlagen. 1. Bildbegriffe und ihre Etymologien. In S. Günzel, D. Mersch, & F. Kümmerling (Eds.), *Bild. Ein interdisziplinäres Handbuch* (p. 1–7). Metzler/Springer.
- Paul, G. (Ed.). (2008). *Das Jahrhundert der Bilder 1949 bis heute*. Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- Raulff, U. (2010, May 17). Die 120 Tage von Bagdad. *Süddeutsche.de*.  
<https://www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/folter-im-irak-die-120-tage-von-bagdad-1.800490>
- Schönemann, S. (2021). Erinnerndes Sehen, sehendes Erinnern – Bilder des Ghettos im sozialen Gedächtnis. In L. Pellner, H.-G. Soeffner, & M. Stanisavljevic (Eds.), *Theresienstadt – Filmfragmente und Zeitzeugenberichte: Historiographie und soziologische Analysen* (p. 227–240). Springer Fachmedien. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-31637-2\\_11](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-31637-2_11)

Schuh, F. (2004, May 13). Von kommunizierenden Bildern. *Die Zeit*.

[https://www.zeit.de/2004/21/Von\\_kommunizierenden\\_Bildern/seite-2](https://www.zeit.de/2004/21/Von_kommunizierenden_Bildern/seite-2)