

Transformative Visuality

Introduction

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Not only do images depict social realities, they can also have a transformative effect on them – a fact that is now taken for granted. The question of the influence and impact of images is raised in regular public debates triggered by political events and includes the role of photographs in war reporting, fraud through fake imagery, and the new possibilities of AI-generated deep fakes. The constant use of images in everyday life also highlights how strongly social and pictorial realities interact with each other. This is probably truer today than ever before, even though, historically, images have always been an essential component of social action and social interactions such as communication.

Since images contribute to social realities, they can have a stabilizing, transforming, and destructive effect on them. Images seem to be particularly virulent in phases of social upheaval and crisis, with both new and old images being brought into play at such times. In this respect, images play a decisive role in determining the course of social transformations and consolidations and change at the same time. They can shape social and political cultures of remembrance, but also individual ideas – of one's own body, gender, family, affiliations, etc. as well as the corresponding [memories](#) of them.

On the one hand, image production and communication can be practiced symmetrically and participatively. On the other hand, they are always embedded in political and social power dynamics, including the negotiation of [visibility](#), which constitute hierarchizing social orders and are effective within them. These are related to gender, generation, class, milieu, racial, and cultural differentiations, etc., but also to (technical) access options and algorithmic logics. Potentially, images are always able to irritate, [affect](#), move, organize, and stabilize and thus contribute in their own way to social transformation processes.

Our research network is interested in this connection between image, society, and transformation, in short in images constituting reality in social transformation processes. In examining them, we ask in what way images co-constitute social realities and thus contribute to social transformation processes, for example by means of their iconic logic or their specific potential for affecting, identifying, and projecting.

What do we mean by 'visuality'? Under this umbrella term we encompass various manifestations and contexts: from individual images to inter-image references to processes of visualization. An image initially represents an entity in itself. It is limited and composed, possibly also framed. In addition, images appear in a wide variety of concrete forms, ranging from drawings, paintings, posters, and scientific, [knowledge-generating](#) graphics to [photographs](#), films, AI-generated images, and images on [social media](#). These manifestations of the pictorial and their different medialities are accompanied by specific pictorial practices, as reflected in the concept of image-making: the field of production with its technical prerequisites that change images or make them possible in the first place, the distribution of images, which in turn is tied to techniques, as well as the reception and effect of images.

It is also crucial for our approach to research that these different image forms not only exist in their mediality and the associated image practices, but also refer to and interact with each other. The combination of different image forms and media gives rise to social perceptions and ideas. Visual media are embedded in social contexts and emerge from them, even if, in principle, the impact of images can unfold in new contexts. The separation of image and social context can only be seen as a heuristic difference.

In addition to the question of the constitutive effect of images and their contribution to social transformations, there is also the question of their specific form, possibly their materiality, mediality, technical prerequisites, etc., as well as the analysis of inter-image and intermedial references and effects. The complexity of these phenomena requires an interdisciplinary approach to research. The following collection of texts is also the result of interdisciplinary collaboration and the reciprocal expansion of perspectives.